



NATIONAL LOW INCOME
HOUSING COALITION

Educating Voters and Candidates on Housing Issues

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Overview

1. Brief Introduction to the Voterization Project
2. Discussion of Housing as an Election Issue
3. Keeping It Legal as a 501 (c)(3)
4. Educating Voters
5. Educating Candidates
6. Q&A

What is the Voterization Project?

- The Voterization Project is our effort to help housing advocates and service providers legally and effectively engage their clients and constituents in voting.
- Voterization is a term that encompasses the three part process of effective voter engagement:
 1. Registration
 2. Education
 3. Mobilization

Housing as an Election Issue

- Housing hasn't been much of an election issue.
- Regardless of party, it is essential that voters and candidates understand housing issues and that voters understand the positions of these candidates.
- Housing issues in this country will not be adequately addressed until this happens.

Considerations for 501(c)(3) Organizations

- Non-profit organizations can participate in voter and candidate education efforts, and are often uniquely situated to do so
 - Connect voting to solutions
 - Use direct service experience to inform public debate
- Remain non-partisan at all times
- Never endorse a candidate or political party

Keeping it Legal: Direct Legislation Campaigns

- Non-profit organizations can take official positions on ballot measures and campaign directly for their passage or defeat
- Insubstantial part test
 - Non-profits designated as 501(c)(3) can work on these issues as long as it is considered an “insubstantial part” of the organization’s work
 - Court decisions have ruled that an “insubstantial part” is when less than 5% of an organization’s time and resources are used for these efforts
 - Non-profits who have elected under a 501(h) classification can spend as much as 20% of annual time and budget on direct legislation
 - Being designated as a 501(h) is recommended

Educating Voters: The Process of Voting

- Know polling locations and times!
 - Keep a list of polling locations and train volunteers and staff on how to look up polling locations online by address
 - Voter suppression efforts have conducted intentional misinformation campaigns—be prepared with good information
- Required documents
 - Know your local voter identification requirements and provide handouts to voters so that they know what to bring
- Accessibility considerations
 - Voters with disabilities should be provided with accommodations

Educating Voters: The Process of Voting

- Early voting
 - Make sure your constituency knows about opportunities for early voting and any eligibility requirements
- Mail-in ballots
 - Learn what your community requires for the submission of absentee ballots
- Sample ballots
 - Make sure that your voters know in advance exactly which federal, state, and local offices will be considered in the election
 - Include any ballot referenda or direct legislation
 - Sample ballots will usually be available through local election officials

Educating Voters: Their Rights

- Prepare voters for common voter suppression practices such as ballot challenges
- Provisional ballots
 - Many voters can be discouraged by difficulties with poll workers or organized suppression efforts; casting a provisional ballot is almost always an option
- Stay in line!
 - Voters who are in line prior to the scheduled time of poll closure should be able to cast a ballot before going home
- Voter protection attorneys
 - Most communities will have groups of attorneys organized to assist on election day

Educating Voters: Housing Issues

- Selecting key issues
 - Which federal, state, and local issues matter most to your clients and your community?
- Distribute materials
 - Candidate questionnaire responses
 - Issue briefing statements that explain how each office on the ballot can impact housing and community development
- Host candidates
 - Provide a venue for candidates to speak to your organization's clients or members so that they can ask questions directly

NLIHC Tools: Voterization Plan

EDUCATION CHECKLIST

For each following section, check those ways in which your agency will educate voters and candidates. In the space after the activity, list the staff or resident(s) who will carry out the activity, and the timeframe for carrying it out.

	STAFF	TIMEFRAME
Educating Clients on Voting And Their Rights As Voters		
<input type="checkbox"/> Educate clients on new I.D. requirements for voter registration and voting in your state.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Obtain sample ballots from your county's Board of Elections and distribute to residents.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Arrange for someone from your county's Board of Elections or County Clerk's office to come to your agency to provide a demonstration of your county's voting machines and explain people's rights as voters.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Host a discussion on the importance of voting and what can be gained by increasing the percentage of voters from the agency.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Encourage residents to sign up with the Board of Elections as poll workers.		
Educating Clients on the Issues		
<input type="checkbox"/> Obtain materials on current affordable housing issues from NLIHC, http://nlihc.org/issues		
<input type="checkbox"/> Host a discussion on who clients' elected officials are, and the connection between what those officials do and your clients' lives.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Arrange for clients to attend or watch a candidate debate or public forum.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Ask all candidates to complete a candidate questionnaire and distribute their answers. Publish the answers on your website, if possible. For information on putting together a questionnaire or hosting a forum, see: http://bit.ly/1gD2hdR		
<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____		
Educating Candidates		
<input type="checkbox"/> Include information on your agency when sending candidates your questionnaire.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Encourage clients to write letters to the editor explaining why affordable housing is an important issue for them.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Prepare clients for asking questions at candidate forums or town hall events.		
<input type="checkbox"/> Arrange for each candidate for a particular office to take a tour of your agency and speak with clients.		

Educating Candidates

- Remember to keep things nonpartisan!
- What are some methods for legally educating candidates?
- There are many ways to educate candidates on your issues:
 - Letters to the Editor
 - Fact Sheets
 - Hosting Candidate Forums
 - Agency Tours
 - Participating in Town Halls
 - Candidate Questionnaires

Educating Candidates

- Today we're going to focus on candidate questionnaires.
- As an example, we're going to go over one we developed about affordable housing.
- We'll post our full candidate questionnaire on our website.

Educating Candidates

- So what exactly is a candidate questionnaire?
 - Short Survey on your issues taken by the candidates.
 - Not a litmus test!

Educating Candidates

- Ideally, a candidate questionnaire accomplishes three main things:
 - Educates candidates on your issues
 - Educates voters about the candidates' positions on your issues.
 - Makes future legislators accountable to your issues.

Educating Candidates

- What makes for a good candidate questionnaire?
- Three parts:
 - cover letter from your organization
 - explicit instructions for completing and returning the questionnaire
 - well formulated questions

Educating Candidates

- Best practices.
- For the sake of brevity, we're going to assume you can come up with a cover letter.
- But what about best practices for questionnaire instructions and questions?

Educating Candidates

- Good instructions:
 - are concise
 - give a specific word limit for responses
 - provide an exact deadline for completing and returning the questionnaire

Educating Candidates

- Sample instructions:

“ Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please limit each answer to 300 words, which will allow us to reprint your answers in their entirety. For any answer that is more than 300 words, we may cut off the answer at the 300th word. As long as your answer is less than 300 words, it will be reprinted in its entirety. Please return to _____ by _____.”

Educating Candidates

- Good questions:
 - are concise
 - appropriate to the type of candidate
 - cite the most relevant data
 - achieve a balance between broadness and specificity
 - create a solid basis for establishing accountability after the election
 - different from asking them to pledge support

Educating Candidates

- Some other points about questions:
 - Fewer is better. Definitely fewer than 10.
 - Don't compare responses to your organization's views.
 - Try to have at least one broad question about the candidate's political philosophy in addition to more technical questions.

Educating Candidates

- Example Question #1:

“The Availability of Affordable Housing – Nationally, there is a shortage of 7.1 million units of housing that are affordable and available to extremely low income households. What generally should be the role of the federal government in filling that gap, and what specific steps would you take to encourage the production of more affordable units for the families most in need?”

Educating Candidates

- Example Question #2:

“Landlord/tenant law is almost exclusively a locally controlled issue. The U.S. Congress in 2009, however, decided to protect renters who were facing eviction when the homes for which they were paying rent went into foreclosure. Do you think the federal government should continue such protections for renters, which allow tenants to stay in their homes for at least 90 days after foreclosure?”

Educating Candidates

- What can I do if they don't respond to my questionnaire?
 - Ask the questions in a town hall or candidate forum.
 - Create a set of cards that people can use to ask or submit questions at a candidate forum.

Educating Candidates

- If a candidate doesn't respond and you want to create a voter guide on your issues:
 - You can note it in the guide and attempt to determine the candidate's position on the issues based on a neutral and complete analysis of publically available information on the candidate.
 - Must note that this isn't the candidate's response.
 - If not all candidates respond, consider carefully if only publishing responses from one come across as partisan.

Review and Q&A

- Review
 - Brief Introduction to the Voterization Project
 - Discussion of Housing as an Election Issue
 - Keeping It Legal as a 501 (c)(3)
 - Educate Voters
 - Educating Candidates
- Questions? Comments?

More Voterization Webinars to come!

Mobilization—Getting Out the Vote!

- Monday, September 8, 2014 at 2:00 pm ET
- Ensure that low income voters get to the polls!
- Effective strategies for organizing on election day, coordinating rides to the polls, and encouraging early voting.
- Visit www.nlihc.org/library/voterization to register.

The Conversation Continues...

#voterization

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Thank You for Joining Us!

For more information about Voterization,
or to find out how you can get involved, please contact:

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