

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 elevate housing as an election issue. 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, the campaign provides an abundance of resources for launching 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 homes 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 rising 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 2022 midterm elections, 58% of homeowners voted, compared with a turnout rate of 37% for renters. High-income people also vote at much higher rates than low-income people. While 67% of people with incomes over \$100,000 voted in 2022, just 33% 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 voter 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 obstacles and cast their ballots. According to research from Non-profit 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 2022, low-income voters engaged by nonprofits had a voter turnout rate 15 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.
- 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.

In general, federally funded organizations are allowed to organize nonpartisan election activities, and some federally funded agencies are required to offer nonpartisan voter registration assistance. Organizations that receive specific types of federal funding (Legal Services, Community Service Block Grant, Head Start, and AmeriCorps) face some 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, assess your existing resources to determine the scope of your election activities. 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 maxi-

mize 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 community members 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 under-represented communities. A coalition can bring a greater range of resources, volunteers, and audiences into your activities.

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: <https://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/getting-started>.

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? Using voter files is a great way to identify which residents are registered to vote, target voter engagement campaigns, and measure success.

Voter data is publicly available and can be obtained from the local elections office, often for a small fee. Many organizers use software such as VAN or PDI to sort their data and target their voter outreach.

- 2. Familiarize yourself with relevant election laws.** Each state has different rules for conducting voter registration drives, hosting polling places or ballot drop boxes, transporting voters to the polls, and assisting with mail-in ballots. Voter registration deadlines, early voting and mail-in voting opportunities, and voter ID requirements also differ by state. Each state's Board of Elections or Secretary of State's office will offer the most comprehensive, up-to-date list of election rules.
- 3. Determine what materials you need.** Forty three states have online voter registration systems, which enable you to use tablets, smartphones, or laptops to conduct your voter registration activities. Because some eligible voters prefer to complete their registration by hand, you should also make paper forms available. Make sure you have materials available in multiple languages if members of your community primarily speak languages other than English.
- 4. Offer registration training.** 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. Build voter registration into ongoing programs and processes.** Housing and homelessness organizations can integrate voter registration opportunities into their everyday activities and responsibilities. For example,

subsidized housing providers can add voter registration forms to their welcome packets for new residents, which will encourage residents to update their registration when they move into the property. Confirming that renters are registered to vote should also be included in checklists for annual income recertification in subsidized properties. Housing providers may even make calls to residents on their 18th birthdays and help them get registered to vote.

6. Display visuals in common spaces. Housing providers and direct services organizations should display voter registration information in offices, lobbies, or other community spaces that are highly visible to clients and volunteers. Be sure to keep visuals accessible, straightforward, and eye-catching, while conveying key information about voter registration and upcoming elections. Materials should be displayed in multiple languages if some residents' primary language is not English. Some housing providers send voting toolkits directly to their residents with buttons, stickers, and customizable door signs. These materials empower residents to publicly display their commitment to vote and inspire their neighbors to do so, too. *Our Homes, Our Votes* provides sample posters and other graphics at: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/downloadable-resources.

7. Organize a door-to-door campaign. Resident leaders can volunteer to receive training and serve as "building captains" or "floor captains" for canvassing 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.

8. 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 National Voter Registration Day, an annual nonpartisan Civic Holiday that celebrates and promotes voter registration opportunities. Signing up as an official Civic Holidays partner can increase the visibility of these activities and even provide access to funding opportunities. Make sure that events are widely publicized and accessible to all community members. Successful events will have printed materials in multiple languages and onsite translation, which will encourage voter registration among new citizens whose primary language is not English. To ensure that events are accessible to families, make the events kid-friendly or provide childcare. To boost attendance, offer food so that attendees will not need to plan their meal schedules around the event.

9. 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.

10. 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 sub-

sitized 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. 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 Brennan Center's map on felony disenfranchisement laws at [/www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/voting-rights-restoration/disenfranchisement-laws](http://www.brennancenter.org/issues/ensure-every-american-can-vote/voting-rights-restoration/disenfranchisement-laws).

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, if they face voter intimidation, or witness 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 jurisdiction 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. [OurHomes.TurboVote.Org](#), NLIHC’s nonpartisan voter registration and information platform, allows voters to enter their address and preview what to expect on their ballots. Consider distributing a voter guide that highlights the candidates’ positions on affordable housing and any relevant ballot measures. *Our Homes, Our Votes* provides a sample voter guide at: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/voter-education. 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.

Bring nonpartisan voter education materials to existing community gatherings, like block parties or resource fairs, and be prepared to answer voters’ questions about elections. Consider planning creative events, such as civic engagement game nights, where organizers can facilitate community conversations about voting. Don’t be afraid to think outside the box!

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. In states where it is available, encourage early voting, which offers more opportunities for people with inflexible schedules or limited transportation options and gives voters time to resolve any issues they face at the polls. 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, whether they need voter ID assistance, and how they plan to get to their polling place. Voters are more likely to cast their ballots when they have already determined when, where, and how they will vote. Asking voters to express this plan allows organizers to verify their polling location details and work through transportation obstacles. Calls, texts, and in-person conversations are effective ways to reach voters and help them make their voting plans.
- **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. Consider partnering with an external, nonpartisan organization to offer rides to the polls.
- **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 opportunities.** Many voters are more likely to make it to the polls if they are joined by their neighbors. Resident councils and other tenant-led organizations 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 candidates on the record about housing and homelessness. Housing organizations and low-income renters should engage with candidates for two main reasons: to make their concerns heard and hold candidates accountable; and 2) to understand candidates' plans so that voters can make informed decisions.

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 activity constitutes an endorsement. You can only create legislative scorecards for incumbent legislators; these are distinct from voter guides.
- Even in nonpartisan candidate elections, you 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, however, organizations should be cautious about awarding elected officials who are up for reelection in the immediate leadup to an election.
- 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, including candidate forums, town hall meetings, candidate surveys, and candidate factsheets. Events such as neighborhood block parties, meet-and-greets, candidate forums, and town halls create opportunities for candidates to interact directly with residents or community members and for voters to understand the candidates' perspectives on the issues affecting their daily lives.

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. Bring tenant leaders into the planning process for candidate forums and town hall meetings. Ensure that the program gives tenant leaders the opportunity to speak about their personal connection to the issues that the candidates will discuss. 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 that are taking place 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 personal experiences and communicate the urgent need to prioritize affordable homes. Consider having low-income renters write letters about issues that are important to them; letters can often be pub-

lished as a response to a story in which candidates have discussed poverty or housing policy. Sharing fact sheets about housing affordability in your community is another way to educate candidates.

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 be sent 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. When publishing candidates' responses, do not modify their answers in any way or express a preference for any candidates' answers.

The Our Homes, Our Votes campaign compiles comprehensive candidate engagement resources, such as a template candidate questionnaire and tips for successful candidate events. These resources can be found on the Our Homes, Our Votes website at: <https://www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/candidate-engagement>.

Ballot Measure Advocacy

Elections offer a critical opportunity to take the issue of affordable housing directly to the voters through ballot measures. Recently, 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 ballot measures reports and resources, which can be found at: www.ourhomes-ourvotes.org/ballot-measures.

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. Use the voter file to track the success of registration and mobilization efforts. By comparing the number of registered voters and actual voters post-election with the numbers before the election and in previous years, organizers can quantify the extent to which their efforts boosted registration and voter turnout.

After evaluating your campaign, report to community members and elected officials on the number of new voters your organization has registered and mobilized, 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.