

**OUR HOMES**

**OUR VOTES**

BECAUSE HOUSING IS BUILT WITH BALLOTS



# TURNING RENTERS INTO VOTERS

LESSONS IN ENGAGING LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES



## 24 LESSONS FROM 2024: A ROADMAP TO NONPARTISAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES

**1) Secure partners' buy-in and make it easy to say yes.** To recruit partners for your nonpartisan voter engagement initiative, hold info sessions and have one-on-one conversations with organizational members, stakeholders, and other prospective partners. When other organizations understand why nonpartisan voter engagement is important and how it connects to their mission, they will be much more enthusiastic about participation. Bringing in other organizations at an early stage also makes it possible to co-design an initiative that reflects all partners' priorities, rather than revisit the plans and change course in response to partners' feedback in a later phase. Understand that most prospective partner organizations will have limited capacity to devote to a new initiative that is not already built into their workplan. Identify places where you can offer support to make it a lighter lift to participate and be transparent upfront about the support that you will and will not provide. Incentives for participation—for example, professional development credit for staff trainings—can also make it easier for individual staff members with a lot on their plates to prioritize voter engagement programs.

**2) Serve as an ongoing resource for your partners.** Getting a partner to sign onto your voter engagement initiative or attend one event is a first step, not a last step. Transform one-time engagement opportunities, like trainings, into sustained relationships. Be proactive in making yourself available for follow-ups. Look for opportunities where your campaign can provide additional support to address a pain point for partners. For example, when the Housing Alliance of PA heard that multiple partners were uncertain about aspects of the voter registration process, they provided additional deep dives on this topic.

**3) Build confidence in the process.** Get clarity on the legal dos and don'ts of voter engagement for 501(c)3 nonprofits and federally funded agencies. Determine whether there are any specific trainings you must complete or certifications you must obtain to conduct voter registration drives in your state. If you are bringing in new partners that are unfamiliar with nonpartisan voter engagement work, be prepared to assuage concerns that their nonprofit status or federal funding may prohibit their participation in nonpartisan election work. To make

partners feel more confident about their ability to undertake this work in compliance with the law, conduct a comprehensive nonpartisanship training paired with follow-up resources at the outset of your campaign. Be sure to meet individually with anyone who still has doubts or more complex questions about the initiative.

#### **4) Establish strong partnerships with frontline staff.**

Many of the strongest nonpartisan voter engagement activities in subsidized housing communities are done in partnership with staff who work directly with residents each day. Get connected with service coordinators in properties where you are interested in engaging with residents or meet with statewide associations of service coordinators to understand where their interests in election work overlap with your organization's priorities.

#### **5) Collaborate with mission-aligned multisector organizations.**

In addition to bringing housing and homelessness partners into the voter engagement space, seek out partnerships with other nonpartisan organizations dedicated to increasing turnout among underrepresented communities. With an equitable division of labor and resource-sharing, partnerships can make big new initiatives into a much lighter lift. For example, HNRI's National Voter Registration Day event with Planned Parenthood and Disability Rights RI distributed key tasks across multiple partner organizations, which made it possible to carry out a high-impact event with minimal burden on each individual organization.

**6) Recruit volunteers in advance.** During get-out-the-vote season, political campaigns and nonpartisan election initiatives are competing for volunteers' limited time and attention. To secure committed volunteers, start building a base of volunteers long before Election Day. Provide other "off-season" opportunities for volunteers to participate in your work so they are bought into the mission and ready to take action during election season. If your organization cannot offer year-round volunteer opportunities, keep track of all inquiries about volunteering, and let interested volunteers know that an opportunity will come up as the election gets closer. Be sure to follow up with interested volunteers as early as possible in the election cycle.

#### **7) Empower people with lived experience—and recognize the diversity of lived experience.**

People with lived experience of homelessness and housing instability are exceptionally strong messengers in nonpartisan voter engagement campaigns. They are well positioned to convey the importance of voting to their neighbors, alleviate distrust in the process, and reinforce positive social norms around political participation. Lived experience, however, is not a monolith, and not everyone who has been personally affected by housing injustice will have the same attitudes about voting or approach to increasing participation. Bring in a range of leaders with lived experience and ensure that they are empowered to shape the campaign and inform its direction from the outset. In many cases, an individual's experiences will resonate most with others

who have similar backgrounds or identities—for example, a veteran’s perspective on why voting matters may resonate most in a veteran housing community, while a young parent’s perspective may find the most receptive audience in a family building.

**8) Use the voter file. State election offices maintain databases of registered voters and their voting history.** Having access to this data can enable you to identify who is a registered voter, who is not yet registered, and who is an infrequent voter who may benefit most from your outreach. Digital platforms like NGP VAN and PDI can help you organize and analyze voter file data.

**9) Respond to state-specific voting laws.** Be sure to discuss any recent changes in state voting law or procedure, and tailor your voter outreach to address the implications of these changes. In Georgia, for example, a new wave of voter purges made it critical to confirm that individuals were registered to vote, since many people who had previously registered had been removed from the voter rolls. Georgia ACT also intentionally hosted voter ID assistance events at private colleges, since Georgia’s state voter ID law does not allow students at private colleges to use their student IDs as voter IDs.

**10) Time your events strategically.** Be aware of all relevant election dates and deadlines in your state and build your activities around the election calendar. The focus of your event will determine the optimal timing in the election cycle. An event that aims to reach unregistered voters should take

place with sufficient lead time before the voter registration deadline. Get-out-the-vote outreach, however, can be more effective in the immediate leadup to Election Day, as prospective voters can immediately take action on the information they receive. Be aware of state-specific voting options, such as same-day registration and early voting periods, that may influence the timeline of your outreach. Once you’ve selected dates for your activities, be intentional when selecting the time. Consider how your event will fit into the rhythms of your attendees’ daily lives. Schedule events that will fit organically into their daily routines, such as child-friendly events on the way home from school pickup.

**11) Eliminate barriers to participation.** Ensure that volunteer opportunities are fully inclusive of and accessible to all participants. While digital tools can make campaigns more efficient, tech-heavy activities may pose obstacles to older adults. SCANPH’s decision to use paper call sheets rather than a virtual phonebank for RUN’s phonebanking sessions, for example, demonstrates the value of providing low-tech alternative forms of engagement. When introducing new tools, be sure to provide trainings. Whenever possible, schedule activities to maximize participation.

**12) Choose your events wisely.** Nonprofit organizations with limited capacity must grapple with the tradeoff between levels of attendee engagement and amount of staff time that an event requires. While designated events, such as civic engagement bingo, capture attendees’ undivided attention, these events are the most time-intensive to

plan and execute. Setting up a table at other organization's events requires less planning, but also results in less engagement, since there are many organizations competing for attendees' attention. To maximize the impact of your time at community events, you should assess your organization's own value proposition, and whether the event's target audience and outreach strategy are aligned with your own. Will another organization at the event provide the same nonpartisan information about voting, or are you the only organization that fills this niche? Is the event being promoted to your target constituency (e.g., low-income renters or unhoused individuals), and do you anticipate that they will be in attendance? Also consider the "selection bias" involved in event attendance: is your event catering to those who are likely already civically engaged, or will it attract attendees who might not otherwise seek out information about voting?

**13) Choose your location wisely—and have contingency plans.** For housing and homelessness organizations, voter engagement activities in subsidized housing communities or homelessness services centers should be considered the "gold standard." Showing up in these locations guarantees that you will reach low-income renters or people experiencing homelessness, respectively. Events in subsidized housing communities have reciprocal benefits for the host properties, as housing providers are often incentivized to strengthen their resident services programs. Yet subsidized housing communities and homeless shelters are not the only locations where you can effectively

reach your target constituency—think outside the box to identify other potential sites for engagement. Public transit hubs, for example, can get substantial foot traffic from community members that your campaign is seeking to reach, as demonstrated in HNRI's successful National Voter Registration Day event. If you are choosing an outdoor location, be prepared for inclement weather: have an alternative indoor location or bring tents to keep your attendees and materials dry in case of rain. In rural areas or other communities that may have limited internet connection, bring a mobile hotspot or paper voter registration forms as a backup to online voter registration.

**14) Get the word out.** Maximize the impact of your activities by spreading the word ahead of time to relevant constituencies. For example, MCAH and SCANPH distributed promotional flyers to subsidized housing properties ahead of their events, which enabled onsite staff to spread the word and build enthusiasm among prospective attendees. Where possible, leverage word-of-mouth and personal relationships to drive turnout. Partner with trusted local institutions: collaboration with sheriffs, county commissioners, and libraries helped Georgia ACT's events achieve visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the local community, which was especially important in rural areas.

**15) Get interactive.** Outside-the-box voter engagement activities can capture attendees' interest and drive higher levels of attendance than more traditional info sessions. Gamification, such as SCANPH's and

MCAH's civic engagement bingo activities, can incentivize participation in discussions about voting and foster positive attitudes toward civic engagement. Remember that subsidized housing communities are not a monolith: the effectiveness of different activities will vary based on residents' age, experience with voting, and many other factors.

#### **16) Bring in partners with specialized**

**knowledge.** While housing and homelessness organizations can provide essential guidance, some community members may have complex questions and needs that go beyond your expertise. Do not feel that you need to be an expert in everything; it is always better to refer a voter to an external partner than to provide inaccurate information. For example, Georgia ACT referred individuals with criminal-legal history to the Georgia Justice Project, which specializes in voting rights restoration. Recognize the limits to your capacity and lean on partner organizations for support. Depending on the time and resources you have dedicated to voter engagement initiatives, it may make sense to bring in a partner to provide specialized services, like voter ID clinics, rather than take on this work yourself.

#### **17) Invite people in—don't call them out.**

Music, food, and swag can make events feel upbeat, approachable, and non-intimidating. Ease into conversations about voting by first establishing an interpersonal connection. If someone has never voted before, do not make them feel guilty, ashamed, or intimidated. Listen to their perspective, find

out why they are skeptical, and acknowledge that their skepticism is valid. Steer away from scolding or talking down; rather, be nonjudgmental and welcoming. Have a human-to-human conversation about how voting affects their daily lives, without invalidating their concerns. If they are not quite ready to commit to voting, share follow-up materials or contact information so you can continue the conversation in the future.

**18) Focus on policies, not people.** To maintain their tax-exempt status, 501(c)3 nonprofits cannot endorse or oppose candidates for office. This legal restriction should be considered an asset, not a weakness, of nonpartisan voter engagement activities. Voters who feel disillusioned about the political process are much more inclined to trust organizers who want to talk about the impact of the election on their lives—not the merits of a particular candidate. Conversations about the tangible impact of elections are especially potent when voters have the chance to weigh in directly on ballot measures. 501(c)3 nonprofits can endorse and advocate for ballot measures, within the relevant limitations on lobbying (see here for more information). Where possible, and in accordance with legal limits, integrate resources about relevant ballot measures into voter education campaigns and use ballot measures as an organizing tool to motivate voter turnout.

**19) Provide actionable information.** Most prospective voters are juggling competing priorities and have limited time to prepare for elections. Those who attend voter education

events are typically seeking essential information that will help them cast their ballots. Be sure to provide concise, clear, and actionable information; do not overload attendees with dense content. To hold attendees' attention, strike a balance between frontal presentation of information and engaging activities. Prepare to address FAQs depending on the makeup of the community: young, first-time voters will typically have different questions than longtime voters who are navigating new polling places, changes to state voting laws, or other departures from past processes.

**20) Address people's basic needs.** Offer food or supplies to people experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Providing essential resources not only supports individuals with the immediate challenges they face but also creates an organic hook for conversations about civic engagement. For example, HNRI provided handwarmers, lip balm, and other winter essentials at Shower to Empower, which drew in some passersby who may not have otherwise stopped for a conversation about voting. On National Voter Registration Day, donuts encouraged Delonis Center guests to stop by MCAH's voter registration table.

**21) Create a ripple effect.** Few organizations have the capacity to reach large numbers of voters through face-to-face interactions on their own. Organizations that have expertise in voter registration and state election processes can offer "train the trainer" sessions so that partner organizations can conduct their own events without the

need for external staff. Where possible, partner with professional associations or other organizations that can award professional development credit to incentivize participation in trainings. Sending "swag kits" or giving mini-grants to partner organizations, as the Housing Alliance of PA did, are also ways to seed partners' voter engagement activities and magnify the impact of your campaign.

**22) Follow up. At every stage of your campaign, follow-up is crucial.** Even when prospective voters are enthusiastic, information can easily slip through the cracks when it is presented just one time. Follow up with all newly registered voters to talk through the logistics of voting and provide Election Day reminders to vote, as HNRI did. Distribute follow-up resources at all events, so people can easily access information and action steps when they are back home. Follow-up is not only important to boost turnout among prospective voters; it is also critical for prospective volunteers and staff at partner organizations. If you offer a training or info session, follow up individually with all attendees and present concrete next steps for getting involved. For example, HNRI reached out to all service coordinators who attended their training and offered support to plan site-specific events.

**23) Make your digital outreach count.** Not all emails and posts are created equal! While social media posts can raise awareness and increase the visibility of your activities, they are not always a potent driver to take action. Social media users, often scrolling through

their feeds while multitasking or on-the-go, are typically less inclined to click through links and fill out detailed information—especially sensitive personal information required for voter registration. Email recipients, by contrast, can be more intentional about choosing when to read their messages and when to revisit at another time. When you post on social media, know the audience for each platform and adjust your messaging accordingly: Facebook's user base trends older, while Instagram and TikTok reach younger audiences. Pilot community partners consistently found that Instagram had the furthest reach in 2024. Sharing out content from organizational leadership's personal accounts, especially if your leadership has a large following, can also increase the impact of your posts, as Georgia ACT discovered in its social media campaign.

**24) Voting is just a first step.** Nonpartisan voter engagement campaigns should emphasize that voting is just one part of a broader ecosystem of civic participation and share concrete opportunities to get involved with advocacy or other non-electoral actions. For example, SCANPH staff always shared information about joining RUN-LA at their events, and HNRI's canvassing scripts included information about advocacy even for those who did not commit to voting. Sharing information about civic engagement beyond voting will make your activities more inclusive of community members who are not eligible to vote due to age, immigration status, or criminal-legal history [in states with felony disenfranchisement laws](#). Electoral participation is one of many pathways to achieve social change and is most powerful when paired with further actions to hold elected officials accountable.

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National Low Income Housing Coalition