

Our Homes, Our Votes: A Guide to Nonpartisan Voter and Candidate Engagement for the Housing and Homelessness Field

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Our Homes, Our Votes is NLIHC's nonpartisan campaign to boost voter turnout among low-income renters and educate candidates about housing solutions. The campaign empowers the housing and homelessness field—including housing advocates, social services organizations, tenant leaders, and affordable housing providers—to register, educate, and mobilize their communities to vote. To support housing and homelessness organizations that have limited experience with elections, the campaign provides an abundance of resources for getting started on nonpartisan voter and candidate engagement work. This guide provides an overview of key considerations for planning a nonpartisan voter and candidate engagement campaign. For a comprehensive set of resources, visit www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/

WHY ENGAGE IN ELECTION WORK?

The same communities that face the greatest barriers to securing stable, accessible, and affordable housing also face the greatest barriers to voting. Low-income people with less flexible work schedules or lack of transportation face obstacles to getting to their polling places. Polling place closures, voter purges, and other voter suppression tactics disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. In states with restrictive voter ID laws, people experiencing homelessness often lack the documents that they need to register and have their votes counted. Returning citizens, who face significant barriers to stable housing, must navigate a patchwork of state-level felony disenfranchisement laws, some of which involve



a complex voting rights restoration process. Many people who have consistently been failed by public policy may feel apathetic towards the process and skeptical that voting is worth their time. Because renters move more frequently than homeowners, they must update their voter registration more often, creating yet another hurdle to overcome before casting their ballots. Research even shows a direct link between higher eviction rates and declining voter turnout, as those who are displaced from their communities and grappling with the trauma of eviction are less likely to have the time or resources for civic participation.

These obstacles contribute to persistent disparities in voter turnout between renters and homeowners. In the 2020 presidential election, 71% of homeowners voted, compared with a turnout rate of 55% for renters. High-income people also vote at much higher rates than low-income people. While 83% of people with incomes over \$100,000 voted in 2020, just 49% of people with incomes below \$20,000 voted. This voter turnout gap is one of the root causes of the threadbare social safety net for housing, as elected officials sideline the concerns of the lowest-income renters and pay more attention to their constituents who vote at higher rates. To increase political participation and build the political will for bold housing solutions, housing and homelessness organizations must bring civic engagement to the forefront of their work.

Fortunately, organizations that work directly with low-income renters and people experiencing homelessness are in a strong position to help their communities overcome these obstacles and cast their ballots. According to research from Nonprofit VOTE, engagement with nonprofits is proven to significantly increase turnout among voters traditionally overlooked by political campaigns – including low-income voters, first-time voters, voters who move often, and returning citizens. In 2020, low-income voters engaged by nonprofits had a voter turnout rate 7 percentage points higher than that of comparable low-income voters who were not engaged by nonprofits. Tenant leaders are also trusted messengers that can empathetically address their neighbors’ concerns about voting and help them navigate the barriers they face.

Voter engagement is a powerful way to further the mission of housing and homelessness organizations. Below are some of the primary reasons why nonprofits, tenant associations, and housing providers choose to register, educate, and mobilize voters:

- Residents and clients engage in civic life and learn about the democratic process;
- The issue of homelessness and housing scarcity is elevated in public debate;
- Elected officials learn about low-income housing issues and see renters as a voting bloc with the power to hold them accountable;
- Housing and homelessness organizations build strong relationships with elected officials;
- People with lived experience of homelessness and housing instability develop civic leadership skills; and
- Housing programs earn positive press.

GETTING STARTED

Nonprofit organizations can, and should, engage in nonpartisan election-related activity, including voter registration, education, and mobilization. There are, however, legal considerations that are important to understand before getting

started on voter and candidate engagement. The basic rule is that 501(c)(3) organizations cannot support or oppose candidates or political parties. 501(c)(3) organizations can register and educate voters, engage with candidates on issues, host election-related public events, and get voters to the polls. While 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations cannot endorse candidates, they can endorse ballot measures that fit within the organization’s mission. Engagement on ballot measures is treated as lobbying on a bill, but with the voters acting as the legislators. Finally, if any staff member engages in partisan political activities, they must do so without representing the organization or using organizational resources. For detailed legal guidance, you may want to consult:

- Nonprofit VOTE, www.nonprofitvote.org.
- Bolder Advocacy, <https://bolderadvocacy.org/>.
- League of Women Voters, www.vote411.org.

Organizations that receive specific types of federal funding might face limitations on electoral engagement. After consulting the above resources, organizations with additional legal questions are encouraged to contact an attorney who specializes in election law. It is important to remember that 501(c)(3) organizations cannot consult with campaign staff or political parties, even on simple technical questions.

When developing your voter engagement plan, you should assess your existing resources to determine the scope of your election activities. Take time to gather information on existing election efforts and identify critical gaps where you could plug in. Identify potential funding sources for your project or in-kind donations to cover expenses like voter databases, supplies, transportation, training sessions, and community events. Once you know what you would like to accomplish, plan out how to maximize staff and volunteer capacity. Look for opportunities to build and leverage partnerships—for example, student groups may be interested in registering voters as part of a community service project, or a civic group may already coordinate rides to the polls and could include your clients in its plans.

Remember to partner only with nonpartisan organizations. Consider formalizing a coalition devoted to increasing voter participation among low-income renters, people experiencing homelessness, and other underrepresented communities. A coalition can bring a greater range of resources, volunteers, and audiences into your efforts. Some of the benefits of an election engagement coalition include the following:

- Social media – Elevate your messages about the election, low-income housing issues, and candidates by cross-posting with other organizations.
- Spotlights – By featuring the efforts of key partners on your website in your newsletter, you can direct your members, renters, or clients to other resources that might be beyond your capacity to organize, such as candidate forums or rides to the polls.
- Website – Joining with other community organizations to house all relevant and important election information on one website can prevent confusion and ensure greater visibility for your resources.
- Pooling volunteers – Each coalition partner will have different types of volunteer support. Sharing volunteer networks can maximize your impact.

There are five components of nonpartisan election work in which housing and homelessness organizations commonly participate: voter registration, voter education, voter mobilization, candidate engagement, and ballot measure advocacy. These should be considered as a menu of possible activities; your organization's mission and capacity will determine where you should concentrate your efforts. To map out your voter engagement strategy, use the *Our Homes, Our Votes* Engagement Plan, which can be found at: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/resource-library

VOTER REGISTRATION

The first step to boost voter turnout among low-income renters and people experiencing

homelessness is to ensure that they are registered to vote. Here are some tips for effective voter registration efforts:

1. Set goals. Define who you want to register, and how many people you hope to register. How will you choose which voters to target? Will you target young voters who recently became eligible to vote? How will you identify new residents who just moved into the community? Request the voter rolls for your community, so you will know who is already registered. Voter lists may cost a small fee, but they are essential to track who is registered and who should be the target of your outreach.
2. Familiarize yourself with voter registration rules. Your local Board of Elections or County Clerk can offer a wealth of information for your voter registration efforts. You will want to check in with them to learn the registration deadline for the general election in your state. Ask whether anyone can register voters in your state, or whether a person must first become authorized to register voters or meet other requirements. Learn about identification requirements for registration and voting. You can partner with organizations like Voteriders or Spread the Vote if any community members need to resolve voter ID issues before registering.
3. Determine what materials you need. Explore whether online voter registration is an option – this might allow your voter registration drive to be done on tablets or smartphones. Request enough voter registration forms to meet your registration goals, and make sure you have materials available in multiple languages if members of your community primarily speak languages other than English.
4. Offer registration trainings. Staff and volunteers who plan to register voters will benefit from receiving training on the process. You may want to bring in someone from the local Board of Elections or County Clerk's office who can explain the state's registration requirements and how voter registration forms must be filled out, whether online or

on paper. It is also helpful to practice voter registration updates for renters who have recently moved and to know the process for registering voters experiencing homelessness.

5. Integrate voter registration into existing activities. Registration can usually be incorporated with few resources and little hassle into client intake processes, training sessions, resident association meetings, and any other gatherings. Staff or volunteers can be prepared to help with voter registration in day-to-day interactions that are already taking place. Organizations can also display voter registration information in common areas that are highly visible to clients and volunteers.
6. Organize a door-to-door campaign. Resident leaders can volunteer to receive training and serve as “building captains” or “floor captains” for canvassing efforts in their own buildings. Captains take on responsibility for registering, keeping registration records, and then turning out to vote all the people in their building or on their floor. Residents are trusted messengers who can answer their neighbors’ questions and get them excited to vote! Be sure that captains keep well-organized records of all the voters they register so that they can reach out again and help them make a voting plan.
7. Organize voter registration events. Hold social events, like block parties, at which low-income renters are encouraged to register to vote. Consider hosting an event for the annual nonpartisan Civic Holidays (National Voter Registration Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day, and Election Hero Day). Ensure that events are accessible to families by making the events kid-friendly or providing childcare. To boost attendance, offer food so that low-income renters will not need to plan their meal schedules around the event.
8. Positive messaging matters. Many low-income renters may not be registered to vote because they feel that elected officials do not have their interests in mind. Research

shows that positive messages can help voters overcome their skepticism towards voting. Connect an individual’s personal experience to the democratic process and the potential for social change. Be prepared to share reminders of very close elections where a small number of voters determined the difference. If someone is frustrated with the political process, you might tell them that you share the same concern, which is why you are registering voters to elect new leaders.

9. Explain what’s at stake. If you are organizing in public housing or registering low-income renters in subsidized properties, you should encourage them to protect their housing program by voting. Remind them that it’s important to vote for leaders who will maintain or increase the budget for subsidized housing programs so they can make needed repairs and increase the number of community members who have access to affordable housing.

Many organizations encounter questions about voting eligibility for people experiencing homelessness. In every state, people experiencing homelessness have the right to vote. The National Voter Registration Form allows a voter to designate an outdoor place where they regularly stay as their place of residence, for the purpose of determining their voting precinct and which ballot they should receive. Shelters and social services agencies should also consider allowing clients to use their addresses and to receive mail-in ballots at their sites. Each state has its own procedure for processing the registrations of voters without a permanent address; it is always best to confirm the requirements with your local election officials.

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness offers helpful resources for navigating the process of voting while experiencing homelessness: a checklist for voters experiencing homelessness to make sure they have everything they need to register and have their votes counted (www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/step-by-step-voting-guide-for-people-experiencing-homelessness), and a step-by-step guide for homeless service

providers (www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/step-by-step-guide-for-homeless-service-providers-to-help-people-vote). The National Alliance to End Homelessness and National Coalition for the Homeless also compile helpful resources about engaging voters experiencing homelessness.

Another common misconception is that returning citizens who have been convicted of a felony are permanently barred from voting. This is only true in the states of Kentucky and Virginia. In most states, returning citizens have their voting rights restored when their sentence is completed or when they are released. In Vermont, Maine, and the District of Columbia, people convicted of felonies never lose the right to vote and can vote while incarcerated. In other states, returning citizens will need to take specific steps to restore their voting rights. Nonprofit organizations can play a powerful role in helping returning citizens navigate this process and cast their ballots with confidence. For a state-by-state breakdown of these voting rights, see the ACLU's map on felony disenfranchisement laws at www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/voter-restoration/felony-disenfranchisement-laws-map.

VOTER EDUCATION

Once voters are registered, the next step is to ensure that they are prepared to vote and know what to expect on their ballots.

Prepare to educate voters about deadlines for voter registration, how to find their polling locations, the logistics of early voting and vote-by-mail, and how to protect their voting rights if they encounter a problem at their polling place. You can always refer them to the Election Protection Hotline—866-OUR-VOTE—if their right to vote is being challenged, they face voter intimidation, or see voter misinformation. Make sure voters know that all voters who show up to the polls should cast a ballot. If voters are in line at the time the polls close, they must be allowed to vote. Encourage voters to bring a charged phone, water, or snacks to ensure they are prepared to wait in line. You may consider producing a “What to Bring with You” sheet so voters can gather what they need in advance.

If there is a question about any person's identification or residency in the ward where they are voting, the voter should cast a provisional ballot that will be counted after the initial run of results. Provisional ballots should always be completed, especially as protection from “voter caging.” The Brennan Center defines voter caging as, “the practice of sending mail to addresses on the voter rolls, compiling a list of the mail that is returned undelivered, and using that list to purge or challenge voters' registrations on the grounds that the voters on the list do not legally reside at their registered addresses.” This practice largely targets low-income renters as they change addresses at higher rates than homeowners.

You may also want to educate voters about what to expect on their ballots. Vote411.org offers sample ballots, which allows voters to enter their address and preview what their ballot will look like. Consider distributing a voter guide that highlights the candidates' positions on affordable housing and any relevant ballot measures. Keep in mind that you can only inform voters about candidates' positions—you cannot endorse a candidate or present information in a way that favors one candidate over the other. If you do not have the capacity to create a voter guide, consider distributing voter education materials from a trusted, nonpartisan partner organization that shares your organization's values and priorities.

VOTER MOBILIZATION

Voter mobilization, or get out the vote (GOTV), efforts are traditionally focused on Election Day. As vote-by-mail and early voting become increasingly common, it is important to mobilize voters throughout election season and to develop the timeline for your voter engagement efforts accordingly. Here are some tips for getting out the vote:

- Encourage vote-by-mail and early voting. Rather than turning out the vote all on one day, encourage voters to request mail-in ballots. Check your state's laws to determine which voters are eligible to vote by mail. Keep a list of mail-in voters in your network and contact them at least 10 days before Election Day to

be sure that ballots are being put in the mail in time to be counted. If your state allows it, it can be effective to allow volunteers to collect and deliver the ballots themselves. In states where it is available, encourage early voting, which offers more opportunities for people with inflexible schedules or limited transportation options. Consider participating in Vote Early Day, a nonpartisan Civic Holiday that educates voters about early voting options and builds enthusiasm for early voting.

- Ask voters to make a plan. Contact voters in the days leading up to Election Day to ask them how and when they plan to vote, and how they plan on getting to their polling place. Asking voters to express this plan allows organizers to verify their polling location details and work through transportation obstacles.
- Provide childcare on Election Day. Consider recruiting volunteers to provide childcare for residents who need flexibility to get to polls and cast their ballot.
- Provide rides to and from polling locations. Recruit volunteers with cars, or perhaps fundraise to rent vans for Election Day, so that low-income renters with limited transportation options can cast their ballots.
- Become a polling location. Organizations should connect with their local Board of Elections far in advance of Election Day to begin the process of becoming a polling location. Voting will be more accessible to low-income voters if they can vote in a location that they visit frequently, such as an agency's office or the community rooms of their buildings.
- Organize group voting. Many voters are more likely to make it to the polls if they are joined by their neighbors. Resident councils and other peer organizing efforts should consider selecting times when groups of residents can walk or ride to the polls together, making it a community activity. People are more likely to vote when there are others expecting them to do so.

Once renters have made their plan to vote, you may also want to encourage them to sign up with the county as poll workers. This provides an additional, and often paid, way for low-income voters to participate in the democratic process.

Nonprofits can play an important role in making sure that people's rights are protected when they get to the polls. You may want to designate leaders in your voter engagement efforts to be poll watchers who spend Election Day recording and reporting instances of voter harassment or unlawful voter suppression. Poll watchers can identify potential issues in your community and can be on call if anyone experiences problems voting.

CANDIDATE ENGAGEMENT

Elections are a prime opportunity to get decision-makers thinking about housing issues. Too often, affordable homes are ignored in the public debate leading up to elections. Raising housing on the national agenda will happen only when candidates for elected office understand that the issue of affordable housing is important to voters. There are two main reasons why low-income renters should engage with candidates: to make their concerns heard, and to learn how candidates plan to address affordable housing issues so they can vote accordingly. Low-income renters can effectively engage and educate candidates through community events, letters to the editor, factsheets, and candidate questionnaires.

When engaging with candidates, be sure to stay nonpartisan. To do this, remember:

- Never criticize candidate statements. You can, however, add perspective or correct the record.
- Do not rank or rate candidates. This constitutes an endorsement. You can only create legislative scorecards for incumbent legislators; these are distinct from voter guides.
- Even in nonpartisan candidate elections, you still cannot endorse candidates or coordinate with campaigns.

- Candidates can visit your organization as public figures (elected officials or field experts), as a candidate, or of their own initiative. If a candidate is visiting your organization as a public official, there should be no mention of their candidacy, although they can discuss their legislative accomplishments. It is also fully legal and acceptable for an elected official to receive an award from your organization for work on housing.
- If candidates are visiting as part of a campaign, then they should not be fundraising.
- Invite all candidates to events and make an equal effort to get them to attend, otherwise you may be perceived as favoring one candidate.

Candidate engagement can take many forms: candidate forums, town hall meetings, candidate surveys, and candidate fact sheets. There are also opportunities to invite candidates to interact directly with residents or community members through meetings and site visits.

Inviting candidates to interact with low-income renters through events at your agency or in your community creates a space for community voices to be heard. These events can range from neighborhood block parties or coffee with the candidates to candidate forums or town hall meetings. Regardless of the type of event, be sure to (1) choose an accessible location; (2) invite all candidates and make an equal effort to get all candidates to attend; (3) offer enough time for the candidates to discuss their visions and campaigns; and (4) conduct outreach ahead of time to ensure a good turnout. Hosting an effective candidate event requires sufficient planning time. You will want to ensure that both candidates and attendees know about the event far in advance.

When hosting a forum or town hall meeting, you can further ensure your event is a success by (1) choosing a skilled moderator; (2) setting time limits for responses to questions and giving all candidates a chance to respond; (3) screening

audience questions ahead of time, if possible, to get diverse views; (4) setting participation rules for the audience at the start of the event; and (5) offering voter registration forms to attendees. If you cannot host a meeting yourself, consider promoting nonpartisan candidate forums and town hall meetings in your community. Forums tend to be moderator-led discussions, while town halls allow for larger audience participation. To ensure that your priorities are addressed, be sure to submit a question in advance, and share your question on social media before the event using the #OurHomesOurVotes hashtag. Try to sit near the microphone, and ask direct questions while including facts. To amplify the candidate's response, record the question and answer, and share the exchange on social media using the #OurHomesOurVotes hashtag.

Another powerful way to engage candidates is through written materials such as letters to the editor, factsheets, and questionnaires. Candidates often learn what issues are important to voters in the community by reading the Letters to the Editor page of the newspaper. This platform can be used to share your experience with affordable housing issues and communicate the urgent need to prioritize affordable housing. Consider having low-income renters write letters about issues that are important to them; letters can often be published as a response to a story in which candidates have discussed poverty issues. Sharing factsheets about affordable housing issues in your community is another way to educate candidates. Finally, asking candidates to fill out a questionnaire is a useful way to learn more about candidates' views and to make them aware of the issues that affect low-income renters. Candidate questionnaires should go to all candidates and be publicly posted. Provide clear instructions for the word limit, deadline, and how to submit, and share how answers will be used. Keep the survey brief, and use open-ended questions to solicit the candidates' opinions on a range of issues. Consider publicizing the candidates' responses on social media or on your organization's website.

The *Our Homes, Our Votes* Toolkit includes comprehensive candidate engagement resources,

such as a template candidate questionnaire and tips for successful candidate events. The toolkit can be found in the *Our Homes, Our Votes* resource library at: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/resource-library

BALLOT MEASURE ADVOCACY

Elections offer a critical opportunity to take the issue of affordable housing directly to the voters through ballot measures. Over the past few years, voters have approved significant new funding for affordable housing and enacted tenant protections through ballot measures at the state and local levels. Although 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations can never endorse candidates, they can endorse and campaign for ballot measures, within the usual restrictions that govern 501(c)(3) lobbying activities. Your organization should consider forming or joining a coalition to support housing-related ballot measures in your community—or even working to place a question on the ballot in a future election.

For further guidance on organizing a housing-related ballot measure campaign, refer to NLIHC’s report, “Housing on the Ballot: How to Organize a Successful Campaign for Affordable Homes,” which can be found in the *Our Homes, Our Votes* resource library: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/resource-library

BUILD ON YOUR MOMENTUM

Once Election Day is over, take a few days to rest. You deserve it! Then, be sure to celebrate your accomplishments and honor your volunteers. Evaluate your project and discuss what you will do differently in the next election cycle.

After the election, you may want to report the number of new voters your organization has registered, which demonstrates the strength of your constituency. Cultivate relationships with newly elected leaders to further educate them about your priorities and hold them accountable to their campaign promises.

Talk with low-income renters, volunteers, and staff who took on leadership roles in your voter engagement campaign, and see who might be

interested in running for local office themselves.

Most importantly, treat your voter engagement project as an ongoing effort. Even when the next election feels far away, continue to integrate voter engagement into your organization’s day-to-day activities.