



Maine Nonprofit + Funder Voter Engagement Guide



Acknowledgments

The Maine Association of Nonprofits and Maine Philanthropy Center thank Nonprofit VOTE for their collaboration and assistance with this Voter Engagement Guide. Nonprofit VOTE is a nonpartisan organization that provides resources and training to 501(c)(3) nonprofit and charitable organizations on how to conduct nonpartisan voter and civic engagement activities.

The Word “Nonprofits”

The term “nonprofits” means different things to many different people. It’s a commonly used word, but often without a common understanding. People can use “nonprofit” and “tax exempt” interchangeably. Congress has created almost three dozen types of tax-exempt organizations in different sections of the tax code. Section 501(c)(3) of the tax code refers to “public charities” (also known as charitable nonprofits) and “private foundations.” The tax code considers “churches and religious organizations” (which the Internal Revenue Service defines to include mosques, synagogues, temples, and other houses of worship) to be “public charities.” This Voter Engagement Guide uses the terms “charitable nonprofits” or simply “nonprofits” as shorthand for “501(c)(3) tax exempt organizations other than private foundations,” unless expressly saying otherwise.

Disclaimer

The content provided in this Voter Engagement Guide is provided in good faith for informational purposes only and is neither intended to be nor should be construed as legal or tax advice. Please consult an attorney for the latest and most accurate information. The Maine Association of Nonprofits and Maine Philanthropy Center make no representations or warranties as to the accuracy or timeliness of the information contained herein.

Contents

Acknowledgments.....	2
Table of contents	3
Letter from CEOs	4
Why should nonprofits engage voters?	5
Getting started	8
What’s next in this voter engagement guide	9
Section 1: Rules of nonpartisanship.....	10
A nonprofit’s guide to nonpartisanship.....	11
Digital communications and nonpartisanship.....	13
Finding state and local election information	14
Maine voter registration drive.....	15
Section 2: Make a plan	16
Your options for voter engagement activities	17
Engaging candidates for office	19
Selecting the best activities.....	20
Partnering for success: Local elections office and beyond	22
Section 3: Talking to potential voters.....	23
Tips for successfully engaging potential voters	24
Don’t forget your staff, board, and volunteers.....	26
Section 4: Permitted nonpartisan activities	27
Ballot measures.....	28
Choosing between paper-based and online activities	29
Voting and homelessness	30
Engaging young voters.....	31
Engaging currently or formerly incarcerated voters.....	32
Voter registration ask.....	33
Candidate engagement.....	34
Candidate questionnaires.....	36
Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small towns.....	38
Engaging potential voters with disabilities	39
Section 5: Philanthropy for voter engagement tools	41
Practices for trust-based philanthropy in voting	42
Building out a voter engagement grants program	43
Strategic plan examples	44
Survey tool to assess grantee voter engagement priorities.....	46
Grant agreement template	47
Training and convening voter engagement partners	48
Common strategies.....	50
Legal guidelines to inform your voter engagement programming	51
Additional resources	54

Dear Maine Nonprofit Leaders,

We are excited to share with you our **Maine Nonprofit & Funder Voter Engagement Toolkit**, designed to help your organization play an essential role in advancing voter engagement in Maine. Nonprofits and foundations are uniquely positioned to support and enhance democratic participation through nonpartisan voter engagement activities. With this toolkit, Maine Association of Nonprofits and Maine Philanthropy Center aim to provide you with the resources and guidance needed to get started!

Nonprofits' impact on voter engagement is significant and proven. Nonprofits across Maine have long been trusted messengers within our communities and their reach extends to almost all Maine people, including and especially those who are historically excluded from the electoral process. According to Nonprofit VOTE, “voters who were engaged by nonprofits about voting were much more likely to cast a ballot than comparable voters – 10 percentage points more likely” (See page 7) overall and even higher in historically underrepresented groups like younger voters, people with low incomes, and people of color.

This toolkit is incredibly timely as it marks the first full year of online voter registration in Maine, a low-barrier way for Maine nonprofits to promote voter engagement and encourage their staff and communities to register.

Maine foundations play a pivotal role in supporting these efforts. By providing early, unrestricted grants and multiyear investments, funders empower nonprofits to dedicate time to building the foundation of public trust necessary for successful civic engagement and get out the vote campaigns. These investments also signal to the broader community that strengthening civic engagement and sustaining our democracy are a priority, and a necessary component of making meaningful community impact.

The involvement of nonprofits and foundations in voter engagement efforts is critical for building a democracy that truly reflects the diverse perspectives and needs of our population. By encouraging and facilitating voter participation, we help to create a more equitable society where policy decisions are made with broader public input and accountability. This inclusivity ensures that the decisions shaping our state are reflective of the will of all its residents.

We invite you to explore this toolkit and consider how your organization can contribute to nonpartisan voter engagement initiatives. Together, we can amplify our impact and ensure that every eligible citizen has the opportunity to participate in the electoral process. Our collective efforts can ensure that every eligible voter can vote - leading to a more representative and vibrant democracy.



Jeannette Andre
President & CEO of Maine
Philanthropy Center

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Andre".



Jennifer Hutchins
Executive Director of Maine
Association of Nonprofits

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Hutchins".





Why should nonprofits engage voters?

Voting is a fundamental right. Every eligible voter should have a say in their own future. Active voter participation builds healthier communities. People who vote are more likely to volunteer, advocate, or be civically active in other ways. Elected officials are more likely to respond to the needs and concerns of neighborhoods that turn out on Election Day, and they are more responsive to organizations that promote voting.

Voting is something we can't take for granted. Voters need guidance with many of the following:

- finding their polling location.
- locating a number to call for assistance.
- learning about their voting options (by absentee ballot, in person, etc.)
understanding what's on the ballot.
- seeing the connection between what's on the ballot and the impact on the issues they care about.

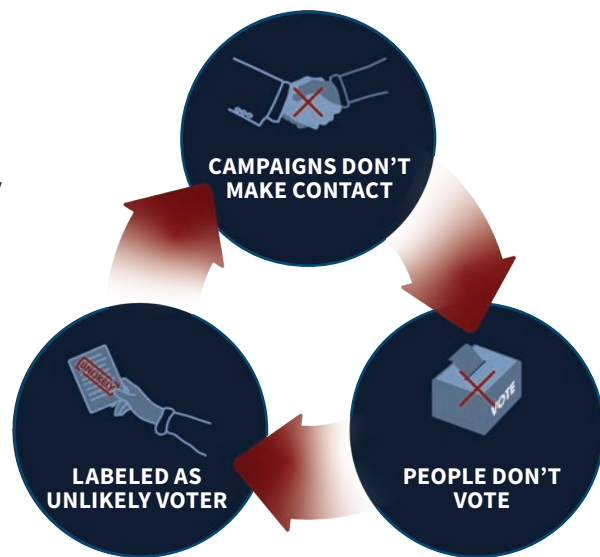
Nonprofit organizations like ours have a critical role to play in promoting voting as a safe and accessible activity to strengthen our communities.

Key Takeaways

Elected officials are more likely to respond to the needs and concerns of neighborhoods that turn out on Election Day, and they are more responsive to organizations that promote voting.



Partisan campaigns for office typically invest in outreach to prospective voters who have a high probability of voting in an upcoming election. People in communities who have been historically marginalized from the election process are less likely to have long voting histories so campaigns don't see value in reaching them. Nonprofits active in those marginalized communities can break the negative feedback loop by registering and turning out new voters so that more of the community is heard by the elected leaders. Through these nonpartisan actions by charitable organizations, the parties and candidates take notice and truly represent them.



Our access and trust make us great messengers

Nonprofits are among America's most trusted community institutions, and as familiar service providers and advocates, we have personal relationships with communities that have been traditionally underrepresented in elections and public policy advocacy. Our regular contact during points of service (any interaction between nonprofits and community members) allows us to weave voter engagement into existing programs and services. We have the opportunity to use our trusted roles to become a powerful nonpartisan voice for voter participation and the issues that matter to our communities.

Learn more at Keeping Our Republic: The Roles of Charitable Nonprofits at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/keeping-our-republic-roles-charitable-nonprofits>

Key Takeaways

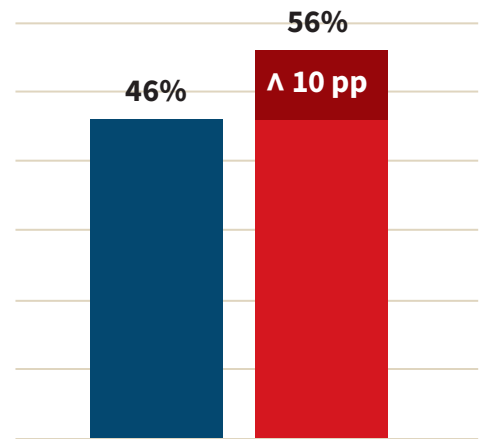
Nonprofits active in those marginalized communities can break the negative feedback loop by registering and turning out new voters so that more of the community is heard by the elected leaders.



Nonprofit voter engagement works

According to the 2024 Nonprofit Power report, nonprofit voter engagement disrupts cycles of disengagement and helps close long-standing gaps in turnout. In an analysis of over 7,000 prospective voters in 8 states who were contacted before the 2022 elections by nonprofits and social service agencies, Nonprofit VOTE found that prospective voters who were contacted were 10 percentage points more likely to vote than demographically similar registered voters (56% vs. 46%). Those percentage points increased even more when focusing on underrepresented populations like low-income households, persons of color, and young people. When nonprofits engage prospective voters, we all benefit from a more inclusive and representative democracy. Learn more about the 2024 Nonprofit Power report at nonprofitvote.org.

Learn more at Keeping Our Republic: The Roles of Charitable Nonprofits at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/keeping-our-republic-roles-charitable-nonprofits>.



Overall Voter Turnout

- Comparable Voter Turnout
- Nonprofit Voter Turnout
- Nonprofit Impact

Key Takeaways

Your nonprofit organization is well-suited to helping people become more active citizens by encouraging voter participation.

ME



Getting started

Whether it is your first time engaging potential voters or you are trying to deepen your existing work, this Voter Engagement Guide can support your way to a successful voter engagement initiative.

Before, during, and after: Build buy-in

A successful voter engagement plan depends on buy-in from your organization's leadership. Key staff and volunteers are often the point people for designing and executing the plan, but the activities are more likely to be carried out organization-wide with clear and strong support from your nonprofit's leadership.

- Plan a time to discuss your voter engagement activities with your executive director and ensure you have support from the board.
- Bring this Voter Engagement Guide to your meeting and describe the activities you think are a good fit for your organization – make sure to specify key points of contact for engagement with your constituents.
- Highlight why this work is important for both your clients and organization.
- Looking for easy first steps? Check out pages 17 (Your options for voter engagement activities) and 26 (Don't forget your staff, board, and volunteers).



What's next in this Voter Engagement Guide

Section 1: Learn the rules

Make sure your efforts are nonpartisan. That means that none of your communications or activities attempt (or even appear to) support or oppose any candidate or political party. In addition, make sure you find out about dates and deadlines, eligibility requirements, and the process of voting in Maine. It's usually best to go directly to the state or county elections office to get the most accurate information.

Section 2: Make a plan

Mapping out a clear plan for your voter engagement activities can help ensure your efforts are successful. Every organization is different, so it's up to you to decide which activities fit most naturally into your existing programs. **Activities generally fall into three categories: voter registration, voter education, and candidate engagement.** You can mix and match for maximum impact and effectiveness.

Section 3: Talk to potential voters

Above all, potential voters want a reason to vote. Research demonstrates that people are much more likely to vote when they sense something is at stake. These potential voters not only believe that their vote will make a difference, but they also believe that the votes of their peers and community will have an impact as well. **Help your staff and constituents make a connection to what's on the ballot and how it can impact their lives.** You can go to your city council, state legislature, or other elected legislative body's website to learn more about policies that are being voted on by the people we elect.

Section 4: Permitted nonpartisan activities

There are so many ways to engage in nonpartisan voter engagement activities. Find one that matches your interest, capacity, and resources.



Section 1:

Rules of nonpartisanship



A nonprofit's guide to nonpartisanship

In 1954 Congress added a provision to the Internal Revenue Code commonly known as the “Johnson Amendment” requiring 501(c)(3) organizations – charitable nonprofits, private foundations, and religious congregations – to remain nonpartisan regarding elections for public office. They did it to protect charitable nonprofits, houses of worship, and foundations – and the donating public – from partisan election-related activity.

Federal law directs that charitable organizations nonprofits may not “participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”

Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code

The power of being nonpartisan flows from more than this statute:

1. Nonpartisanship respects the diversity of political opinions among your staff, board, volunteers, donors, and the people you serve. Charitable nonprofits should be focused on advancing our missions, not diverted by partisan politics in these and other ways:
 - Staff discussions and board meetings devolving into contentious debates about which candidates up and down the ballot to support, and how to allocate staff time and resources.
 - Powerful donors demanding that a certain percentage of their donations be redirected as a political contribution to a particular candidate.
 - The donating public reducing or stopping their contributions out of concern that nonprofits might turn around and give the donor's contribution to a political candidate the donor may oppose.
2. Nonpartisanship strengthens your ability to advocate across and without regard to partisan lines and have access to diverse community leaders and funding sources. There is a place for a more partisan approach. That's why Congress created 501(c)(4) social welfare advocacy organizations (and other partisan vehicles) which can do a certain amount of partisan election-related activity, but whose donors don't get a tax deduction.
3. Nonpartisanship reinforces the role of charitable nonprofits as trusted messengers who can engage marginalized populations that campaigns and candidates often miss. Our nonpartisan approach is one reason charitable nonprofits have proven effective at reaching youth, new voters, rural residents, and increasing voting rates across all demographics.

A 501(c)(3) organization may NOT conduct partisan activities to support or oppose any candidate for public office, including:

- Endorsing a candidate or expressing support or opposition for any candidate or party (even for nonpartisan offices).
- Making a contribution to, or expenditure for, a candidate.
- Rating candidates on who is most favorable to your issue(s) or sharing messages or materials that rate or rank candidates.
- Letting candidates use the organization's facilities or resources, unless those resources are made equally available to all candidates at their fair market value.

Nonpartisan activities 501(c)(3) nonprofits may do to encourage voter participation and promote voter education include:

- Promote or conduct nonpartisan voter registration in alignment with state law.
- Educate registered voters on a nonpartisan basis on the where, when, and how of voting.
- Encourage and remind people to vote.
- Distribute nonpartisan sample ballots, candidate questionnaires, or voter engagement guides.
- Host or co-sponsor a candidate forum in nonpartisan ways.
- Host or co-sponsor events so people learn about ballot measures (e.g., propositions, referenda, bonds) they will be asked to decide by voting and how the outcomes can affect their lives.
- Educate community members in nonpartisan ways on who the candidates are and what the offices do.
- Encourage staff to serve on Election Day as a poll worker, translator, or other nonpartisan volunteer.
- Continue issue advocacy during an election.
- Support or oppose ballot measures.
- Reminder: partisanship is not the same as lobbying for issues related to your mission. Charitable nonprofits are permitted to lobby, within limits, and may continue issue advocacy during an election. Extra care may be necessary for certain issues that have a partisan bent. See resources from Bolder Advocacy / Alliance for Justice for more information on nonprofit lobbying.

Key Takeaways

While your organization is not allowed to directly or indirectly support any candidate or party for office, there are many nonpartisan activities you can undertake to help people vote.



Digital communications and nonpartisanship

Your organization may already be using social media to communicate with supporters and the public, attract new members, mobilize public opinion, mobilize your communities, and promote civic engagement. The prohibition on nonprofits participating in partisan election-related activities is the same for social media as it is for any other type of communication. You may encourage people to register and vote on a nonpartisan basis, but you may not use social media to indicate support for, or opposition to, candidates for public office.

Can a staff member use their personal account to support candidates?

Individuals have a right to express preferences for or against candidates, as long as they are doing so on their own time and using their individual resources. This applies to their personal social media accounts. The exception would be if that account is primarily used by the individual or others as a communication vehicle for the nonprofit.

What about the Executive Director or CEO?

The chief executive officer of the nonprofit has the same rights of free expression as any other staff member, when not officially representing the organization. However, to the extent they are seen by stakeholders and constituents as representing the nonprofit, a CEO should exercise extra restraint in what they say on the internet to avoid any appearance of partisanship. CEOs should clarify when they are speaking in their own capacity and not as a representative for the organization.

What are guidelines for engaging online?

Don't use organizational accounts to tag, re-tweet, like, or share posts with political campaigns or partisan organizations that have endorsed candidates.

How about sharing content posted by a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization or other non-campaign organization whose primary purpose is other than electing candidates?

You may share content if the content shared is educational in nature and clearly nonpartisan. It is always safer to share content, for example, from a state or local government elections office, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational source or public media outlet not affiliated with a partisan political campaign.

Is my nonprofit responsible for how our posts are shared?

No. You are not responsible for how and with whom others share your posts.

What about content posted by other users to our social media platforms?

While you can't control how other people engage with your nonprofit through social media, you can make a general disclaimer on your social media site that you're not responsible for opinions posted by people not employed by your organization.



Finding state and local election information

After learning what it means to stay nonpartisan while engaging voters as a 501(c)(3) organization, researching state and local election information is the next step. Every state sets the legal framework for its own elections, so rules and dates will vary. Always confirm your information with a reputable source, like the local election office. If you're unsure if a website is from an actual governmental office, look for websites that end in ".gov".

Gather the following relevant information before engaging potential voters:

When to vote:

- The date on which online voter registration closes and how same-day registration works
- When to expect mail ballots to be received at voter's address
- Election date (including primaries and special elections as applicable)
- Polling location hours (may vary between locations and dates)

Where to cast a ballot:

- Accessible voting locations for voters who need accommodation
- Dropbox locations for ballots if not being returned by mail

How to participate:

- Voter registration processes, including online and in-person options
- How to fill out a mail ballot
- Type of ID needed, especially for first time voters or those registering on election day

Find helpful links, including Maine's election website at maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/voter-info/voterguide.html

If you plan to offer help with registering people to vote, review the information for Maine's regulations on third-party voter registration drives on the next page.

Maine voter registration drive guide

Getting Started:

Maine does not require training for registration drives and does not have notification requirements for registration drives. Do not pay registration drive participants based on how many registrations they collect. Do not offer an applicant any incentive of monetary value to register to vote.

Choose Between Paper-Based and Online Activities – Online voter registration is new in Maine, and underutilized as a tool for voter registration. Especially for organizations who don't have a lot of capacity to do big voter registration drives.

Obtaining Applications:

Maine registration cards can be obtained at no cost by requesting them from the Maine Office of Elections by completing the voter registration card request form available here: maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data/index.html

Individuals and organizations may request up to 1,000 per week, up to a total of 5,000 per election. Anyone may use the current electronic version of the Voter Registration Card to print additional cards. If voter registration drives opt to print their own cards, the cards must be printed double-sided on 4" x 6" green card stock. Print your own cards here: maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data/data-pdf/Voter%20Registration%20Card%20Policy.pdf

The federal mail-in voter registration application may be used in voter registration drives: eac.gov/voters/national-mail-voter-registration-form/

Handling Applications

Do not fill in any missing information on a registration form unless you have permission from the applicant.

Completed applications must be delivered by 21 days before Election Day. The Secretary of State (SOS) recommends delivering completed voter registration cards as soon as possible to the appropriate municipal registrar. The SOS requests that, if submitted to their office, completed registration cards be received by the 30th day before an election so they can distribute them to the appropriate municipal registrar. They also request that submissions of voter registration cards from drives be bundled together and returned with the contact information of the organization or individual conducting the drive.

If a new Maine voter who mails a voter registration application or submits an application through a third party does not include with the application a photocopy of one of the following identifying documents, an election official will contact the person to arrange submission of the document:

- Maine driver's license or other valid photo ID (including ID from a federally-recognized tribe);
- current utility bill;
- bank statement;
- paycheck stub; or
- other government document that shows the voter's name and address.

An applicant who attempts to register within 30 days of an election must be advised that the registrar might not receive the application before the deadline for mail- or third-person registration, but that the applicant may register in person through the close of polls.



Section 2:

Make a plan



Your options for voter engagement activities

Below is a list of common voter engagement activities to get you started. You don't have to do it all but choose what works for you! Remember: everything must be done on a nonpartisan basis.

Publicize and promote

- Promote voter registration deadlines and how-to's in the weeks before the election.
- Assign a staff member to plan and direct voter education activities.
- Make announcements about when and where to register to vote on your digital communication channels.
- Put up posters or offer flyers with voter registration information to clients in person.
- Sign up as a National Voter Registration Day community partner for free posters and stickers at nationalvoterregistrationday.org.
- Talk about registering to vote at a staff or board meeting. Encourage all of your staff and volunteers to register to vote.
- Include a link to online registration forms in your email newsletters, event calendars, and on social media.

Mobilize and partner

If you have the time and resources, extend your education efforts outside your nonprofit to the community you serve.

- Identify partners in your neighborhood or service area – like other nonprofits, libraries, schools, or small businesses – and encourage them to promote voting.
- Have staff or volunteers set up a voter information table at community events or highly trafficked areas. Good locations are where likely voters from the neighborhood congregate – supermarkets, stores, school events, places of worship, transit stops, etc. Check with the desired site first to make sure you have their permission to set up a table.

Election protection

Make sure people know where to go if they need help casting a ballot.

Include the relevant election protection hotline numbers for different languages:

- 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683),
- 888-VE-Y-VOTA (888-839-8682) for Spanish
- 888-API-VOTE (888-274-8683) for Asian languages
- 844-YALLA-US (844-925-5287) for Arabic.

Display or distribute sample ballots or nonpartisan voter engagement guides

Seeing a sample ballot helps people familiarize themselves with the voting process, giving them greater confidence to cast an actual ballot on Election Day. Share instructions for how to find sample ballots on your state or local elections website. Nonpartisan candidate guides provide an important, unbiased overview of what your community will be voting on.

Political parties sometimes publish sample ballots marking their candidates as the “correct” answers, but nonprofits need to steer clear of those in order to remain nonpartisan. Instead, nonprofits can share blank, nonpartisan sample ballots to help voters understand what they’ll be voting for.

Include lessons about voting

Does your nonprofit have classes or training? Consider holding a mock election or hosting a discussion about the principles of a fair democracy or fair election. Be sure to discuss the election with community members who are not able to vote and develop ways they can participate as volunteers.

Make calls or send texts to potential voters

If you have phone numbers for clients, consider sending them an informational text with election reminders or organize a phone bank to call (and leave messages) for registered voters. Be careful to send the messages out broadly; don’t pick and choose among your contacts in ways that could give the impression of partisan bias.

Promote poll worker opportunities

Share information on how to become a poll worker. In many states these are paid or volunteer positions that any registered voter can be trained for, but they will need to be on-site the entire day.

Learn more at Nonprofits, Democracy, and Voting: They Go Together So Well at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/nonprofits-democracy-and-voting-they-go-together-so-well>.

Key Takeaways

There are many effective and creative ways to conduct nonpartisan voter engagement and you are encouraged to explore ideas that will feel inviting and celebratory for your audience.



Engaging candidates for office

Elections offer numerous opportunities to interact with candidates for elected office. As a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, you cannot support, endorse, or oppose candidates for public office. However, you can still use their campaign status to get your issues in front of the candidates, build relationships with future elected officials, share your policy ideas, and influence future debates and decisions. Just make sure you are offering information and invitations to all candidates for that office on a fair and equal basis.

Share your policy ideas

Although elected officials can benefit from your ideas and research year-round, elections provide a focused opportunity to build relationships while demonstrating your organization’s expertise.

Have a candidate attend an event

Invite candidates to visit your nonprofit or attend an event, as the invitation alone gets your organization’s name and mission in front of the candidates. Hosting candidates at an event also allows your constituents and stakeholders to ask questions and familiarize themselves with their choices. You must invite all candidates, but you don’t have to have them appear at the same time and not all must accept your invitation. Be sure to inform your audiences that all candidates have been invited and reiterate your organization’s nonpartisanship.

Host or co-sponsor a candidate forum or questionnaire

Candidate forums not only connect your organization with candidates, but they also give your constituents and community members a chance to meet and interact with future officials. If there are already forums planned that your organization will not participate in, consider a questionnaire. Be sure to ask fair and impartial questions. Invite all the candidates in a particular race to respond to a set of questions which you share with your community audience to better inform them of candidate positions and values.

Key Takeaways

As a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, you cannot support, endorse, or oppose candidates for public office. However, you can still use their campaign status to get your issues in front of the candidates.



Selecting the best activities

Who's your audience?

Consider the various audiences for your voter participation activities and communications. The activities, messages, and format of the communications you choose may change depending on your audience, including:

- Your members, service population, or other constituents.
- Your staff, board members and volunteers.
- Your neighborhood or local community.

What do they need?

Most people benefit from reminders about upcoming elections and information about who and what is on the ballot. Some voters have additional needs. Identify the barriers your audience may face when trying to vote to anticipate the information or assistance needed to successfully cast a ballot. Examples include:

- Eligibility and registration because they are a new or returning citizen, an out-of-state student, experiencing homelessness, or anyone lacking a current relevant ID for any reason.
- Accessibility and accommodations due to disability or language barriers.
- Getting time off from work to vote or transportation to and from the polls.

Who's involved?

Determine who should be involved, such as staff, volunteers, constituents, and partner organizations. These people will need some training to effectively engage prospective voters. Consider:

- Front office staff who do intake or manage materials and signage in the lobby.
- Volunteers or interns who can take on a voter participation activity as a special project.
- Program staff who can weave voting into ongoing program activities.
- Communications team who creates assets and runs your website and social media.
- Partner organizations, coalitions, or local elections boards that can expand your reach.

What are your communication vehicles?

Plan with the people in charge of your communications and website to include messages and announcements about registration and voting in the weeks leading up to the election. Depending on how you reach your audience some of these may be more effective than others:

- Signage, posters, and handouts in your lobby or service areas.
- Phone calls or texts.
- Digital channels: website, social media, newsletters, paid advertising.
- Staff meetings or emails.

How are you tracking and celebrating efforts?

If you are taking the time to run a voter engagement campaign, take the time to track, celebrate, and share your success! The documentation you do during the campaign can be used for fundraising, developing partnerships, and raising your profile. Keep track of:

- **Stories:** Take pictures of engagement activities and collect quotes from staff, volunteers, and potential voters.
- **Metrics:** Track the number of voter registrations collected as well as events, discussions, and other voter interactions. Include digital voter outreach, such as social media posts and newsletter mentions.
- **Post-election:** Collect photos and stories from people your nonprofit helped to vote. Consider ways to use them soon after the election to demonstrate your community engagement work and save them to inspire people before the next election.

See page 29 for more resources on choosing between paper based and online activities.

Key Takeaways

There are many options for voter engagement activities.
It's okay to start small and grow your efforts as you build capacity.
You can start with staff, board, and/or volunteers.

ME



Partnering for success: Local elections office and beyond

Partnering with another local nonprofit organization can be a mutually beneficial relationship, fostering community engagement, social impact, and often, increased visibility for both parties. Here are some tips to make the most out of such partnerships:

Identify potential partners

There are three types of partnerships your organization can benefit from when conducting voter engagements:

- **Local and State Election Offices:** Having a contact at an election office is invaluable when questions or needs come up. Election officials appreciate when organizations reach out, utilize their resources, and provide voters with accurate information.
- **Voter Outreach Organizations:** Look for organizations that provide quality, nonpartisan voter engagement resources and are operating locally. These organizations may be able to provide additional insight, tools, resources, or volunteers.
- **Existing Partners with Shared Goals:** Look to your current nonprofit partners whose mission aligns with your values and goals – including your complete commitment to remaining nonpartisan – or whose service population overlaps with your own. You may be able to share resources or team up to better integrate voter messaging and activities.

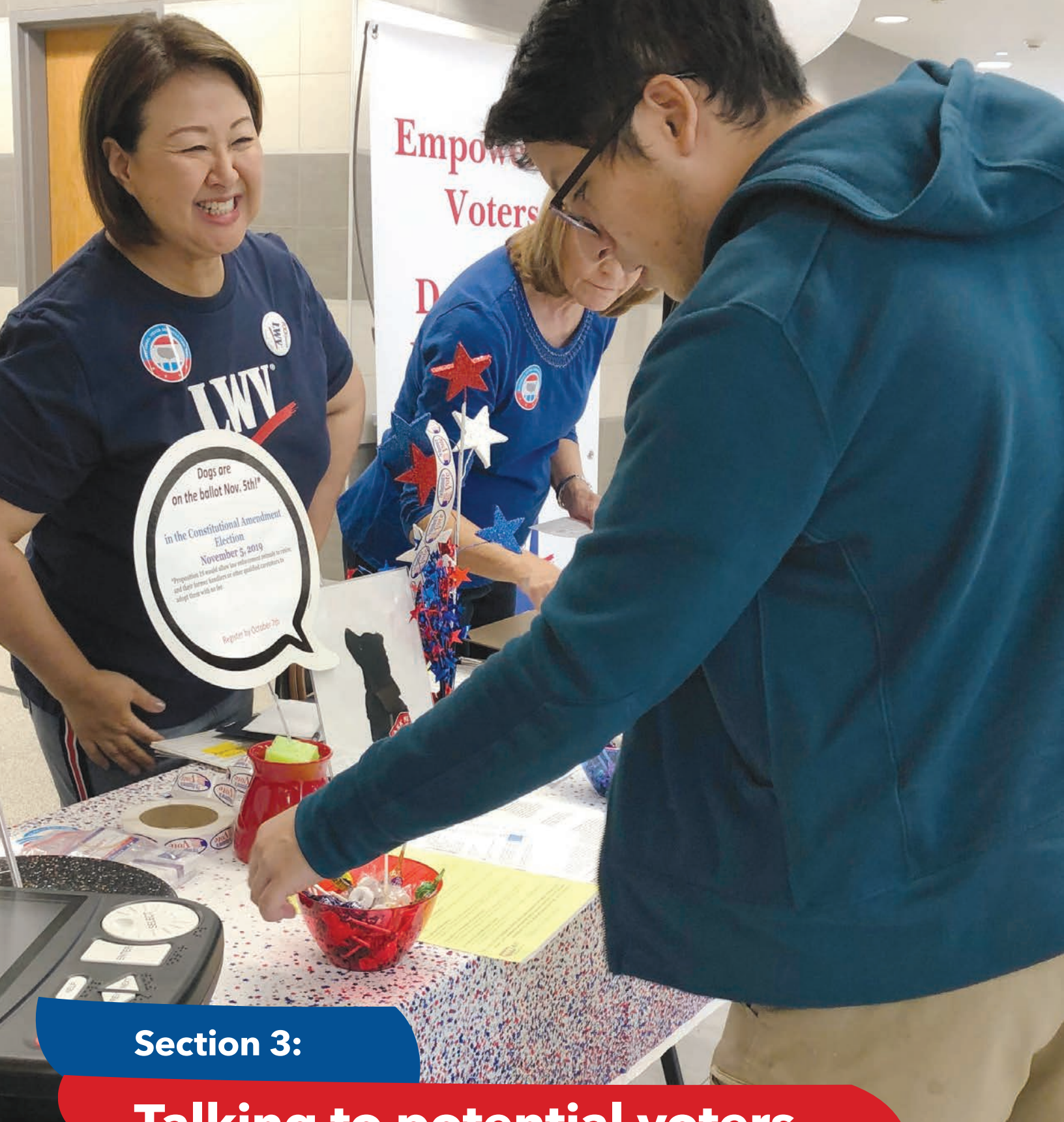
How to develop a lasting partnership

Open Communication: Initiate a dialogue with the organization’s leadership team to discuss potential partnership opportunities and be transparent about your objectives, resources, and limitations. Emphasize that your goal is to provide accurate, nonpartisan information to eligible voters so they will have an easier time getting to the polls and casting a ballot.

Define Roles and Responsibilities: Clearly outline each partner’s roles and responsibilities within the partnership. Establishing expectations upfront helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures that both parties are committed to achieving common goals.

Collaborative Projects: Brainstorm collaborative projects that leverage the strengths of both organizations. Whether it’s hosting joint events, conducting community outreach, or launching fundraising campaigns, collaboration can amplify the impact of your efforts.

Promote Each Other: Use your respective platforms to promote each other’s initiatives and events and celebrate successes along the way. Recognize the achievements of both organizations and the positive impact of your partnership on the community.



Section 3:

Talking to potential voters



Tips for successfully engaging potential voters

One of the reasons nonprofits are great resources for voter engagement is because of the relationship we have with our communities. An organization can use all the digital tools or fancy talking points but at the end of the day, voter engagement is a year-round initiative focused on talking directly with potential voters, building trust through relationships, and honest communication.

When engaging potential voters at festivals or events, use large signage to attract attention. Banners, posters, balloons, and other decorations can make your information table visible. You can bring snacks, or other freebies to encourage people to visit your table; however, legally, you must give these out regardless of whether someone registers or not.

Be proactive! Stand up, get out from behind the table, and greet people. When you're talking to somebody, offer them a pen and clipboard to fill out their information. Once they see how easy the form is, they're more likely to follow through with registration.

Keep it strictly nonpartisan

Staff working for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations should be nonpartisan when representing their nonprofit on site, at events, or doing voter engagement activities. Nonprofits and staff cannot suggest which candidate to vote for or political party to support. This includes not wearing buttons, hats, or t-shirts for a candidate.

Prepare for the conversation you will get to have, including with people who are hesitant to participate. Here are some common responses to keep in your back pocket:

“I don't have time.”

“I understand. It only takes a couple minutes and doing it now will save you time later. I can answer any of your questions and ensure it gets turned in according to state law.”

“I don't want to register” or “I don't care about voting.”

Respect their hesitancy. You can't convince everyone, but you'll get better at trying.

- “Candidates pay more attention to communities where everyone's registered. They won't always do what we want, but they're more likely to pay attention if we register to vote.”
- Cite an important issue in the upcoming election. Give an example of what the city council, state legislature, or Congress might be voting on next year, being careful to remain strictly nonpartisan.
- Remind them that they won't be voting alone – they're voting with and for their families, neighbors, and community.

“I don't know any of the candidates.”

Suggest that they look up a voter guide on vote411.org/ or BallotReady, or talk to family and friends. They might be able to find someone who can bring them up to speed.



Can I say anything about specific candidates?

You can only answer simple facts like what party they are in, if they are an incumbent or challenger, or where they live. Remember you need to remain strictly nonpartisan. Do not state your preferences.

What do I say when asked about the difference between Republicans and Democrats?

There is no good answer or any accurate source that doesn't have a bias. You could mention the names of the current nominees and their party, but go no further. Suggest they ask a trusted friend or go to the political parties' or candidates' official websites.

What if I'm asked about a ballot measure?

Ballot measures are about enacting laws, not electing candidates. You may discuss the pros and cons of a ballot measure unless it is your organization's policy not to. You can also tell them if your nonprofit has an official position on one or more ballot questions and, if it does, why. For more information on discussing ballot measures see page 28.

Key Takeaways

An organization can use all the digital tools or fancy talking points but at the end of the day, voter engagement is a year-round initiative focused on talking directly with potential voters, building trust through relationships, and honest communication.



Don't forget your staff, board, and volunteers

Encourage everyone to vote

In our zeal to register people to vote in our offices and at events, it's easy to overlook those closest to us: our staff, board members, and volunteers. Their voices deserve to be heard at the ballot box, too. Intentionally reach out to them to make sure they're registered and invite them to the nonpartisan voter education events you host, such as candidate forums or sessions explaining ballot measures. Also provide them with information about how, when, and where to vote, and encourage them to vote with a reminder that they are important to you. Even a small nonprofit can have a mighty impact on voter turnout by leveraging the power of our most natural, closest connections.

Give paid time off to vote

Inability to take time off to vote (or not being aware of time off to vote policies) can be a barrier for potential voters. While nearly half of states require employers to offer paid time off to vote, the rest do not. Offering unpaid time off to vote can also help but makes employees choose between voting and their paycheck.

Nonprofits can make a difference by leading with policies that ensure all employees have access to the ballot box. Make sure each employee is aware of your policy for time off to vote. In addition to publicizing election deadlines, helping voters make a plan, and encouraging folks to vote.

The standard elements of any time-off-to-vote policy include:

- A statement of support for active and engaged citizenship;
- The number of hours granted, usually three hours with pay;
- Time off granted conditioned on the employee not having time to vote before or after work on Election Day, not able to use or access an absentee/ mail ballot, or not able to vote early; and
- A requirement that the employee notify their supervisor before Election Day.

See sample policies and state requirements for time off to vote at nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-staff-vote/.

You can view MANP's policy at <https://www.nonprofitmaine.org/blog/join-us-in-offering-paid-time-off-to-vote>.



Section 4:

Permitted nonpartisan activities

This section has more specific tools and sample resources for implementing various voter engagement strategies. Whether you're curious about candidate forums, thinking of hosting a phonebank, or looking for best practices for voter engagement in small towns and rural communities, this is a great starting point. You're invited to visit the resource library at nonprofitvote.org for even more.

Ballot measures

What is a ballot measure?

Ballot measures ask voters to vote on laws, bonding issues, or constitutional amendments. If the vote is on a proposed law, it's called a "ballot initiative". If the vote is on a law already passed by the legislature, it's called a "referendum".

Can a nonprofit take a position for or against a ballot measure?

Generally, yes. Activity supporting or opposing ballot measures is considered lobbying – not electioneering for or against a candidate – and as a result a charitable organization will not be considered engaging in partisan, election-related activities. Charitable 501(c)(3) nonprofits may advocate to pass or defeat a ballot measure as a lobbying activity, subject to normal limits on lobbying.

What are common activities for nonprofits on ballot measures?

Organizations can engage in a range of activities related to ballot measures such as – collecting signatures to put an issue on the ballot, endorsing or opposing the measure, communicating your position to influence the public, organizing volunteers to work on passage or defeat of a ballot measure, or hosting an educational forum or event. You can also distribute neutral educational materials designed to inform the public about both sides of the question.

How much can a 501(c)(3) nonprofit spend on lobbying?

Your spending limits depend on which test your nonprofit chooses to measure lobbying.

1. Unless your charitable nonprofit has filed the simple and easy 501(h) form, then it automatically falls under Section 501(c)(3)'s unclear limitation on lobbying: "no substantial part of the [charity's] activities" can be "attempting to influence legislation." Neither Congress nor the IRS has clarified what constitutes "substantial" or "insubstantial" lobbying activities or where the dividing line is drawn. Importantly, this default standard in Section 501(c)(3) looks at the organization's full "activities," and not at the amount of dollars spent.
2. To avoid uncertainty, many charitable nonprofits instead choose to take the 501(h) election, which sets clear, objective guidance by comparing how much they spent on lobbying in a given year to the organization's total expenditures. To take the 501(h) election, nonprofits will spend less than five minutes filling in a few simple items on IRS Form 5768. Learn more at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/everyday-advocacy/taking-501h-election>.

Are there any spending limits for ballot measure advocacy?

There are no limits on spending on ballot measures, beyond the limits on lobbying discussed above. Some states, like Maine, require you to file an expenditure report if you devote substantial funds to ballot measure advocacy as, for example, a primary sponsor of a ballot measure, an active partner, or as a financial contributor for a particular advertisement. If your organization receives or spends more than \$5,000 to initiate or influence the outcome of a statewide ballot question, then your organization would be considered a Ballot Question Committee and would have to register and file campaign finance reports with the Commission. For more info, see Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices: <https://www.maine.gov/ethics/committees/ballot-question>.

Choosing between paper-based and online activities

Paper, digital, or both? How should your organization approach engaging voters, especially when it comes to official forms like voter registration or voting by mail? This quiz can help.

Who are you trying to reach?

- A. Low-income voters and those without state IDs, older voters, or voters who use your services.
- B. Younger voters, college students, or the friends and families of voters connected with your organization.
- C. Your staff, volunteers, or supporters of your organization or cause or voters who speak a language other than English at home.

Where or how do you normally interact with them?

- A. In-person when providing services (either at your organization, their homes, or at a recurring venue)
- B. In-person at community events, while door knocking, or at neighborhood hot spots (like a bus station, grocery store, or public park)
- C. Via your website, newsletter, social media, text campaigns, or phone call

What special strengths does your organization have?

- A. Your staff is good at walking clients through paperwork, you have a waiting area, or your staff and clients have one-on-one time.
- B. You have a lot of voter-facing staff or volunteers who can wear voting swag (like buttons, stickers or lanyards).
- C. You have tech-savvy staff/volunteers, you have access to a large social media audience or social media influencers.

What limitations does your organization have?

- A. Internet service in your area is unreliable or your staff is less comfortable with digital platforms.
- B. Your staff or volunteers are too busy to assist voters one-on-one or are trying to minimize close interactions for health/safety reasons.
- C. There are restrictions on who can conduct voter registration in your state or you have few in-person interactions with voters.

Results

Mostly As: Try a paper-based strategy. Your staff and voters may have the best luck with good old-fashioned paper and pen. Develop a relationship with your local elections office to receive printed voter registration forms.

Mostly Bs or a mix: Consider blended organizing. It's good to have paper on hand for when internet access is spotty or devices aren't working and for voters who just feel more comfortable filling out a paper form. Add digital components to your in-person efforts by putting links and QR codes on your materials, such as a lanyard card, so voters can engage from their own device.

Mostly Cs: Focus on digital outreach. From your state's voting website, to online voter guides, to motivational apps, there is plenty of content to populate your communications channels. Develop messaging that will resonate with your unique audience.



Voting and homelessness

People experiencing homelessness or who are otherwise in transition face special challenges when registering to vote. Remember, the best source of information about these issues is your state or county election officials.

Can someone who is homeless register and vote?

Yes. Persons experiencing homelessness can register and vote in all 50 states.

What should this person list as his or her home address?

It is recommended homeless registrants list a shelter address as their voting address where they could receive mail. Alternatively, homeless registrants may denote a street corner or a park as their residence, in lieu of a traditional home address. The federal voter registration form and many state forms provide a space for this purpose.

Does the registrant have to have lived at this location for any particular length of time?

Most states have some duration of residency requirements for voter registration – for example, having resided for 30 days or more before the Election Day in the state or county. Contact your [local elections officials](#) to find out what the rules are in your state.

Where can I find more information on registration and voting for the homeless?

For further information about registration and voting The National Coalition for the Homeless provides extensive information in their [You Don't Need a Home to Vote](#) campaign. The National Alliance to End Homelessness has a [toolkit](#) that may also be helpful.



Engaging young voters

Younger voters, especially those aged 18-29, have lower voter participation rates compared with older voters due to a variety of factors. According to research by CIRCLE and Ideas42, young people are often unfamiliar with the process of registering and voting. They may misunderstand key voting rules, such as the need to update their voter registration whenever they move or how to locate their polling place. Justice-involved youth may believe they lost their right to vote due to misdemeanor or felony charge, but in Maine, individuals do not lose the right to vote due to convictions or incarceration. There are actions your organization can take to help young people feel identified with voting and empowered to participate.

Make the Process Clear: Not all young people will locate key information on an official website – or may not even know there is such a website where they can find that information. Whether printed or digitally, write out dates of various elections, the opening hours of polling places, and what ID they need to bring, if any.

Help Navigate the Barriers: Young voters may need to rearrange their work or school schedule to make it to the polls, or may need help with transportation. Help them set a concrete plan around when they will vote, how they will get there, and with whom they will go to make their participation more likely.

Host Youth-Friendly Events and Workshops: Organize events, workshops, and seminars tailored to young people, focusing on issues that resonate with them. As often as possible, include young people in planning and hosting the event.

Encourage Peer-to-Peer Outreach: Empower young people to become ambassadors for voter registration and civic engagement within their communities. This is a form of relational organizing, and it is one of the most effective ways to boost turnout.

Publicize Paid Poll Worker Opportunities: In addition to making some money, young people can get an in-depth experience with the election process and contribute to a more welcoming environment for other youth voters.

Additional resources:

[Campus Vote Project](#)



Engaging currently or formerly incarcerated voters

For justice system-involved individuals, the rules and processes around voting may be another difficult element of transitioning back into the community. Returning citizens may be unsure of whether their voting rights have been or can be restored, they may lack the ID or information about the process of re-registering to vote, and they may feel that their voice does not matter in elections. For these voters and their families, assistance with voting can help them feel more integrated within their community.

Voting rights are taken away in some states after a felony conviction. In Maine, citizens serving time for misdemeanor or felony convictions or detained awaiting trial or conviction still have the right to vote. Jail-based voting varies across states and localities, so reach out to your local elections office with questions.

What to know about voting after a felony conviction:

1. In D.C., Maine, and Vermont, people convicted of felonies never lose their right to vote.
2. In 38 states where a felony conviction results in the loss of voting rights, those rights may be automatically restored upon a person's release from incarceration (in 23 states) or once their sentence ends, including parole or probation and potentially until any fines, fees, or restitution are paid (in 15 states).
3. In the other 10 states where voting rights are lost, citizens may need to undergo a waiting period or a special process to restore their voting rights. Some types of convictions may result in the loss of voting rights indefinitely. Check the [NCSL website](#) for additional information.

Even in states where voting rights are automatically restored, or are not lost, returning citizens must update their voter registration with their current address. This includes voters who never lost the right to vote but moved after a period of incarceration or detention.

Voter registration ask

Sample Email

	Content Outline
<p>Subject Line</p> <p>Register to Vote for the Upcoming Election</p>	
<p>Email Draft</p> <p>Dear</p> <p>We at [Organization Name] are asking all our staff, board members, and volunteers who are eligible to make sure you are registered to vote. You are important to us and our community, and we want to make sure that your voice is heard in the upcoming (and future) elections.</p> <p>If you're already registered, now is the time to make sure your official voter registration information is up to date at your current address. Our goal is to have 100% of eligible staff, board, and volunteers registered by the week of National Voter Registration Day [Insert Date]. Will you help us reach that goal?</p> <p>When we ask elected officials to support our issues and funding for services like ours, having our staff, board, and volunteers be registered voters makes our voice that much stronger. [Insert org. specific or election-specific information].</p>	<p>Ask: Include an ask, goal and a date or timeframe.</p>
<p>Option 1: Direct</p> <p>[Employee Name] will be coming around the office with registration forms asking you if you need to register or update your registration [Insert timeframe]. They can help you fill it out and return it.</p>	<p>Why: Note importance to your organization and community.</p>
<p>Option 2: Indirect</p> <p>You can learn more about registering and voting using [Organization's registration tool of choice]</p> <p>Be sure to visit your county's election website for the most up-to-date information ahead of the election.</p> <p>We appreciate your service to [Organization Name]. Thank you for being a registered voter!</p>	<p>How: Highlight registration activity or how to get registered.</p>
<p>Sincerely</p> <p>[Insert Sender]</p>	<p>Thank you.</p>



Candidate engagement

The most visible of all the activities are the “Candidate Engagement” options. These present more opportunity for an organization to be accused of being partisan or showing bias in favor of, or in opposition to, a particular candidate or political party. The steps a 501(c)(3) nonprofit needs to take to prevent bias or partisanship in “Candidate Engagement” activities may vary depending on the nature of the issues that would be covered in a candidate forum or questionnaire and other specifics about the nonprofit and the elections at issue. Among “Candidate Engagement” activities, it can be easier for a candidate who doesn’t want to be held accountable to refuse to answer by alleging bias in a questionnaire.

Therefore, when “Making a Plan” and “Selecting the Best Activities”, organizations with less experience may wish to consider starting with activities other than “Candidate Engagement” to build more experience.

Sharing your policy ideas

Educating candidates about policy solutions you are prioritizing is an important step to ensuring all candidates have a robust plan. This helps ensure that the newly or recently re-elected official will work to address these challenges while in office.

Sharing your policy ideas with a candidate is similar to how you would engage an elected official. Utilize email, in-person meetings, social media, or other contacts to make them aware of your policy priorities. Additionally, be sure to engage all candidates when doing your outreach. Do not conduct research on behalf of a candidate or campaign, and do not sign your organization’s name on to their policy proposals or platforms issued as part of their campaigns. This can be viewed as an endorsement of support.

Candidate appearances at your nonprofit event

During the election season, a candidate may appear at your nonprofit event in one of three ways:

1. In their capacity as a candidate invited to your event,
2. In their capacity as a public figure invited to your event, or
3. As an uninvited attendee at a public event.

Each scenario has different guidelines to ensure that their appearance maintains your organization’s nonpartisanship.

1. Inviting candidates to an event in their capacity as candidates

Your nonprofit may want to invite candidates for office to a function or event to expose them to your work, develop relationships with future office holders, or for a purpose related to your ongoing programs.

If you invite all the candidates to the SAME event:

- Invite all candidates from all political parties in the same race. They don't all have to come, but all must be invited.
- Remind candidates – in writing – that they are attending as guests – campaigning and political fundraising are prohibited.
- Remind the audience that this is a nonpartisan event.
- The atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

If you invite candidates to appear at DIFFERENT events:

- Provide equal opportunities to candidates for the same office, including a similar time, venue, and presentation format.
- Remind candidates – in writing – that they are attending as guests. Campaigning and political fundraising are prohibited.
- Prior to introducing the candidate, clarify for the audience that the appearance is not an endorsement and that there will be additional opportunities to meet the other candidates.
- Ensure the atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

Keep in mind that elected officials are themselves candidates when they are running for re-election in a primary or general election. This is particularly important to remember in the last two months leading up to the election.

2. Inviting a candidate to an event in their capacity as a public figure

A charitable nonprofit may invite a candidate to an event in their capacity as a recognized public figure, like an elected official or expert in their field. You might invite a candidate to speak because they 1) currently hold, or formerly held, public office; 2) is considered an expert in a field unrelated to office held; or 3) is a celebrity or has led a distinguished public service, military, legal, or other career. Under these circumstances only extend an invitation if:

- The candidate is chosen to speak solely for reasons other than their candidacy and speaks only in a non-candidate capacity.
- There is no mention of their candidacy during the presentation or event.
- Remind the public figure – in writing – that they are attending in that sole capacity and not as a candidate, and that campaigning and political fundraising is prohibited.
- The atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

3. Candidates attending your event on their own initiative

Candidates may appear at a public event held by your nonprofit on their own initiative. Take care that there is no actual or implied endorsement. Do not give the candidate an opportunity to address the gathering or distribute campaign literature.



Candidate questionnaires

Candidate questionnaires serve two purposes. First, they collect information about the candidates for voters. Second, they let candidates know the range of issues of concern to the organization(s) preparing the guide. Questionnaires do take time to prepare and require care to ensure they are nonpartisan. If you wish to do a candidate questionnaire, consider these key factors in determining whether a voter engagement guide is nonpartisan:

- Do the questions cover a broad range of issues related to the broad interests of the electorate? For example, do the questions address a range of issues relevant to a specific elected office or reflect a truly broad range of concerns within your issue area?
- Are the questions or any description of the issues clear and unbiased in both structure and content?
- Are the questions posed to candidates identical to the questions you later publicly print or post online? (They should be.)
- Are the candidates given a reasonable amount of time to respond?
- If the questions ask the candidates to respond with “Yes” or “No” or “Undecided,” are candidates given the opportunity to give short one or two sentence explanations to explain their positions in their own words?
- Have all major candidates responded?

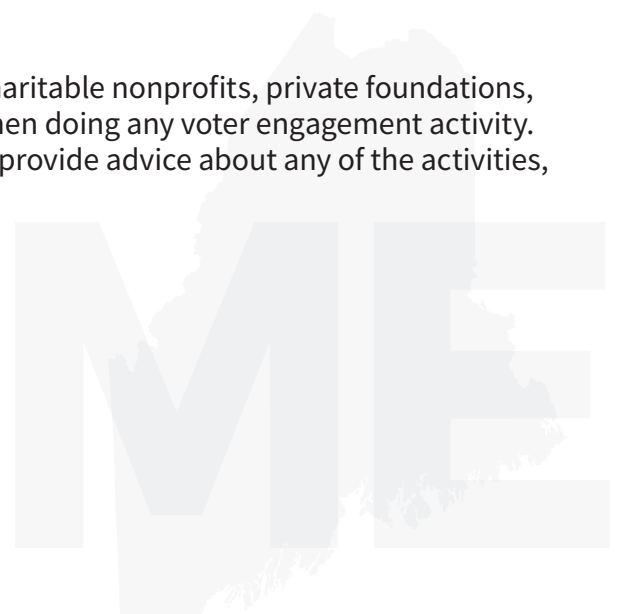


Q: What if the candidate does not respond?

You may list “Did Not Respond.” When a candidate fails to respond, some 501(c)(3)s choose to provide information about the candidate that is a matter of public record or on their website. If you do, be sure to stick strictly to factual information – name, address, etc. – and avoid efforts to summarize the candidate’s positions on issues, which might appear to be slanted to favor or disfavor the candidate. You should provide all candidates with the same reasonable time period – for example, three weeks – to give their responses and information. As the deadline nears, let the candidates know that if they don’t respond, you will print “did not respond.” While not required, it is a good practice to give the candidates the chance to review the final draft of their information and make any last-minute corrections.

Reminder

Federal law requires that all 501(c)(3) organizations – charitable nonprofits, private foundations, and houses of worship – remain strictly nonpartisan when doing any voter engagement activity. While the law does not require you to have an attorney provide advice about any of the activities, legal assistance is still advised in many circumstances.





Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small towns

Rural areas and small towns hold some of the nation's closest elections, but they are frequently overlooked by major parties. In many of these communities, food accessibility is scarce, healthcare access is limited, and public transportation is nonexistent. Yet, neighbors, nonprofits, and local leaders work together to build vibrant communities that are vital to our democracy. Every community, regardless of size, deserves adequate representation. Residents are more likely to know their local elected officials and their individual vote can have more power. In local races, a handful of votes may be enough to change the outcome of an election. And yet, most small communities continue to have lower participation rates in local elections than in federal elections.

Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small town communities may look different from how to engage people in cities or suburban areas. Here are a few strategies from nonprofits in rural areas and small towns:

Make space for one-on-one conversations

In rural areas and small towns, a one-on-one conversation is an effective way to engage and educate people. Making space to ask how people are doing can help meet more holistic needs and connect them to other resources.

Use physical materials to distribute information

Reliable Internet is often harder to access in rural areas. Having printed voter registration forms and flyers that educate voters on the processes and candidates are a reliable way to engage voters.

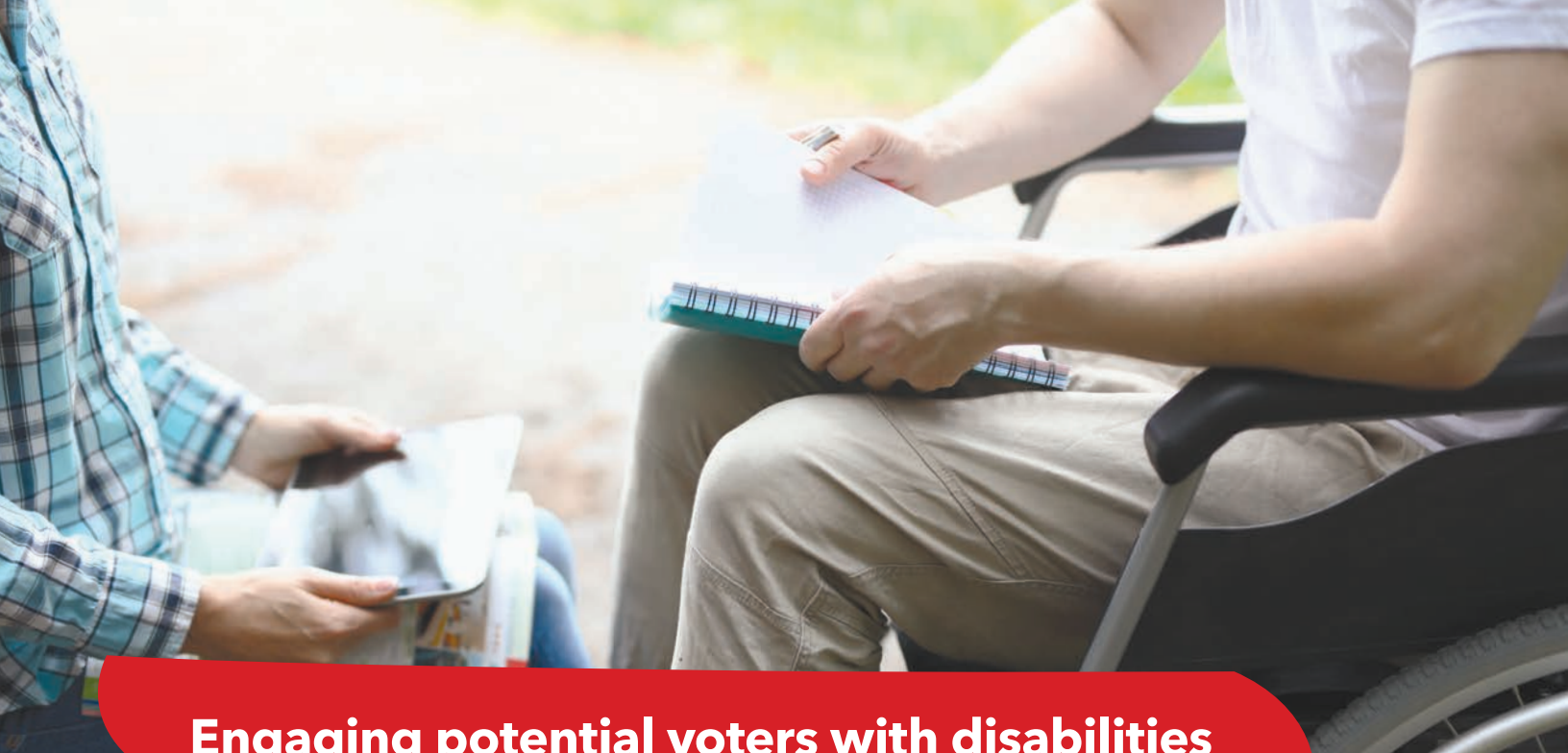
Read about how Community Partnership Family Resource Center reaches rural communities through trusted relationships at <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/field-program/>.

Host a meet and greet with local candidates and officials

Candidates and local officials in your small town/rural area might be neighbors you already know and work with. When people know their candidates, voting is more personal.

Utilize the trust in the community

Organize your voter engagement around local events. Try partnering with local businesses or libraries to help increase awareness about the approaching elections because people are already going there, linking voting to something safe and familiar.



Engaging potential voters with disabilities

A disability includes any condition that significantly impacts a person's life activities. This can include matters of mobility, cognition, hearing, and/or vision. Any of these can impact the ability to vote in unique ways. If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who have the same demographic characteristics, there would be about 1.75 million more voters. The landmark Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires states and local governments to make voting more accessible to ensure that people with disabilities have a full and equal opportunity to vote in all elections. The ADA covers all parts of voting, from voter registration to selecting a location for polling places to actually voting, whether on election day or during an early or absentee voting process. Since then, other laws such as the Help Americans Vote Act of 2002 have continued these efforts. Despite this, people with disabilities continue to face barriers to voting. In 2022, voters with disabilities were three times more likely to experience some type of difficulty in voting than people without disabilities.

Strategies for making voter engagement activities more accessible:

Use multiple formats in different mediums

Make any needed adjustments for the physical and digital space in which voter registration is done. This may mean providing information in multiple formats in various visual, auditory, and tactile mediums. For visual information and forms, you may need to provide both paper printouts and digital devices so screen readers can be utilized.

- Hosting a webinar on voting information? Be sure to turn on captioning.
- Posting an image to social media? Be sure to use the “alt tag” features.
- Using the web? Use free online tools to simplify language or check for color contrast to ensure readability.



Visualizing and walking through the steps to vote

One way to work with people with disabilities is in preparing to vote, from making sure voter information is clear and understandable to addressing potential concerns, such as: How will the voter get to the polling place? If driving, will there be accessible parking? Will the pathways to the entrance be accessible and clearly marked? How will the doors open?

- For first-time voters or if a polling place has changed, visiting the site together in advance can help to give the person a feel for the location and opportunity to identify any areas of concern.
- Any issues can be shared with the local county election office, which can be an ally in making sure accessibility requirements for polling places are met. Frame it as, “We want to help you make sure everyone can vote.”
- Try reaching out to the local election office to receive a demonstration to give people with disabilities experience with the actual voting machine that will be used.

By better understanding the full range of possible disabilities and appropriate accommodations, nonprofit staff can help address some of the barriers to voter registration and education, while maintaining dignity and independence for people with disabilities.



Section 5:

Philanthropy for voter engagement tools

Practices for trust-based philanthropy in voting

I would encourage foundations to trust the organizations that they're funding. There's a lot of hesitation about legality and what's allowed. Do your due diligence – trust and verify.

– Sapelo Foundation

- **Provide multi-year general operating support grants:** Investing for the long run means allowing grantees the flexibility to invest in the programs, systems, and capacities they need to move forward their long-term goals. For voter engagement funders, this often means having a shared vision for the future of democracy and improving representation among key communities, building relationships with grantees, and trusting their knowledge base, the challenges and opportunities they see to engage their community, and their ability to shift their work as necessary to address emerging needs.
- **Support beyond the grant:** Many funders named that providing the grant is just the beginning. Funders offer capacity building support through training and additional grants to help organizations continue to grow their impact. For voter engagement funders, this has included connecting grantees to Nonprofit Vote and Bolder Advocacy resources to understand the ways they can conduct voter engagement work, along with training on voter data and tools.
- **Be guided by grantee partners:** Grantee organizations are on the frontlines of the work and should be part of the information gathering process that informs foundation strategies. Be in conversation with partners to understand the current environment, what's working and not working, and what approaches or investments are needed. Voter engagement funders use townhalls, convenings, and grantee informed strategic planning processes to be responsive to the needs that emerge from the community in setting the priorities and parameters of their voter engagement programs.
- **Leverage the foundation's risk capital:** Foundations have unique positioning in their communities to convene leaders, invest in new ideas, and take bold action. Voter engagement funders have leaned into opportunities to convene elected leaders to discuss policy goals, explored ways to activate new funding tools to expand the type of voter engagement funding they can provide, and invest in emergent initiatives to support voter engagement infrastructure. Many foundations report that what allows these explorations to be successful is having board and executive leadership who sees new frontiers as bold opportunities to meet the organization's mission.
- **Reduce burden on grantees:** Foundations can minimize the application and reporting process for their grantees. For voter engagement funders that might mean having a call with a prospective grantee to understand their priorities for the upcoming election cycle rather than requiring a formal application or allowing grantees to submit a video that breaks down their approach. Some funders have eliminated reporting requirements or have set up convenings for grantees in lieu of reports that enable organizations to learn from each other rather than invest time in reporting that only the funder will see.



Building out a voter engagement grants program

Voter engagement grants can take many forms, from smaller, supplemental grants to existing grantees to integrate voter engagement into the client and community outreach work they are already doing, to more robust voter engagement grant programs with open RFPs targeting groups already working in the voter engagement space. Below are a sampling of such grant-making approaches. Consult the legal guidelines here in developing your program.

- **Jefferson Regional Foundation** awarded mini grants awarded nonprofit organizations to conduct voter engagement work. A total of 13 organizations received \$1,000 each to host voter registration events, canvass, transport residents to the polls, and to conduct outreach aimed at increasing voter turnout.
- **New Hampshire Charitable Foundation** launched a voter outreach pilot program that provides grants to community-based organizations for the purpose of increasing local civic engagement and participation in nonpartisan voter outreach activities, with a special focus on BIPOC and other historically under-represented populations. In 2022, the foundation invited grassroot groups to apply and supported eleven groups – some with no prior history of doing voter outreach. One example from their pilot year was a community-based organization that primarily provides after school sports programming and family and caregiver supports. With foundation funding, the organization, a trusted and known entity in the community, was able to add nonpartisan voter outreach work into their existing programming.
- **The Ruth Mott Foundation** launched a Civic Participation Fund, in partnership with United Way of Genesee County and Community Foundation of Greater Flint. The Ruth Mott Foundation has invested \$30,000 through the fund to support civic engagement. The fund has supported 13 organizations and the foundation intends to invest again in the fund, which has a goal of growing and attracting contributions from outside of the local community to support voter education and voter participation in Flint.
- **The California Community Foundation** launched the PIVOT Power Building Pooled Fund which aims to raise \$10-15 million to be spent over the next three years (2023-2026) to support California's key power building innovations and infrastructure. Specifically, the fund will focus on infrastructure for organizing, narrative communications, and independent revenue generation. CCF serves as a steering committee member and their former civic engagement program officer serves as the director of the fund.



Strategic plan examples

Through their strategic planning work, many foundations have articulated the clear connection between their mission and voter engagement and civic life. Including voter engagement as part of priorities and outcomes sets a tone for the organization, can align programs and resources, and communicates the importance that participation plays in achieving mission-aligned outcomes.

Episcopal Health Foundation 2018-2023 Strategic Plan

The Episcopal Health Foundation’s plan includes an outcome that “community and congregation members actively shape healthy communities and influence health systems to improve health equity.” A core strategy to achieve the outcome is to support organizations to elevate the voice of community members to influence community health:

We will work with community organizations that are interested in and capable of engaging community members, particularly low-income and vulnerable populations, to become advocates for health. Our primary mechanisms for advancing this strategy include technical assistance to help organizations learn how to do meaningful community engagement work and financial support to organizations that work actively and effectively with community members.

Examples of work within this strategy include increasing the number and reach of grassroots community organizing groups that advocate for community health; supporting the development of new leaders within communities; ensuring that client-facing community partners have the skills and resources they need to actively engage those they serve as influential beneficiaries; developing new and strengthening existing health coalitions; and supporting community organizations in using hospital community benefit data to encourage investment in social determinants of health.

Fairfield County Forward: Fairfield County’s Community Foundation’s 2022 Strategic Plan

The Fairfield County Community Foundation developed a strategic plan that evolves its approach to philanthropy. The plan set out intentions to embrace trust-based approaches to grantmaking and community leadership and to work with the community on three goals:

1. To understand and acknowledge racial history;
2. Create a shared affirmative vision of a fair, antiracist, inclusive society; and
3. Build civic, cultural, economic, and political power for those most impacted by inequities and injustices in our current systems.

The inclusion of civic and political power undergirds the Foundation’s priorities to invest in voter engagement.



Together We Thrive: New Hampshire Charitable Foundation Strategic Plan for 2022-2027

As part of its strategy to focus on equity, racial justice, and economic security, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation outlined five priorities including civic health.

Under civic health, the foundation aims to

- Work with partners to identify leverage points for the Foundation’s advocacy, communications, convening power and grantmaking to address polarization, misinformation and other forces that threaten our democracy. We will invest in efforts to expand leadership by and representation of people of color.

The Sapelo Foundation 2020-2025 Strategic Plan

The Sapelo Foundation celebrated its 70th anniversary, outlining a new strategic plan to guide its work. Among the strategic priorities were two goals:

- Catalyze systemic change through power-building strategies of policy advocacy, civic engagement, and grassroots community organizing. A just Georgia requires changes to the policies and practices that have oppressed marginalized communities, and power is built among those communities. We support promising efforts focused on strategies of policy advocacy, civic engagement, and grassroots community organizing, which result in tangible systemic change and power building.
- Support marginalized communities—particularly communities of color—so they are included in and benefit from the creation and implementation of just policies and practices. A just Georgia requires that we engage and lift the voices of those whose participation in our democratic society has been systematically denied—in particular, communities of color. We support efforts that meaningfully engage marginalized communities in the pursuit of systemic change.



Survey tool to assess grantee voter engagement priorities

Contact information

1. Name of Organization:
2. Fiscal Sponsor (if applicable):
3. Person completing survey:
4. Email:
5. Executive Director:
6. Executive Director Email:

About your voter engagement program

1. Please select the race & ethnicity of your target voter population(s):
 - Asian
 - Black/African American
 - Indigenous
 - Latinx
 - Middle Eastern & North African
 - Native/Tribal
 - Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander
 - Other (please specify)
2. Based on PREVIOUS electoral programs, what areas in [indicate region] have you been able to reach? Please list below.
3. For this UPCOMING electoral program, what areas in [indicate region] are you intending to reach? Please list below.
4. Please outline your [insert election year] voter engagement plans in 3 bullet points.
5. Will your voter engagement program be addressing any local or state ballot measures? If so, please specify.

For private foundations, please reference guidance on ballot measures.

6. Does your organization have a fundraising gap for your [insert election year] work? If so, please specify.
7. Anything else we should know about your [insert election year]:engagement.



Grant agreement template

A grant agreement that bars all “political activities” can unnecessarily limit nonprofits. The Internal Revenue Code only prohibits “partisan political activities” that support or oppose candidates. It does not prohibit election activities conducted on a nonpartisan basis. Not specifying “partisan” creates confusion among nonprofits as to whether or not they can carry out even fully allowable nonpartisan voter activities such as voter education or candidate forums commonly undertaken as part of the sector’s longstanding commitment to active civic engagement.

Further, the IRS does not require either private or public foundations to include a statement related to partisan political activities at all. It’s sufficient to state funds should be used solely for charitable and educational purposes as outlined in the Internal Revenue Code.

Grant Agreement Templates for Private Foundations: The following grant agreement templates were developed by the Council on Foundations and Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, a program of the National Council of Nonprofits, with the assistance of Marcus Owens, director of the IRS Exempt Organizations Division (1990–2000):

- **Grant Template with language prohibiting partisan political activity**

Key language in template: “No funds may be used for partisan political activities, which are prohibited under Section 501(c)(3). However, the grantee may engage in any voter education and voter engagement activities conducted on a nonpartisan basis.”

- **Grant Template without a specific partisan political prohibition**

Key language in template: “Grant funds will be used solely for charitable, religious, scientific or educational purposes as described in Section 170(c)(2)(B) of the Internal Revenue Code.”



Training and convening voter engagement partners

Blue Shield of California Foundation

One of Blue Shield of California Foundation's major grantmaking areas is domestic violence and the Foundation has made core support grants to every one of the nearly 200 domestic violence shelters in California. Blue Shield has offered an added benefit to all grantees through a partnership with Alliance for Justice to make their Bolder Advocacy webinars and training materials available for free. The trainings cover topics that include advocacy and voter engagement and allow grantees to access resources that help deepen the impact of their work. Blue Shield of California works with Alliance for Justice to develop the training schedule and sends a quarterly email to all grantees with the dates and reminders about this free resource.

California Community Foundation

In 2022, the California Community Foundation (CCF) hosted four trainings leading up to the June primary and another four training sessions leading up to the November General Election on topics including script writing for voter contact, how to conduct volunteer recruitment, how to navigate voter data and software tools, and a session about the rights of voters in partnership with the Los Angeles County Registrar. CCF partnered with other local grantmakers, including the Weingart Foundation, Liberty Hill Foundation, the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, and California Wellness Foundation, to invite their grantee partners and extend the reach of the training. The training sessions were successful and CCF relaunched them in 2023.

To deepen the impact of the trainings and inform their grantmaking strategy, CCF sent a survey to attendees asking them about their electoral plans. The majority of organizations responded that they needed \$10,000 to 20,000 for their voter engagement programs. CCF collaborated with training session partners Weingart Foundation and Liberty Hill Foundation to provide \$5,000 to \$25,000 grants to 15 organizations to fill budget gaps.

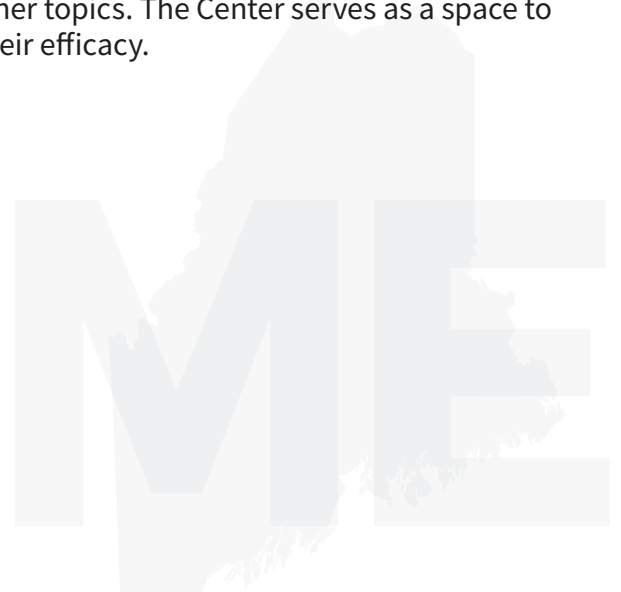


Episcopal Health Foundation

In collaboration with representatives from the Episcopal Church, Texas League of Women Voters, and Texas Impact, Episcopal Health Foundation, EHF hosted a training that provided information to congregations about ways to educate and engage community members to vote in the upcoming election. The session covered resources available through the Episcopal “Voting Faithfully” campaign, ways to engage vulnerable populations to vote, and recruiting election workers. In addition to the training, a workshop at their sixth annual In Common event shared ways for attendees to educate themselves and others about current elections and nonpartisan ways to encourage voting in the community.

Fairfield County’s Community Foundation

Fairfield County’s Community Foundation’s Center for Nonprofit Excellence provides education and tools to help nonprofits grow and thrive. The center provides training to more than 600 organizations on topics ranging from grant writing, data storytelling, board effectiveness, integrating an equity mindset, and nonprofit management, among other topics. The Center serves as a space to support nonprofits with ways to deepen and expand their efficacy.





Common strategies

Communications campaigns that get out the vote

Create a communications strategy that informs the community and grantees about upcoming elections and how to vote. This can include building a page on your foundation website with key election dates; information about where and how to vote; and links or phone numbers for the registrar, board of elections, and/or Secretary of State. Create an easy-to-use toolkit with social media posts and graphics to share with grantees and other partners to spread the word within their own communities. View [sample](#) content to include in your communications campaign.

Training and convenings

Bring your grantees together for training on topics such as staying nonpartisan, effective voter outreach, using data, technology, and tools to engage voters, and approaches to reach communities with voting information. Create a space for shared learning, exploration, brainstorming, and collaboration. Don't worry about having all of the answers and knowledge – invite experts, trainers, and advisors to inform programming on specific topics, or promote trainings organized by others. View [examples](#) of ways that foundations have organized training and convenings for their partners.

Grantmaking

Directly support voter engagement activities. This can be done through supplemental grants to existing grantees to build out voter engagement programs for their respective communities. Whether food pantries, health centers, or family service agencies, these groups and the communities served will be stronger as a result of greater voter participation. Alternatively, build out a stand-alone grants program to support groups doing voter engagement work within given communities. View more [examples](#) of ways foundations have built voter engagement grant programs.

Investing in voting ecosystems

Support collaborative networks that convene, organize, and build shared strategy among community-based organizations that are invested in improving voter engagement. View these networks as a way to build the backbone of the local voter engagement infrastructure.

Research that informs strategy

Conduct or collaborate on research that aims to identify voting and civic gaps. Use that research to ask questions about what's needed to engage the community and inform the approach for investing in strategies to improve voting engagement.



Legal guidelines to inform your voter engagement programming

Provided by Adler & Colvin, a group of seasoned attorneys in San Francisco deeply committed to serving the legal needs of the nonprofit sector nationwide. These Guidelines summarize information for educational purposes, and are not intended as legal or tax advice. Consult a qualified attorney concerning the application of the law in any specific factual situation.

Private and community foundations can use their resources to strengthen democracy and invest in voter engagement to support nonpartisan efforts that give voice to the communities they serve.

Foundations can directly conduct, and provide grants to nonprofit organizations to support, a wide range of nonpartisan election-related activities to educate voters and candidates and increase voter engagement and participation. With the exception of prohibiting private foundations from conducting or supporting certain voter registration drives, the Internal Revenue Code places no limit on the amount of nonpartisan, election-related activities a foundation may conduct in pursuit of its charitable or educational purposes.

Foundations can participate in both candidate elections and ballot measure campaigns:

- 1. Candidate Elections:** Foundations can support or promote a wide range of nonpartisan voter engagement, voter education, and candidate engagement activities as long as they do not support or oppose candidates or political parties; and community foundations can support and conduct nonpartisan voter registration drives. Private foundations can support voter registration drives that comply with additional rules discussed below.
- 2. Ballot Measure Campaigns:** Foundations can conduct voter engagement and education on ballot measures, including initiatives, referendums, and bonds, subject to the rules governing lobbying under Section 501(c)(3) discussed more fully below. However, unlike community foundations, private foundations cannot deploy their resources, directly or through earmarked grants to others, to oppose or support ballot measures, except in the limited circumstances described below.

Candidate elections

While foundations can support a wide range of nonpartisan voter education, candidate engagement, and get-out-the-vote activities, Section 501(c)(3) prohibits all charities, including private and community foundations, from engaging in activities that support or oppose any candidate, or group of candidates such as a political party, for election to public office.

Being nonpartisan means a foundation cannot endorse or contribute to any candidate campaign nor engage in any communication, conduct, or use of resources that favors or disfavors a specific candidate or party. This includes activities such as rating candidates or labeling them with arguably partisan identifiers such as “pro-choice” or “anti-tax.”

The safest strategy is to make no reference to any candidate or party except in the context of carefully-designed and -implemented nonpartisan educational activities where multiple candidates are presented, or in a context completely separate from any election, such as attempting to influence an incumbent’s performance as an officeholder.

For example, a foundation can stay nonpartisan by inviting all viable candidates for a city council office to participate in a voter education forum or to respond to a questionnaire about where they stand on a range of key issues, and publishing their responses without editing or commentary.

A foundation can provide information on voting or encourage greater voter participation by any community or demographic of people chosen without regard to political affiliation or candidate preference provided it avoids partisan content and acts independently from any candidate or political group.

For instance, a foundation can provide targeted grants to engage new, first-time voters within the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, or alternatively, voters from an underrepresented, largely Black community in the foundation’s service area. Demographic targeting does not in itself constitute partisan activity.

Further, private and community foundations can educate voters about the candidates by using or funding unbiased, even-handed methods such as nonpartisan debates, forums, questionnaires, voter guides, news reporting, social media, and web links in accordance with IRS guidance.^[1] Organizations like Nonprofit VOTE and Bolder Advocacy are available to provide support, information, and guidance on how to provide voter education resources.

Private foundations and voter registration drives

One thing private foundations cannot do easily however, that community foundations can, is conduct or fund a voter registration drive targeted to a specific time or place. A private foundation that wants to conduct or fund a voter registration drive can do so only by making a grant to an organization recognized by the IRS as meeting very specific qualifications, set forth in Section 4945(f) of the Code, such as conducting its registration drives in five or more states and across multiple election cycles. However, these rules only apply to private foundation grants earmarked or specifically for the purpose of funding a voter registration drive.

General Support or Project Grants: A private foundation may provide general support grants or project grants to an organization that conducts voter registration drives, provided the grant is not earmarked for specific voter registration activities or outcomes. In such cases, the charity may use some or all of the grant for voter registration work, provided there is no oral or written expectation that funds be used for voter registration.^[2]

For more, see [Bolder Advocacy’s fact sheet](#) on Voter Registration Rules for Private Foundations.

Ballot measure campaigns

About half the states and many localities have ballot measures by which voters may directly approve new laws via public elections. Section 501(c)(3) expressly authorizes public charities (but not private foundations – see below) to engage in activities designed to influence the outcome of legislation, including ballot measures, provided that such activities do not constitute a “substantial part” of the charity’s overall activities.^[2] This federal tax restriction affects only laws passed by legislatures or voters in a ballot measure, not other forms of government action like regulatory, administrative, or judicial decisions. Expenditures to support or oppose a ballot measure may also require reporting under state or local campaign finance laws.^[3]

Being a public charity, rather than a private foundation, means that a community foundation can, if it chooses and within its lobbying limits, reflect a view in a ballot measure campaign as a lobbying activity. A community foundation can also engage in any other kind of activity related to a ballot measure, without limit, so long as the activity is charitable or educational and does not reflect a view on the ballot measure, and therefore does not constitute “lobbying” as defined for federal tax purposes.

To determine how best to accomplish its goals and remain nonpartisan, a community foundation seeking to fund voter engagement activities should consult knowledgeable counsel as well as learning from the content of this toolkit and suggested resources.

Private foundations and ballot measures

Unlike community foundations, private foundations cannot directly support or oppose ballot measures, and cannot earmark grants to do so. For measures placed on the ballot by citizen petition, the law allows private foundations (and other charities) to discuss the subject of the measure, and even express a view about it, until signature petitions begin to circulate. Before that moment, a potential ballot measure is not considered “specific legislation” for federal tax purposes, and referring to it is not lobbying. Once petitions begin to circulate, however, the measure becomes “specific legislation”, and a communication that refers to and reflects a view on the measure thereafter will constitute lobbying unless the communication fits within the exception for “nonpartisan study, analysis, and research”.^[4]

A private foundation cannot “earmark” funds for lobbying, including lobbying on a ballot measure. However, the Code provides two safe harbors within which a private foundation can make a grant to a charity that lobbies (on a ballot measure or other legislation), without adverse tax consequences for the foundation. A grant properly made under either safe harbor need not prohibit the use of grant funds for lobbying.^[5]

General Support Grant: A private foundation grant that provides “general support” to a public charity that the grantee is free to use for any of its activities will not be considered “earmarked” for lobbying, even if the grantee chooses to spend grant funds to support or oppose a ballot measure.^[6]

Specific Project Grant: A private foundation grant that supports a specific project that includes lobbying will not be considered “earmarked” for lobbying if the amount of the grant does not exceed the non-lobbying portion of the specific project budget.^[7]

[1] Guidance from the IRS on how to conduct these activities on a nonpartisan basis is in Revenue Rulings 2007-41, 80-282, 78-248, and 76-456.

[2] Some foundations may prefer to use the definitions and percentage limits of Section 501(h) to govern their ballot measure and other lobbying expenditures. Those rules treat a public charity’s communications, conduct, or expenditures supporting or opposing a ballot measure as direct (not grassroots) lobbying of voters in their capacity as legislators that provide higher and more defined spending limits.

[3] Guidance from the IRS on how to conduct these activities on a nonpartisan basis is in Revenue Rulings 2007-41, 80-282, 78-248, and 76-456.

[4] Further discussion of campaign finance requirements related to ballot measures is beyond the scope of this Toolkit. Community foundations should consult with campaign finance counsel and each relevant state or local campaign finance office before starting any activity that could be subject to these rules.

[5] A private foundation considering reliance on either of the safe harbors should consult knowledgeable counsel before making any such grant

[6] Whether the grant is for general support depends on the specific facts and circumstances of the grant.

[7] Funders seeking the protection of this safe harbor should consult knowledgeable counsel in advance about how to safely implement this device.



Additional resources

General Resources:



[Nonprofit VOTE](#) – Get webinars, factsheets, and support for nonpartisan voter engagement.



[National Council of Nonprofits](#) – Learn more about nonpartisan ways nonprofits can and do promote voting and community engagement, how to take the 501(h) election, and the many benefits of doing so.



[Bolder Advocacy/Alliance for Justice](#) – Find answers to questions about nonpartisanship through their library of factsheets or by contacting their technical assistance team.



[National Conference of State Legislatures](#) – Learn even more about election issues, including 50-state surveys on state laws, legislation databases, podcasts, and webinars.

Nonpartisan Voter Information (National):



[Vote.gov](#): National governmental website for the most direct access to accurate voter registration and election information.



[Vote411](#): Provided by League of Women Voters, a decades old organization providing nonpartisan voter information.



[BallotReady](#): See what is on your ballot ahead of election time.

National Civic Holidays:

[National Voter Registration Day \(September\)](#)

[National Voter Education Week \(October\)](#)

[Vote Early Day \(October\)](#)