

Engage: Inspiring Voter Participation and Engagement



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Elected officials have a direct influence on fundamental issues related to our quality of life. These issues encompass everything from the minimum wage to the availability of funding for community-supported programs, from investments in vital infrastructure to the staffing of public safety agencies. Changes in the political landscape can have a significant impact on the ability of nonprofits to pursue their charitable missions. So, it shouldn't be surprising that political developments are of great interest to the leaders of nonprofit organizations.

Federal tax-exempt status is a privilege enjoyed by more than a million nonprofit organizations; it enables nonprofits to make greater investments in their missions and communities than would be possible if federal income taxes were due. Because of tax-exempt status, however, nonprofit organizations must be vigilant to the types of activities in which they participate.

An essential element in the health and processes of our democratic system is voter engagement. According to [NonprofitVote.org](#), engaged voters help nonprofits enjoy “more access to elected officials, increased clout on issues, and are better positioned to advance their mission.” Therefore, despite the risks associated with crossing the boundaries of what a tax-exempt charity is permitted to say and do, voter engagement is an area where nonprofits should participate. They can safely do so with minimal risk to their tax-exempt status by following nonpartisan guidelines.

Voter Registration: Barriers to Turnout

Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan ‘fact tank,’ [conducted a survey](#) aimed at voter registration and turnout in 2016. They reported that in the US, voter turnout among registered voters is relatively high (86.8% in 2016). However, the number of citizens of *eligible voting age registered to vote* is sadly much lower than other democratic countries (70% in 2016). What are the possible reasons for our lagging status when it comes to the participation of eligible voters? One reason is the prevailing view in the US that voter registration is an *individual responsibility* versus a required one.

Only 13% of the world's democratic nations espouse compulsory voting. However, countries such as Belgium have required citizens to vote since 1893 and Australia instituted the practice in 1924 (source: www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout/compulsory-voting). In addition to compulsory voting requirements, Belgium also employs automatic voter registration: a perfunctory process where all eligible citizens over 18 receive a voter registration card and poll location information. In the United States, three states (California, Oregon, and West Virginia) provide automatic registration through their respective Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMV). In the other 47 states, however, barriers to registration accessibility continue to contribute to the low number of registered voters, especially in areas with larger minority populations.

In a democratic nation, high voter activity results in the selection of candidates that are the most representative of the community's needs and desires. In turn, these candidates are responsive to their constituents and the issues that are important to them. While Presidential elections often receive the highest voter turnouts, results of races for local elected officials often lead to the most change in our lives and communities. Therefore, combatting nonvoting at all levels of the democratic system is an issue that should be top-of-mind for nonprofits.

In the Know: Understand Voter Registration Rules in Your State

States governments determine rules and processes related to voter registration and differences between them is the norm. Vote411.org has extensive resources that outline registration deadlines, how voters can register, and when the next election will take place. NonprofitVOTE.org also offers a resource guide to voting procedures in all 50 states.

Eligibility

One barrier to voter engagement is misunderstandings about voter eligibility. Some groups may *assume* (incorrectly) that they are excluded from the voting public. If your nonprofit supports vulnerable groups such as people who are homeless or in transitional housing, individuals with felony convictions, foreign language speakers, or people struggling with mental health, be aware that some of your clients may not fully understand their eligibility to vote. Understand that your state's eligibility laws for these special populations may be different from the laws of a neighboring state. Learn more about eligibility in your state here:

- [US Vote Foundation, State Voting Requirements & Information](http://USVoteFoundation.org/vote/sviddomestic.htm) (usvotefoundation.org/vote/sviddomestic.htm)
- [National Alliance on Mental Health, #Vote4MentalHealth](http://NationalAllianceonMentalHealth.org/Get-Involved/Take-Action-on-Advocacy-Issues/Vote4MentalHealth/Know-Your-Voting-Rights) (nami.org/Get-Involved/Take-Action-on-Advocacy-Issues/Vote4MentalHealth/Know-Your-Voting-Rights)
- ProCon.org, State Felon Voting Laws (felonvoting.procon.org/state-felon-voting-laws/)

B-E Unbiased!

Educate staff and volunteers on ways to assist your participants, consumers, and clients without injecting partisan viewpoints. Hosting nonpartisan voter registration activities also means being cognizant that events aren't being restricted to targeted areas of your community based on a strategy to influence the outcome of an election. [Independent Sector](#) recommends maintaining strict compliance with Federal Election Commission rules by posting a sign that explicitly signals your nonprofit's impartiality. For example:

"These voter registration services are available *without regard to the voter's political preference*. Information and other assistance regarding registering or voting, including transportation and other services offered, shall not be withheld or refused on the basis of support for or opposition to particular candidates or a particular party."

Voter Education & Issue Advocacy

During an election season, issues or platforms advocated by candidates often motivate voters to register and show up at the polls. Issue advocacy is, therefore, a fertile opportunity for nonprofits. To reduce the downside risks associated with issue advocacy, remember that nonpartisanship should be the central nervous system of your efforts. By following some basic guidelines, nonprofit organizations can play a pivotal role in educating voters and potential voters about the issues that are crucial to their community-serving missions. So how can

your organization talk about the issues without treading into tricky territories?

First, consider how voter education activities relate to your mission. It can be easy to venture into biased territory if your organization's mission becomes a hot-button topic in an upcoming election. Don't produce materials that appear to endorse only candidates who "correctly" answer questions. Do include responses from all candidates, publish their answers with no editing or paraphrasing (in the same font and font size) and resolve to maintain maximum impartiality. Remember to pose open-ended questions! This format prevents candidates from simply answering "support or oppose" to issues and allows candidates to elaborate on their positions on the issues and concerns that matter to your mission.

Get The Vote Out Campaigns

[Nonprofit VOTE published a report in 2015](#) examining the impact that nonprofit organizations had on voter turnout in both the 2012 Presidential election year and the 2014 midterm elections. One result highlighted in this study showed that "...the outreach of nonprofits resulted in above-average turnout rates across all demographics, most strikingly among young and low propensity voters not expected to turn out." Many nonprofits extended their efforts beyond voter registration activities and used tools like voter pledge cards for constituents and clients that were already registered. Try these three tactics for a successful Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign.

1. **Start organizing early and name a program leader for all GOTV activities.** Your planning process should start a minimum of 30 days before an election, but there's no need to wait! Begin as soon as you can. Also, make sure that your GOTV program has someone to lead the charge. Too many cooks in the kitchen can create chaos. Identify someone in your organization who faithfully carries a torch for democracy and ask that individual to help design your program to motivate voters.
2. **Catalog supporters and make lists.** First, determine how far-reaching your GOTV campaign will be; how many potential voters will you try to reach? Next, start making lists of anyone who will be participating in the campaign: staff, volunteers, clients, participants, members, or even team members from your branch offices, affiliates and partner organizations. Keep lists of any clients and constituents with whom your organization connects!
3. **Focus on connections and relationships with potential voters.** The people that your nonprofit interfaces with regularly may be among those who are overlooked by political campaigns and candidates for public office. By encouraging these low propensity voter groups to exercise their voting privilege, voter turnout increases, and our democracy stands stronger. It's your *connection* to these groups that make your advocacy stand out. Personal and authentic interactions make the most impact. The individuals and communities you serve will appreciate encouragement from your staff and volunteers and are far more likely to act when you invite them to do so, versus simply receiving a mass email from a partisan group. Reach out with a "voter pledge" campaign and ask how your organization can help make voting more accessible to your clients, participants, and consumers.

Remember, the message that you want to send to your community is nonpartisan and straightforward. **Voting matters!** By increasing awareness, making registration accessible, and fostering voter engagement, your organization can influence our democratic process in a way that will benefit our country as well as your vital mission.

Whitney Thomey is Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions about any of the topics covered in this article at 703.777.3504 or Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org.

Resources

- "A 501(c)(3) Guide: General Rules," NonprofitVOTE (www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofits-voting-elections-online/general-rules/)
- "Candidate Questionnaires and Voter Guides," Bolder Advocacy (bolderadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Candidate_Questionnaires_and_Voter_Guides.pdf)
- "Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout," NonprofitVOTE (www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/12/engaging-new-voters.pdf/)
- "Lessons from GOTV experiments," Yale ISPS (isps.yale.edu/node/16698)
- "Voter Engagement Toolkit for Community Foundations," Council on Foundations (www.cof.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/Community-Foundation-Voter-Engagement-Toolkit.pdf)