



# Florida Nonprofits

## Voter Engagement Guide





## Acknowledgments

The Florida Nonprofit Alliance thank Nonprofit VOTE for their collaboration and assistance with this National Voter Engagement Guide. Nonprofit VOTE is a nonpartisan organization that provides resources and training to 501(c)(3) nonprofit and charitable organizations on how to conduct nonpartisan voter and civic engagement activities.

### The Word “Nonprofits”

The term “nonprofits” means different things to many different people. It’s a commonly used word, but often without a common understanding. People can use “nonprofit” and “tax exempt” interchangeably. Congress has created almost three dozen types of tax-exempt organizations in different sections of the tax code. Section 501(c)(3) of the tax code refers to “public charities” (also known as charitable nonprofits) and “private foundations.” The tax code considers “churches and religious organizations” (which the Internal Revenue Service defines to include mosques, synagogues, temples, and other houses of worship) to be “public charities.” This Voter Engagement Guide uses the terms “charitable nonprofits” or simply “nonprofits” as shorthand for “501(c)(3) tax exempt organizations other than private foundations,” unless expressly saying otherwise.

### Disclaimer

The content provided in this Voter Engagement Guide is provided in good faith for informational purposes only and is neither intended to be nor should be construed as legal or tax advice. Please consult an attorney for the latest and most accurate information. The National Council of Nonprofits and Florida Nonprofit Alliance make no representations or warranties as to the accuracy or timeliness of the information contained herein.



# Contents

Acknowledgments .....	2
Table of contents .....	3
Letter from CEO .....	4
Why should nonprofits engage voters? .....	5
Getting started.....	8
What's next in this voter engagement guide .....	9
<b>Section 1: Rules of nonpartisanship .....</b>	<b>10</b>
A nonprofit's guide to nonpartisanship .....	11
Digital communications and nonpartisanship.....	13
Finding state and local election information .....	14
Conducting a Voter Registration Drive in Florida .....	15
<b>Section 2: Make a plan .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Your options for voter engagement activities.....	19
Engaging candidates for office .....	21
Selecting the best activities.....	22
Partnering for success: Local elections office and beyond .....	24
<b>Section 3: Talking to potential voters .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Tips for successfully engaging potential voters.....	25
Don't forget your staff, board, and volunteers.....	28
<b>Section 4: Permitted nonpartisan activities.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Ballot measures.....	30
Hosting a phone or text bank .....	31
Voter registration ask.....	33
Candidate engagement.....	34
Candidate forums .....	36
Candidate questionnaires.....	40
Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small towns.....	42
Engaging potential voters with disabilities.....	43
Additional resources .....	45



## Dear Nonprofit Leaders,

We all know nonprofits are trusted voices. Our clients come to us in times of need but also with questions about resources available to them. During election years, these questions also include the how to's on our democratic process.

Voting rules are constantly changing and nonprofits can help voters understand them. Research proves that when nonprofits encourage voting – on a nonpartisan basis – by holding registration drives, providing information on where to vote, hosting candidate forums, giving staff time off to vote, and more, people vote at significantly higher levels than if nonprofits sat on the sidelines and did nothing. When nonprofits encourage people to vote, they are reminding people of the importance of their vote.

Nonprofit civic engagement is part of Florida Nonprofit Alliance's public policy agenda. FNA advocates for civic engagement to promote civic dialogue, open elections, voter registrations, and open government. Our sector is uniquely positioned as trusted messengers and credible resources to communities often overlooked, under-served, and under-resourced.

This Voter Engagement Guide provides a roadmap of how charitable nonprofits can effectively engage in elections on a nonpartisan basis, leverage our networks for greater impact, and build relationships with elected officials. The examples and guidance on how to remain nonpartisan should provide small nonprofits, large nonprofits, and everything in between the confidence to do voter engagement with those you serve and your broader communities.

It is up to us to ensure the communities we serve are actively participating and voting. They just need you to ask.



Sabeen Perwaiz  
President & CEO

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sabeen Perwaiz".

Sabeen Perwaiz  
President & CEO  
Florida Nonprofit Alliance





## Why should nonprofits engage voters?

Voting is a fundamental right. Every eligible voter should have a say in their own future. Active voter participation builds healthier communities. People who vote are more likely to volunteer, advocate, or be civically active in other ways. Elected officials are more likely to respond to the needs and concerns of neighborhoods that turn out on Election Day, and they are more responsive to organizations that promote voting.

Voting is something we can't take for granted. Voters need guidance with many of the following:

- finding their polling location.
- locating a number to call for assistance.
- learning about their voting options (by absentee ballot, in person, etc.)
- understanding what's on the ballot.
- seeing the connection between what's on the ballot and the impact on the issues they care about.

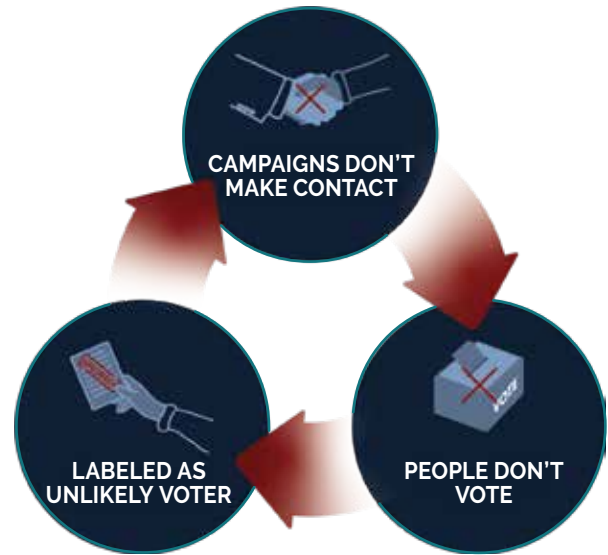
Nonprofit organizations like ours have a critical role to play in promoting voting as a safe and accessible activity to strengthen our communities.

### Key Takeaways

Elected officials are more likely to respond to the needs and concerns of neighborhoods that turn out on Election Day, and they are more responsive to organizations that promote voting.



Partisan candidate campaigns only invest in outreach to prospective voters who have a high probability of voting in an upcoming election. People in communities who have been historically marginalized from the election process are less likely to have long voting histories so campaigns don't see value in reaching them. Nonprofits active in those marginalized communities can break the negative feedback loop by registering and turning out new voters so that more of the community is heard by the elected leaders. Through these nonpartisan actions by charitable organizations, the parties and candidates take notice and truly represent them.



### Our access and trust make us great messengers

Nonprofits are among America's most trusted community institutions, and as familiar service providers and advocates, we have personal relationships with communities that have been traditionally underrepresented in elections and public policy advocacy. Our regular contact during points of service (any interaction between nonprofits and community members) allows us to weave voter engagement into existing programs and services. We have the opportunity to use our trusted roles to become a powerful nonpartisan voice for voter participation and the issues that matter to our communities.

Learn more at Keeping Our Republic: The Roles of Charitable Nonprofits at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/keeping-our-republic-roles-charitable-nonprofits>

### Key Takeaways

Nonprofits active in those marginalized communities can break the negative feedback loop by registering and turning out new voters so that more of the community is heard by the elected leaders.

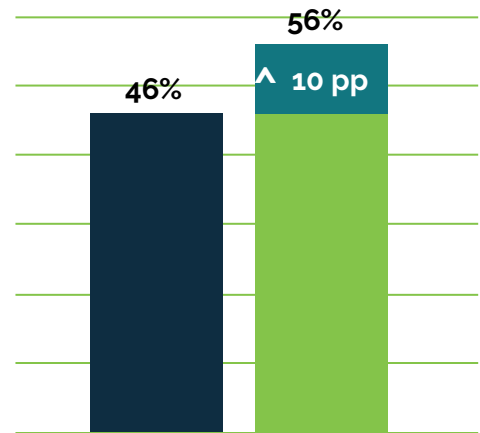




## Voter engagement works

According to the 2024 Nonprofit Power report, nonprofit voter engagement disrupts cycles of disengagement and helps close long-standing gaps in turnout. In an analysis of over 7,000 prospective voters in 8 states who were contacted before the 2022 elections by nonprofits and social service agencies, Nonprofit VOTE found that prospective voters who were contacted were 10 percentage points more likely to vote than demographically similar registered voters (56% vs. 46%). Those percentage points increased even more when focusing on underrepresented populations like low-income households, persons of color, and young people. When nonprofits engage prospective voters, we all benefit from a more inclusive and representative democracy. Learn more about the 2024 Nonprofit Power report at [nonprofitvote.org](https://nonprofitvote.org).

Learn more at Keeping Our Republic: The Roles of Charitable Nonprofits at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/keeping-our-republic-roles-charitable-nonprofits>.



### Overall Voter Turnout

- Comparable Voter Turnout
- Nonprofit Voter Turnout
- Nonprofit Impact

## Key Takeaways

Your nonprofit organization is well-suited to helping people become more active citizens by encouraging voter participation.





## Getting started

Whether it is your first time engaging potential voters or you are trying to deepen your existing work, this Voter Engagement Guide can support your way to a successful voter engagement initiative.

### **Before, during, and after: Build buy-in**

A successful voter engagement plan depends on buy-in from your organization's leadership. Key staff and volunteers are often the point people for designing and executing the plan, but the activities are more likely to be carried out organization-wide with clear and strong support from your nonprofit's leadership.

- Plan a time to discuss your voter engagement activities with your executive director and ensure you have support from the board.
- Bring this Voter Engagement Guide to your meeting and describe the activities you think are a good fit for your organization – make sure to specify key points of contact for engagement with your constituents.
- Highlight why this work is important for both your clients and organization.



## What's next in this Voter Engagement Guide

### Section 1: Learn the rules

Make sure your efforts are nonpartisan. That means that none of your communications or activities attempt or even appear to support or oppose any candidate or political party. In addition, make sure you find out about dates and deadlines, eligibility requirements, and the process of voting in your state. It's usually best to go directly to the state or county elections office to get the most accurate information. <https://dos.fl.gov/elections/for-voters/election-dates/> <https://dos.elections.myflorida.com/supervisors/>

### Section 2: Make a plan

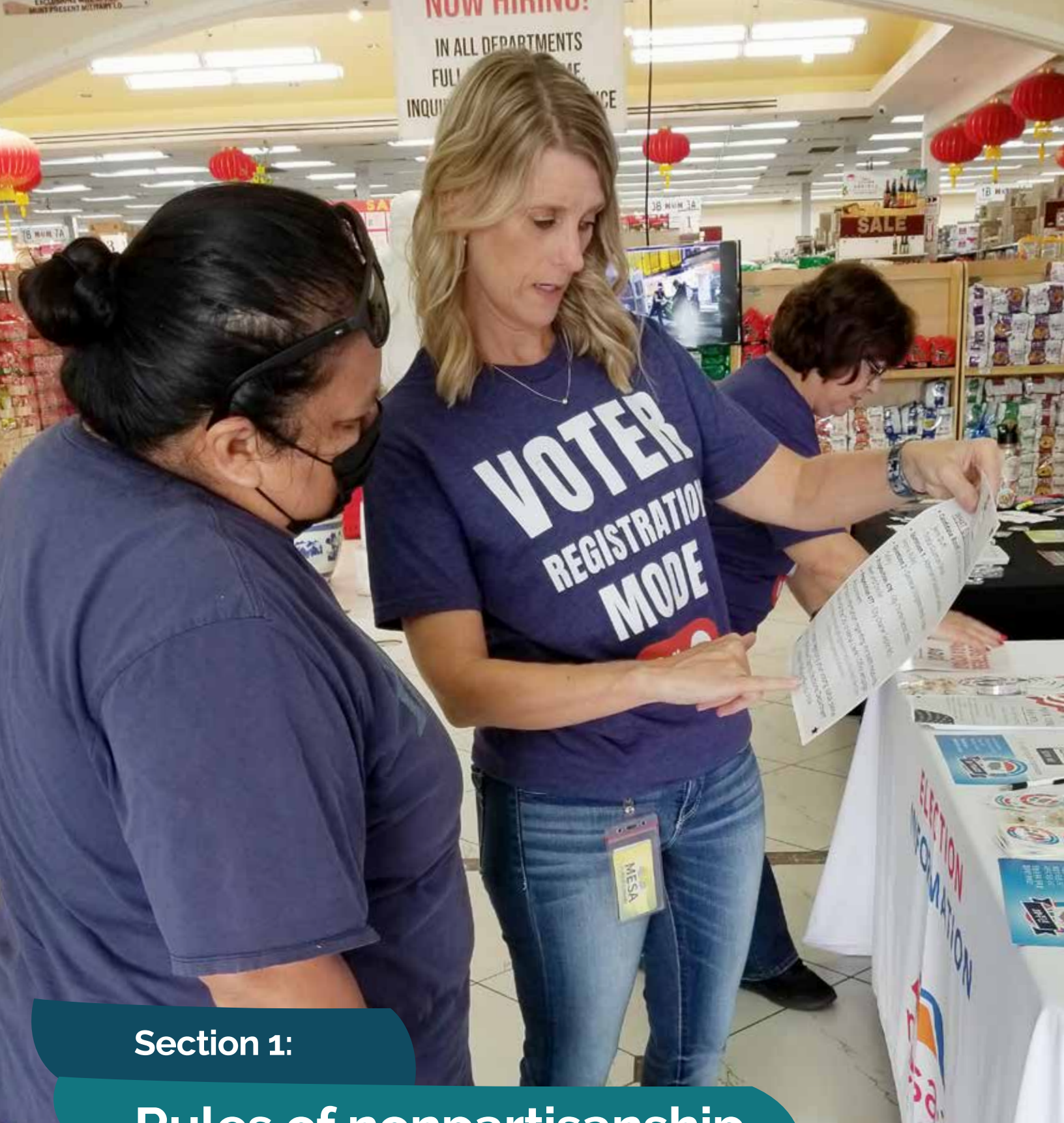
Mapping out a clear plan for your voter engagement activities can help ensure your efforts are successful. Every organization is different, so it's up to you to decide which activities fit most naturally into your existing programs. Activities generally fall into three categories: voter registration, voter education, and candidate engagement. You can mix and match for maximum impact and effectiveness.

### Section 3: Talk to potential voters

Above all, potential voters want a reason to vote. Research demonstrates that people are much more likely to vote when they sense something is at stake. These potential voters not only believe that their vote will make a difference, but they also believe that the votes of their peers and community will have an impact as well. Help your staff and constituents make a connection to what's on the ballot and how it can impact their lives. You can go to your city council, state legislature, or other elected legislative body's website to learn more about policies that are being voted on by the people we elect.

### Section 4: Permitted nonpartisan activities

There are so many ways to engage in nonpartisan voter engagement activities. Find one that matches your interest, capacity, and resources.



Section 1:

## Rules of nonpartisanship



## A nonprofit's guide to nonpartisanship

In 1954 Congress added a provision to the Internal Revenue Code commonly known as the "Johnson Amendment" requiring 501(c)(3) organizations – charitable nonprofits, private foundations, and religious congregations – to remain nonpartisan regarding elections for public office. They did it to protect charitable nonprofits, houses of worship, and foundations – and the donating public – from partisan election-related activity.

Federal law directs that charitable organizations nonprofits may not "participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code

The power of being nonpartisan flows from more than this statute:

1. Nonpartisanship respects the diversity of political opinions among your staff, board, volunteers, donors, and the people you serve. Charitable nonprofits should be focused on advancing our missions, not diverted by partisan politics in these and other ways:
  - Staff discussions and board meetings devolving into contentious debates about which candidates up and down the ballot to support, and how to allocate staff time and resources.
  - Powerful donors demanding that a certain percentage of their donations be redirected as a political contribution to a particular candidate.
  - The donating public reducing or stopping their contributions out of concern that nonprofits might turn around and give the donor's contribution to a political candidate the donor may oppose.
2. Nonpartisanship strengthens your ability to advocate across and without regard to partisan lines and have access to diverse community leaders and funding sources. There is a place for a more partisan approach. That's why Congress created 501(c)(4) social welfare advocacy organizations (and other partisan vehicles) which can do a certain amount of partisan election-related activity, but whose donors don't get a tax deduction.
3. Nonpartisanship reinforces the role of charitable nonprofits as trusted messengers who can engage marginalized populations that campaigns and candidates often miss. Our nonpartisan approach is one reason charitable nonprofits have proven effective at reaching youth, new voters, rural residents, and increasing voting rates across all demographics.

## **A 501(c)(3) organization may NOT conduct partisan activities to support or oppose any candidate for public office, including:**

- Endorsing a candidate or expressing support or opposition for any candidate or party (even for nonpartisan offices).
- Making a contribution to, or expenditure for, a candidate.
- Rating candidates on who is most favorable to your issue(s) or sharing messages or materials that rate or rank candidates.
- Letting candidates use the organization's facilities or resources, unless those resources are made equally available to all candidates at their fair market value.

## **Nonpartisan activities 501(c)(3) nonprofits may do to encourage voter participation and promote voter education include:**

- Promote or conduct nonpartisan voter registration in alignment with state law.
- Educate registered voters on a nonpartisan basis on the where, when, and how of voting.
- Encourage and remind people to vote.
- Distribute nonpartisan sample ballots, candidate questionnaires, or voter engagement guides.
- Host or co-sponsor a candidate forum in nonpartisan ways.
- Host or co-sponsor events so people learn about ballot measures (e.g., propositions, referenda, bonds) they will be asked to decide by voting and how the outcomes can affect their lives.
- Educate community members in nonpartisan ways on who the candidates are and what the offices do.
- Encourage staff to serve on Election Day as a poll worker, translator, or other nonpartisan volunteer.
- Continue issue advocacy during an election.
- Support or oppose ballot measures.

### **Key Takeaways**

While your organization is not allowed to directly or indirectly support any candidate or party for office, there are many nonpartisan activities you can undertake to help people vote.





## Digital communications and nonpartisanship

Your organization may already be using social media to communicate with supporters and the public, attract new members, mobilize public opinion, mobilize your communities, and promote civic engagement. The prohibition on nonprofits participating in partisan election-related activities is the same for social media as it is for any other type of communication. You may encourage people to register and vote on a nonpartisan basis, but you may not use social media to indicate support for, or opposition to, candidates for public office.

### Can a staff member use their personal account to support candidates?

Individuals have a right to express preferences for or against candidates, as long as they are doing so on their own time and using their individual resources. This applies to their personal social media accounts. The exception would be if that account is primarily used by the individual or others as a communication vehicle for the nonprofit.

### What about the Executive Director or CEO?

The chief executive officer of the nonprofit has the same rights of free expression as any other staff member, when not officially representing the organization. However, to the extent they are seen by stakeholders and constituents as representing the nonprofit, a CEO should exercise extra restraint in what they say on the internet to avoid any appearance of partisanship. CEOs should clarify when they are speaking in their own capacity and not as a representative for the organization.

### What are guidelines for engaging online?

Don't use organizational accounts to tag, re-tweet, like, or share posts with political campaigns or partisan organizations that have endorsed candidates.

### How about sharing content posted by a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization or other non-campaign organization whose primary purpose is other than electing candidates?

You may share content if the content shared is educational in nature and clearly nonpartisan. It is always safer to share content, for example, from a state or local government elections office, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational source or public media outlet not affiliated with a partisan political campaign.

### Is my nonprofit responsible for how our posts are shared?

No. You are not responsible for how and with whom others share your posts.

### What about content posted by other users to our social media platforms?

While you can't control how other people engage with your nonprofit through social media, you can make a general disclaimer on your social media site that you're not responsible for opinions posted by people not employed by your organization.





## Finding state and local election information

After learning what it means to stay nonpartisan while engaging voters as a 501(c)(3) organization, researching state and local election information is the next step. Every state sets the legal framework for its own elections, so rules for and dates will vary. Always confirm your information with a reputable source, like the local election office. If you're unsure if a website is from an actual governmental office, look for websites that end in ".gov".

Gather the following relevant information before engaging potential voters:

### When to vote:

- The date on which voter registration closes (typically 29 days before the election)
- Election dates (including primaries and special elections as applicable)
- Polling location hours (may vary between locations and dates)
- Early voting period (starting and ending date)
- The deadline to submit a vote-by-mail request (typically 5PM on the 12th day before the election)

### Where to cast a ballot:

- Polling place locations, including
  - Early voting locations (often fewer locations)
  - Election Day voting locations (more locations that are spread around in community locations like schools, community centers, sometimes nonprofit and faith-based spaces)
- Dropbox locations for vote-by-mail ballots

### How to participate:

- Voter registration processes, including online and in-person options
- Types of ID that will be accepted by polling places
- How to request a vote-by-mail ballot
- What the ballot looks like

Find helpful links, including Florida's election website at [nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state](https://nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state).

Note that Florida has several restrictions around voter registration. If your organization is not in a position to file as a Third Party Voter Registration Organization with the state, your staff and volunteers may still pass out blank applications, assist voters who request assistance to fill out their registration application, or facilitate online registration through [registertovoteflorida.gov](https://registertovoteflorida.gov). Learn more about state rules for voter registration on the next page of this guide.





## Conducting a Voter Registration Drive in Florida

### Voter Registration Deadlines

- Applications must be received or postmarked 29 days before Election Day.
- Drives must submit completed applications to the division or supervisor of the applicant's residence so they are received within 10 days of receiving them from the applicant or by the registration deadline, whichever is first.

### Getting Started:

**Preregistration Filings:** Before engaging in voter registration activities, third-party voter registration organizations (3PVROs) must submit form DSDE119 electronically to the Division of Elections at [3PVRO@dos.fl.gov](mailto:3PVRO@dos.fl.gov) or if email is not available, by fax at 850-245-6291. Updates to staff canvassers (but not volunteers) are required within 10 days of the change.

The form and other information is available online: <https://dos.fl.gov/elections/for-voters/voter-registration/third-party-voter-registration-organizations-3pvro/>

**Organization ID:** Third-party voter registration organizations may not begin collecting applications until the Division of Elections approves the application and assigns an ID number to the organization.

The organization ID, the date the application is collected from the applicant (MM/DD/YY), and the registration agent's initials must also be on each application collected during the registration on the bottom front portion of each voter registration application in a manner that does not obscure any other entry.

**Compensation Restrictions:** Do not pay registration drive participants based on how many registrations they collect. It is a felony offense in Florida to solicit or pay another person to solicit voter registration for compensation that is based on the number of registrations obtained.

**Canvasser Restrictions:** To collect or handle voter registration applications a person must not have been convicted of certain felonies under Florida law. 3PVROs must affirm that their registration agents meet this requirement. State law sets fines of \$50,000 per such agent collecting or handling applications who does not meet this requirement. Additional canvasser restrictions in Florida statute are currently not in effect due to a court order.



*“Collecting or handling”* means physically exercising custody over filled-out voter registration applications but does not include passing out blank applications, supervising the collecting or handling of applications, assisting a voter who requests assistance to fill out their registration application, or facilitating the online registration through [registertovoteflorida.gov](https://registertovoteflorida.gov). A 3PVRO may require each person collecting or handling voter registration applications on its behalf to sign written declarations affirming under penalty of perjury that the person has not been convicted of a listed felony. If the 3PVRO has a declaration signed by the person with the conviction prior to collecting or handling voter registration applications on behalf of the 3PVRO, the 3PVRO is not subject to this fine.

Declaration forms are located here (The citizen section does not need to be completed):

English: [files.floridados.gov/media/706999/formds-de-127-declarations-adopted-fillable.pdf](https://files.floridados.gov/media/706999/formds-de-127-declarations-adopted-fillable.pdf)

Spanish: [files.floridados.gov/media/707864/dsde-127-declarations-technical-change-spanishrev.pdf](https://files.floridados.gov/media/707864/dsde-127-declarations-technical-change-spanishrev.pdf)

## Obtaining Applications:

**State Forms:** The state mail-in voter registration application (Form DS-DE 39) can be downloaded at the Florida DOS website: [dos.fl.gov/elections/forvoters/voter-registration/register-to-vote-or-update-your-information/](https://dos.fl.gov/elections/forvoters/voter-registration/register-to-vote-or-update-your-information/)

State forms can also be requested in writing from the Division of Elections. The first 9,999 applications are provided at no cost, but a 1 cent charge is assessed for each application over 10,000.

**Federal Forms:** The federal mail-in registration application also may be used in voter registration drives: [eac.gov/voters/national-mail-voter-registration-form](https://eac.gov/voters/national-mail-voter-registration-form)

**Photocopying Blank Forms:** The state mail-in form may be photocopied and used in voter registration drives.

## Handling Applications:

**Providing Filled Out Forms:** A 3PVRO may not mail or otherwise provide a voter registration application upon which any information about an applicant has been filled in before it is provided to the applicant. Per-application fines apply to violations.

**Receipt Requirement:** 3PVROs must provide a receipt to an applicant upon accepting the application from them. The format must include the applicant's name, the date the application is received, the name of the 3PVRO, the name of the registration agent, the applicant's political party affiliation, and the county in which the applicant resides.

Receipt forms are available on the state 3PVRO website:

English: [files.floridados.gov/media/707000/formds-de-129-3pvro-voter-receipt-adopted.pdf](https://files.floridados.gov/media/707000/formds-de-129-3pvro-voter-receipt-adopted.pdf)

Spanish: [files.floridados.gov/media/707865/dsde-129-receipt-technical-change-spanish-202309-rev.pdf](https://files.floridados.gov/media/707865/dsde-129-receipt-technical-change-spanish-202309-rev.pdf)



**Incomplete Applications:** Do not alter the information on a registration form without the knowledge and consent of the applicant; doing so is a violation of Florida law.

**Photocopying Completed Applications:** As a best practice, do not retain a voter's full or partial Social Security Number and/or driver's license number, or signature. 3PVROs may retain copies of receipts provided. Retention restrictions in Florida statute are currently not in effect due to a court order.

**Submitting Applications:** Organizations must submit completed applications to the elections division or supervisor of the applicant's resident county so they are received **within 10 days** of receiving them from the applicant or by the registration deadline, whichever is first. Per-day per-application fines apply for late applications.

Prior to submitting the collected application(s), a 3PVRO must record its assigned 3PVRO ID#, the date the applicant completed the application, and must initial the application. The recording must be on the bottom front portion of the voter registration application in a manner that does not obscure any other entry.

**Cover letters:** When submitting applications, the 3PVRO must provide a cover letter indicating any applications that they believe were fraudulently completed or collected.

*Voter registration drive rules in Florida are currently the subject of ongoing litigation. Please check back for any changes. This document is not intended to provide legal advice.*

*Fair Elections Center, its Campus Vote Project, and Nonprofit VOTE intend the information contained herein to be used only as a general guide. This document should not be used as a substitute for consultation with a licensed Florida legal professional.*

*Last updated May 2025*



FOR MORE NONPARTISAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT  
RESOURCES, VISIT OUR RESOURCE LIBRARY  
[nonprofitvote.org/resource-library](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource-library)





## Section 2:

# Make a plan



## Your options for voter engagement activities

Below is a list of common voter engagement activities to get you started. Remember: everything must be done on a nonpartisan basis.

### Publicize and promote

- Promote voter registration deadlines and how-to's in the weeks before the election.
- Assign a staff member to plan and direct voter education activities.
- Make announcements about when and where to register to vote on your digital communication channels.
- Put up posters or offer flyers with voter registration information to clients in person.
- Sign up as a National Voter Registration Day community partner for free posters and stickers at [nationalvoterregistrationday.org](https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org).
- Talk about registering to vote at a staff or board meeting. Encourage all of your staff and volunteers to register to vote.
- Promote vote-by-mail request deadlines – the request to vote-by-mail is only valid from the date a request was submitted through the end of the calendar year for the next ensuing regularly scheduled general election.

### Mobilize and partner

If you have the time and resources, extend your education efforts outside your nonprofit to the community you serve.

- Identify partners in your neighborhood or service area – like other nonprofits, libraries, schools, or small businesses – and encourage them to promote voting.
- Have staff or volunteers set up a voter information table at community events or highly trafficked areas. Good locations are where likely voters from the neighborhood congregate – supermarkets, stores, school events, places of worship, transit stops, etc. Check with the desired site first to make sure you have their permission to set up a table.
- Encouraging local businesses to give paid time off for voting.



## Election protection

Make sure people know where to go if they need help casting a ballot.

Make sure people understand the Florida voter's bill of rights <https://www.myfloridaelections.com/Voting-Elections/Voters-Bill-of-Rights>

Include the relevant election protection hotline numbers for different languages:

- 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683),
- 888-VE-Y-VOTA (888-839-8682) for Spanish,
- 888-API-VOTE (888-274-8683) for Asian languages
- 844-YALLA-US (844-925-5287) for Arabic.

## Display or distribute sample ballots or nonpartisan voter engagement guides

Seeing a sample ballot helps people familiarize themselves with the voting process, giving them greater confidence to cast an actual ballot on Election Day. Share instructions for how to find sample ballots on your state or local elections website. Nonpartisan candidate guides provide an important, unbiased overview of what your community will be voting on.

Political parties sometimes publish sample ballots marking their candidates as the "correct" answers. A nonpartisan sample ballot listing the candidates and ballot questions as presented on the official ballot without designating which people and issues are favored help potential voters make up their own minds and reinforce the nonpartisanship of your organization. Direct them to [https://ballotpedia.org/Sample\\_Ballot\\_Lookup](https://ballotpedia.org/Sample_Ballot_Lookup) and <https://www.vote411.org/ballot>.

## Include lessons about voting

Does your nonprofit have classes or training? Consider holding a mock election or hosting a discussion about the principles of a fair democracy or fair election. Be sure to discuss the election with community members who are not able to vote and develop ways they can participate as volunteers. Educate them on Florida's [photo ID requirements](#).

## Make calls or send texts to potential voters

If you have phone numbers for clients, consider sending them an informational text with election reminders or organize a phone bank to call (and leave messages) for registered voters. Be careful to send the messages out broadly; don't pick and choose among your contacts in ways that could give the impression of partisan bias.

## Promote poll worker opportunities

Share information on how to become a poll worker. In many states these are paid volunteer positions that any registered voter can be trained for, but they will need to be on-site the entire day.

Learn more at Nonprofits, Democracy, and Voting: They Go Together So Well at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/nonprofits-democracy-and-voting-they-go-together-so-well>.

## Key Takeaways

There are many effective and creative ways to conduct nonpartisan voter engagement and you are encouraged to explore ideas that will feel inviting and celebratory for your audience.



## Engaging candidates for office

Elections offer numerous opportunities to interact with candidates for elected office. As a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, you cannot support, endorse, or oppose candidates for public office. However, you can still use their campaign status to get your issues in front of the candidates, build relationships with future elected officials, share your policy ideas, and influence future debates and decisions. Just make sure you are offering information and invitations to all candidates for that office on a fair and equal basis.

### Share your policy ideas

Although elected officials can benefit from your ideas and research year-round, elections provide a focused opportunity to build clout while demonstrating your organization's expertise.

### Have a candidate attend an event

Invite candidates to visit your nonprofit or attend an event, as the invitation alone gets your organization's name and mission in front of the candidates. Hosting candidates at an event also allows your constituents and stakeholders to ask questions and familiarize themselves with their choices. You must invite all candidates, but you don't have to have them appear at the same time and not all must accept your invitation. Be sure to inform your audiences that all candidates have been invited and reiterate your organization's nonpartisanship.

### Host or co-sponsor a candidate forum or questionnaire

Candidate forums not only connect your organization with candidates, but they also give your constituents and community members a chance to meet and interact with future officials. If there are already forums planned that your organization will not participate in, consider a questionnaire. Be sure to ask fair and impartial questions. Invite all the candidates in a particular race to respond to a set of questions which you share with your community audience to better inform them of candidate positions and values. Remember not to rank or appear to endorse a candidate in any way when sharing the candidate positions and values .

### Key Takeaways

As a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, you cannot support, endorse, or oppose candidates for public office. However, you can still use their campaign status to get your issues in front of the candidates.





## Selecting the best activities

### Who's your audience?

Consider the various audiences for your voter participation activities and communications. The activities, messages, and format of the communications you choose may change depending on your audience, including:

- Your members, service population, or other constituents.
- Your staff, board members and volunteers.
- Your neighborhood or local community.

### What do they need?

Most people benefit from reminders about upcoming elections and information about who and what is on the ballot. Some voters have additional needs. Identify the barriers your audience may face when trying to vote to anticipate the information or assistance needed to successfully cast a ballot. Examples include:

- Eligibility and registration because they are a new or returning citizen, an out-of-state student, experiencing homelessness, or anyone lacking a current state ID for any reason.
- Accessibility and accommodations due to disability or language barriers.
- Getting time off from work to vote or transportation to and from the polls.

### Who's involved?

Determine who should be involved, such as staff, volunteers, constituents, and partner organizations. These people will need some training to effectively engage prospective voters. Consider:

- Front office staff who do intake or manage materials and signage in the lobby.
- Volunteers or interns who can take on a voter participation activity as a special project.
- Program staff who can weave voting into ongoing program activities.
- Communications team who creates assets and runs your website and social media.
- Partner organizations, coalitions, or local elections boards that can expand your reach.



## What are your communication vehicles?

Plan with the people in charge of your communications and website to include messages and announcements about registration and voting in the weeks leading up to the election. Depending on how you reach your audience some of these may be more effective than others:

- Signage, posters, and handouts in your lobby or service areas.
- Phone calls or texts.
- Digital channels: website, social media, newsletters, paid advertising.
- Staff meetings or emails.

## How are you tracking and celebrating efforts?

If you are taking the time to run a voter engagement campaign, take the time to track, celebrate, and share your success! The documentation you do during the campaign can be used for fundraising, developing partnerships, and raising your profile. Keep track of:

- **Stories:** Take pictures of engagement activities and collect quotes from staff, volunteers, and potential voters.
- **Metrics:** Track the number of voter registrations collected as well as events, discussions, and other voter interactions. Include digital voter outreach, such as social media posts and newsletter mentions.
- **Post-election:** Collect photos and stories from people your nonprofit helped to vote. Consider ways to use them soon after the election to demonstrate your community engagement work and save them to inspire people before the next election.

## Key Takeaways

There are many options for voter engagement activities. It's okay to start small and grow your efforts as you build capacity. You can start with staff, board, and/or volunteers.





## Partnering for success: Local elections office and beyond

Partnering with another local nonprofit organization can be a mutually beneficial relationship, fostering community engagement, social impact, and often, increased visibility for both parties. Here are some tips to make the most out of such partnerships:

### Identify potential partners

There are three types of partnerships your organization can benefit from when conducting voter engagements:

- **Local and State Election Offices:** Having a contact at an election office is invaluable when questions or needs come up. Election officials appreciate when organizations reach out, utilize their resources, and provide voters with accurate information.
- **Voter Outreach Organizations:** Look for organizations that provide quality, nonpartisan voter engagement resources and are operating locally. These organizations may be able to provide additional insight, tools, resources, or volunteers.
- **Existing Partners with Shared Goals:** Look to your current nonprofit partners whose mission aligns with your values and goals – including your complete commitment to remaining nonpartisan – or whose service population overlaps with your own. You may be able to share resources or team up to better integrate voter messaging and activities.

### How to develop a lasting partnership

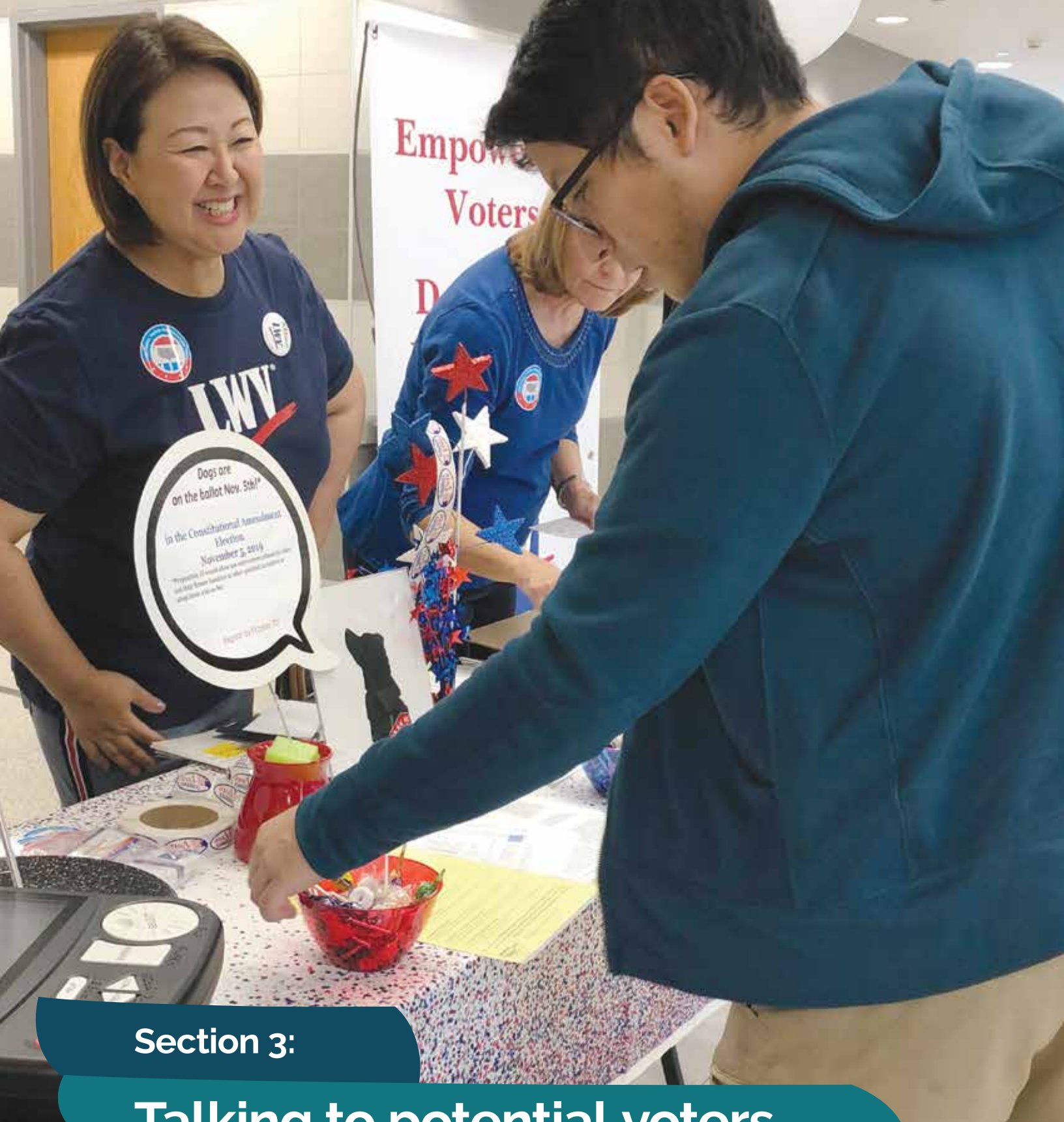
**Open Communication:** Initiate a dialogue with the organization's leadership team to discuss potential partnership opportunities and be transparent about your objectives, resources, and limitations. Emphasize that your goal is to provide accurate, nonpartisan information to eligible voters so they will have an easier time getting to the polls and casting a ballot.

**Define Roles and Responsibilities:** Clearly outline each party's roles and responsibilities within the partnership. Establishing expectations upfront helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures that both parties are committed to achieving common goals.

**Collaborative Projects:** Brainstorm collaborative projects that leverage the strengths of both organizations. Whether it's hosting joint events, conducting community outreach, or launching fundraising campaigns, collaboration can amplify the impact of your efforts.

**Promote Each Other:** Use your respective platforms to promote each other's initiatives and events and celebrate successes along the way. Recognize the achievements of both organizations and the positive impact of your partnership on the community.





### Section 3:

## Talking to potential voters



## Tips for successfully engaging potential voters

One of the reasons nonprofits are great resources for voter engagement is because of the relationship we have with our communities. An organization can use all the digital tools or fancy talking points but at the end of the day, voter engagement is a year-round initiative focused on talking directly with potential voters, building trust through relationship, and honest communication.

When engaging potential voters at festivals or events, use large signage to attract attention. Banners, posters, balloons, and other decorations can make your information table visible. You can bring snacks, or other freebies to encourage people to visit your table; however, legally, you must give these out regardless of whether someone registers or not.

Be proactive! Stand up, get out from behind the table, and greet people. When you're talking to somebody, offer them a pen and clipboard to fill out their information. Once they see how easy the form is, they're more likely to follow through with registration.

### Keep it strictly nonpartisan

Staff working for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations should be nonpartisan when representing their nonprofit on site, at events, or doing voter engagement activities. Nonprofits and staff cannot suggest which candidate to vote for or political party to support. This includes not wearing buttons, hats, or t-shirts for a candidate.

Prepare for the conversation you will get to have, including with people who are hesitant to participate. Here are some common responses to keep in your back pocket:

#### **"I don't have time."**

"I understand. It only takes a couple minutes and doing it now will save you time later. I can answer any of your questions and ensure it gets turned in according to state law."

#### **"I don't want to register" or "I don't care about voting."**

Respect their hesitancy. You can't convince everyone, but you'll get better at trying.

- "Candidates pay more attention to communities where everyone's registered. They won't always do what we want, but they're more likely to pay attention if we register to vote."
- Cite an important issue in the upcoming election. Give an example of what the city council, state legislature, or Congress might be voting on next year, being careful to remain strictly nonpartisan.
- Remind them that they won't be voting alone – they're voting with and for their families, neighbors, and community.

#### **"I don't know any of the candidates."**

Suggest that they look up a voter guide on [vote411.org/florida](http://vote411.org/florida) or [BallotReady](http://BallotReady), or talk to family and friends. They might be able to find someone who can bring them up to speed.





### Can I say anything about specific candidates?

You can only answer simple facts like what party they are in, if they are an incumbent or challenger, or where they live. Remember you need to remain strictly nonpartisan. Do not state or imply your preferences.

### What do I say when asked about the difference between Republicans and Democrats?

There is no good answer or any accurate source that doesn't have a bias. You could mention the names of the current nominees and their party, but go no further. Suggest they ask a trusted friend or go to the political parties' or candidates' official websites.

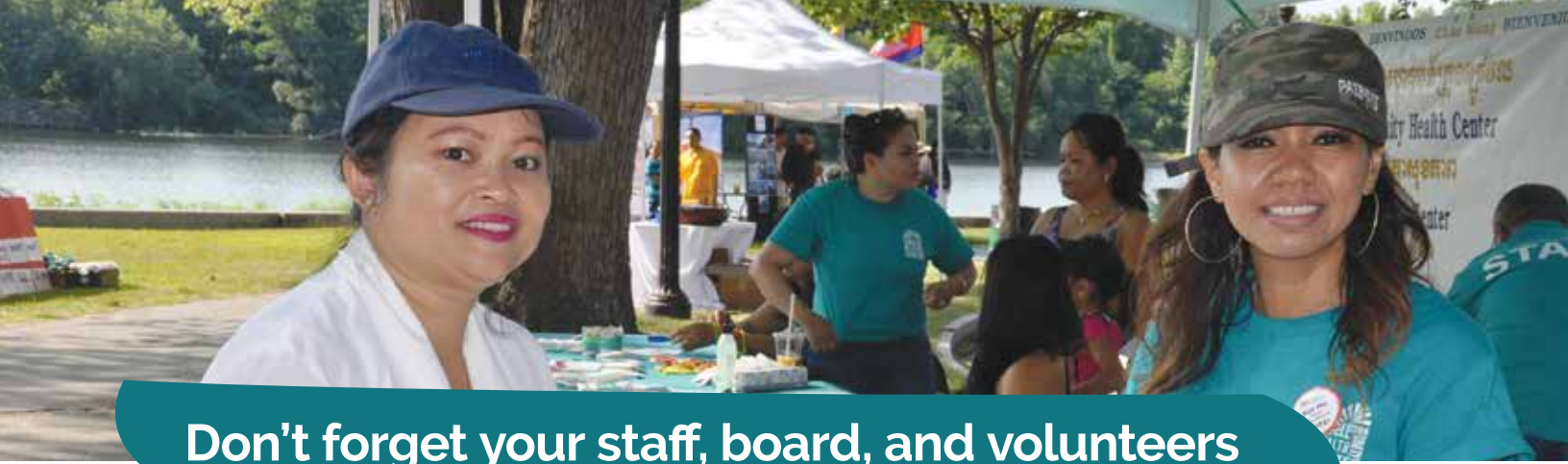
### What if I'm asked about a ballot measure?

Ballot measures are about enacting laws not electing candidates. You may discuss the pros and cons of a ballot measure unless it is your organization's policy not to. You can also tell them if your nonprofit has an official position on one or more ballot questions and, if it does, why.

## Key Takeaways

An organization can use all the digital tools or fancy talking points but at the end of the day, voter engagement is a year-round initiative focused on talking directly with potential voters, building trust through relationship, and honest communication.





## Don't forget your staff, board, and volunteers

### Encourage everyone to vote

In our zeal to register people to vote in our offices and at events, it's easy to overlook those closest to us: our staff, board members, and volunteers. Their voices deserve to be heard at the ballot box, too. Intentionally reach out to them to make sure they're registered and invite them to the nonpartisan voter education events you host, such as candidate forums or sessions explaining ballot measures. Also provide them with information about how, when, and where to vote, and encourage them to vote with a reminder that they are important to you. Even a small nonprofit can have a mighty impact on voter turnout by leveraging the power of our most natural, closest connections.

### Give paid time off to vote

Inability to take time off to vote (or not being aware of time off to vote policies) can be a barrier for potential voters. While nearly half of states require employers to offer paid time off to vote, the rest do not. Offering unpaid time off to vote can also help but makes employees choose between voting and their paycheck.

Nonprofits can make a difference by leading with policies that ensure all employees have access to the ballot box. Make sure each employee is aware of your policy for time off to vote. In addition to publicizing election deadlines, helping voters make a plan, and encouraging folks to vote.

The standard elements of any time-off-to-vote policy include:

- A statement of support for active and engaged citizenship;
- The number of hours granted, usually two hours with pay;
- Time off granted conditioned on the employee not having time to vote before or after work on Election Day, not able to use or access an absentee/ mail ballot, or not able to vote early; and
- A requirement that the employee notify their supervisor before Election Day.

See sample policies and state requirements for time off to vote at [nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-staff-vote/](https://nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-staff-vote/).



## Section 4:

# Permitted nonpartisan activities

This section has more specific tools and sample resources for implementing various voter engagement strategies. Whether you're curious about candidate forums, thinking of hosting a phonebank, or looking for best practices for voter engagement in small towns and rural communities, this is a great starting point. You're invited to visit the resource library at [nonprofitvote.org](https://nonprofitvote.org) for even more.

# Ballot measures

## What is a ballot measure?

Ballot measures ask voters to vote on laws, bonding issues, or constitutional amendments. If the vote is on a proposed law, it's called a "ballot initiative". If the vote is on a law already passed by the legislature, it's called a "referendum".

## Can a nonprofit take a position for or against a ballot measure?

Generally, yes. Activity supporting or opposing ballot measures is considered lobbying – not electioneering for or against a candidate – and as a result a charitable organization will not be considered engaging in partisan, election-related activities. Charitable 501(c)(3) nonprofits may advocate to pass or defeat a ballot measure as a lobbying activity, subject to normal limits on lobbying.

## What are common activities for nonprofits on ballot measures?

Organizations can engage in a range of activities related to ballot measures such as – collecting signatures to put an issue on the ballot, endorsing or opposing the measure, communicating your position to influence the public, organizing volunteers to work on passage or defeat of a ballot measure, or hosting an educational forum or event. You can also distribute neutral educational materials designed to inform the public about both sides of the question.

## How much can a 501(c)(3) nonprofit spend on lobbying?

Your spending limits depend on which test your nonprofit chooses to measure lobbying.

1. Unless your charitable nonprofit has filed the simple and easy 501(h) form, then it automatically falls under Section 501(c)(3)'s unclear limitation on lobbying: "no substantial part of the [charity's] activities" can be "attempting to influence legislation." Neither Congress nor the IRS has clarified what constitutes "substantial" or "insubstantial" lobbying activities or where the dividing line is drawn. Importantly, this default standard in Section 501(c)(3) looks at the organization's full "activities," and not at the amount of dollars spent.
2. To avoid uncertainty, many charitable nonprofits instead choose to take the 501(h) election, which sets clear, objective guidance by comparing how much they spent on lobbying in a given year to the organization's total expenditures. To take the 501(h) election, nonprofits will spend less than five minutes filling in a few simple items on IRS Form 5768. Learn more at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/everyday-advocacy/taking-501h-election>.

## Are there any spending limits for ballot measure advocacy?

There are no limits on spending on ballot measures, beyond the limits on lobbying discussed above. Some states require you to file an expenditure report if you devote substantial funds to ballot measure advocacy as, for example, a primary sponsor of a ballot measure, an active partner, or as a financial contributor for a particular advertisement. Contact your state's [campaign finance office](#) for more information.





## Hosting a phone or text bank

### Why host a phone or text bank to reach voters?

Phone or text banking involves individual outreach to eligible voters through phone calls or text messages. Contact from a trusted organization can help prepare and motivate people to vote and is more effective than emails or postcards. Include phone or text banking as part of your strategy in the weeks leading up to the election.

### Benefits include:

- Flexibility to organize staff and/or volunteers in-person, at a distance, all at once, or over many shifts.
- Enjoyable for your staff and volunteers.
- Voter engagement messages can be paired with wellness checks, invitations to events/ services, or other messages you want to get out to your community.

### Every good phone or text bank has 4 key ingredients:

1. A list of clients/voters to contact.
2. Staff or volunteers (phone/text bankers) to make the calls/texts to voters.
3. A tracking system (e.g. shared spreadsheet like a google doc, your existing CRM might have options, or you can use a company with more robust texting programs) to record voters' answers and important notes. Tracking is especially important if you plan to do multiple rounds of calls to voters who don't pick up at first.
4. A script to guide their interactions.



### **What if I don't have a list of clients or community members that includes their name and phone number?**

There are a few options. You can buy a list for your area from a data company (rates vary but, in some areas, it could be around \$50 for a few hundred names and numbers). You can also collect the desired contact information in a way that makes it clear to your audience of clients or community members that you're going to follow up with them about voting.

### **Who should I ask to phone/text bank? How many people should I ask?**

For every 100 phone numbers, recruit two people to phone/text bank for two hours (you could also recruit four people for a Power Hour!) Consider asking staff to participate, as well as committed volunteers, members of your board, or program participants. Members of a local youth leadership program make great bankers. Recruit bilingual speakers if many people in your community speak languages other than English as a primary language.

### **What every phone banker should know:**

If this is your first time phone-banking, welcome! This is generally a very positive experience for both the caller and the voter being called. Keep in mind the following:

- It will feel awkward at first and that's okay! You'll start feeling more comfortable after the third or fourth conversation.
- Most people won't pick up and you may only have a handful of conversations with voters. This is okay too! Every call makes a difference.
- You never have to stay on the phone with someone rude or aggressive. If you feel uncomfortable, disconnect the call, and make a note in the tracker.

# Voter registration ask

## Sample Email

	Content Outline
<p><b>Subject Line</b></p> <p>Register to Vote for the Upcoming Election</p> <p><b>Email Draft</b></p> <p>Dear</p> <p>We at [Organization Name] are asking all our staff, board members, and volunteers who are eligible to make sure you are registered to vote. You are important to us and our community, and we want to make sure that your voice is heard in the upcoming (and future) elections. In Florida election day registration is not allowed.</p>	<p><b>Ask:</b> Include an ask, goal and a date or timeframe.</p>
<p>If you're already registered, now is the time to make sure your official voter registration information is up to date at your current address. Our goal is to have 100% of eligible staff, board, and volunteers registered by the week of National Voter Registration Day [Insert Date]. Will you help us reach that goal?</p> <p>When we ask elected officials to support our issues and funding for services like ours, having our staff, board, and volunteers be registered voters makes our voice that much stronger. [Insert org. specific or election-specific information].</p>	<p><b>Why:</b> Note importance to your organization and community.</p>
<p><b>Option 1: Direct</b></p> <p>[Employee Name] will be coming around the office with registration forms asking you if you need to register or update your registration [Insert timeframe].</p> <p><b>Option 2: Indirect</b></p> <p>You can learn more about registering and voting using [Organization's registration tool of choice].</p>	<p><b>How:</b> Highlight registration activity or how to get registered.</p>
<p>Be sure to visit your county's election website for the most up-to-date information ahead of the election.</p> <p>We appreciate your service to [Organization Name]. Thank you for being a registered voter!</p> <p>Sincerely</p> <p>[Insert Sender]</p>	<p>Thank you.</p>





## Candidate engagement

### Sharing your policy ideas

Educating candidates about policy solutions you are prioritizing is an important step to ensuring all candidates have a robust plan. This helps ensure that the newly or recently re-elected official will work to address these challenges while in office.

Sharing your policy ideas with a candidate is similar to how you would engage an elected official. Utilize email, in-person meetings, social media, or other contacts to make them aware of your policy priorities. Additionally, be sure to engage all candidates when doing your outreach. Do not conduct research on behalf of a candidate or campaign, and do not sign your organization's name on to their policy proposals or platforms issued as part of their campaigns. This can be viewed as an endorsement of support.

### Candidate appearances at your nonprofit event

During the election season, a candidate may appear at your nonprofit event in one of three ways:

1. In their capacity as a candidate invited to your event,
2. In their capacity as a public figure invited to your event, or
3. As an uninvited attendee at a public event.

Each scenario has different guidelines to ensure that their appearance maintains your organization's nonpartisanship.

## 1. Inviting candidates to an event in their capacity as candidates

Your nonprofit may want to invite candidates for office to a function or event to expose them to your work, develop relationships with future office holders, or for a purpose related to your ongoing programs.

If you invite all the candidates to the SAME event:

- Invite all candidates from all political parties in the same race. They don't all have to come, but all must be invited.
- Remind candidates – in writing – that they are attending as guests – campaigning and political fundraising are prohibited.
- Remind the audience that this is a nonpartisan event.
- The atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

If you invite candidates to appear at DIFFERENT events:

- Provide equal opportunities to candidates for the same office, including a similar time, venue, exposure opportunity, and presentation format.
- Remind candidates – in writing – that they are attending as guests. Campaigning and political fundraising are prohibited.
- Prior to introducing the candidate, clarify for the audience that the appearance is not an endorsement and that there will be additional opportunities to meet the other candidates.
- Ensure the atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

Keep in mind that elected officials are themselves candidates when they are running for re-election in a primary or general election. This is particularly important to remember in the last two months leading up to the election.

## 2. Inviting a candidate to an event in their capacity as a public figure

A charitable nonprofit may invite a candidate to an event in their capacity as a recognized public figure, like an elected official or expert in their field. You might invite a candidate to speak because they 1) currently hold, or formerly held, public office; 2) is considered an expert in a field unrelated to office held; or 3) is a celebrity or has led a distinguished public service, military, legal, or other career. Under these circumstances only extend an invitation if:

- The candidate is chosen to speak solely for reasons other than their candidacy and speaks only in a non-candidate capacity.
- There is no mention of their candidacy during the presentation or event.
- Remind the public figure – in writing – that they are attending in that sole capacity and not as a candidate, and that campaigning and political fundraising is prohibited.
- The atmosphere is kept entirely nonpartisan and free of campaign activity with no campaign brochures or materials distributed or on tables.

## 3. Candidates attending your event on their own initiative

Candidates may appear at a public event held by your nonprofit on their own initiative. Take care that there is no actual or implied endorsement. Do not give the candidate an opportunity to address the gathering or distribute campaign literature.





## Candidate forums

### Keeping your forum nonpartisan

When planning your nonprofit candidate forum, remember – nonpartisanship is key! Not only is it required for 501(c)(3) organizations, but it also encourages attendance by candidates, attracts more interest from the media, and is an effective tool for engaging your community around the issues that matter to them.

### Basic guidelines for staying nonpartisan

- The forum should cover a broad range of issues.
- Candidates should have equal time to present their views.
- The candidates are asked about issues but are not asked to pledge to or agree with specific positions of the sponsoring organizations.
- The moderator stays neutral and does not imply approval or disapproval of the candidates.

Staying nonpartisan is fairly straightforward. Here are some tried and true tips from the experts:

### Inviting the candidates

Invite all viable candidates for a specific office to your forum and make an equal effort to encourage each of them to attend. If it is a two-candidate race and only one agrees to attend, you should not go forward with your forum because it could be perceived as partisan with only one candidate.

#### **Q: What about a race with several candidates?**

At least two candidates must attend in order for the forum to remain nonpartisan. You may want to ensure the front runners can attend, but having any two or more is enough to make it a nonpartisan.

#### **Q: What about a last minute cancellation?**

If it is a two-candidate race and one cancels with very little notice, or worse, doesn't show up, you may cancel or go forward with the candidate event as planned. If you go forward, make sure to announce that this in no way signifies the endorsement of the attending candidate by your organization.

Read about Rosie's Place, a community center serving women experiencing homelessness, and how they meld empowering women with civic engagement through candidate forums at <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/field-program/>.

## Questions asked at the forum

You may want to have one or more staff members in charge of reviewing audience questions before handing them to the moderator. Your forum should ask clear, relevant, and balanced questions; none that signal a strong bias for or against a candidate. It's okay to ask straightforward questions on the issues, but balance these across partisan lines.

## Ground rules inside the forum

**Partisan Attire:** Insist in advance that anyone helping to staff the event may not wear partisan attire (e.g., t-shirts, hats, buttons). While not required, you may want to ask audience members to check their partisan materials (including buttons and signs) at the door. This helps to create a sense of nonpartisanship within the forum hall.

**Audience:** Ask the audience to respectfully refrain from excessive exuberance for or against a particular candidate.

**Security:** Although not required by laws governing nonprofits, consider hiring security to be visible onsite to help discourage anyone who might otherwise want to disrupt the event.

## Site selection

**Choose a neutral site for your forum – one that is not associated with any party, candidate, or strong advocacy for any issue.**

## Literature

You may provide nonpartisan voter education and blank voter registration materials for your audience. Do not collect them unless you are a 3PVRO (see page 15). Have a separate table outside the room of the forum for candidates to place their campaign literature.

## What the candidates want

It is helpful to understand what the candidates hope for in a nonprofit candidate forum. Use this information to entice candidates to attend.

- **A large audience!** Candidates are spread very thin during a campaign season. They cannot attend every event to which they are invited. You and your co-sponsoring organizations should focus on turnout to increase the chances that candidates will attend. This is a great opportunity to invite volunteers, campus chapters or young professional groups, donors, and more to participate. Be sure to communicate your expected audience size to the candidates in advance, as a large turnout at your candidate forum demonstrates that your organization has influence on voters.
- **A guarantee of neutrality:** Candidates will avoid any event where they think they could be ganged up on – especially if the media is expected to attend. Remind all candidates of the nonpartisan nature of the forum and share any ground rules you have established to keep everything neutral.



- **A trusted and well-respected nonprofit in the district:** Leverage your reputation as a respected community organization and partnerships with other nonprofits. Since candidates are aware of nonprofits that have held successful and neutral candidate forums in the past, they will be more likely to attend if those organizations are involved as one or more of your co-sponsors.
- **Time to meet informally with voters:** Allow time after the forum for the candidates to speak one-on-one with voters and shake hands. Tell candidates about this opportunity in your invitation to them.
- **More information about your organization:** In your invitation to the candidates, briefly explain the mission of your organization and your constituency as well as how your organization affects policy – and how those policies hurt and could help your organization's work in the community. Many candidates and elected officials already rely on nonprofits as resources for policy information. This is a fantastic opportunity to mention your policy priorities and issues that impact your community members.

## Selecting a format

At the top of your to-do list is selecting the format of your forum. As you decide, remember that it's important to select the option that best meets your community's needs.

- **Equal Time Q&A:** An impartial moderator and panelists question the candidates, who are allowed equal response time. Traditionally, the candidates are unaware of the exact questions but know the established focus of the program. Candidates may answer the same questions or may be asked different questions, as long as each is given equal time to present their point of view.
- **Follow-Up Q&A:** In this approach, the moderator and/or panelists ask the candidates questions. To get clarifications and more specific answers, follow-up questions are permitted.
- **Town Meeting Q&A:** Members of the audience ask all questions. Questions should be screened by a staff member of your organization to avoid partisan questions and to facilitate substantive dialogue. The audience members asking questions will educate the candidate on the concerns of the constituency.
- **Prepared and Spontaneous Debate:** Prior to the forum, the candidates are presented with several prepared questions constructed to elicit detailed responses. A selection of these questions will be asked at the forum. Candidates will then be asked to give spontaneous answers to questions that originate with the moderator, their opponents, and/or the audience.

## Logistics

Ideally, you will begin planning your forum at least 4 months in advance. Shorter timelines can work, but make sure the date and location are set and candidates are confirmed with enough time to do thorough promotion. See the task checklist at [nonprofitvote.org/resource/candidate-forum-checklist/](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource/candidate-forum-checklist/).





## Publicizing your forum

1. **Promote, promote, promote!** Use all your communication channels. Target and time your online and print to maximize impact. Post flyers and make details about the forum available.
2. Leverage partners and media outlets that have featured your work in the past.
3. Use key election dates or campaign news to drive communications in the lead-up to the forum.
4. Try to personally contact and invite local and regional media outlets. Use this to establish new relationships and raise your profile.
5. Use a known moderator to draw additional attention (ex. local news anchor, university professor, retired or former elected leader, civic leaders who are not associated with a political party).
6. Your nonpartisanship is an advantage. For media and your audience, a forum is a chance to hear from candidates in a nonpartisan setting rather than hear stock messages from the campaign trail.
7. Frame your forum as a “community event” – one that brings voters and residents together to engage in the democratic process and influence their government.

## What NOT to do when planning a forum

- Start planning late.
- Make assumptions about turnout (typically, actual attendees are half or less of RSVPs).
- Over rely on partners and co-sponsors for audience turnout without verifying their effort (social media posts are great for getting the word out but relational organizing is the strongest tool for turnout).
- Send media releases without personal follow-up.
- Fail to take advantage of media outlets in other languages common to your community.
- Forget good signage around the building so people know where the forum is (including parking, entrance, online accessibility, etc.).
- Leave out instructions to your audience at the start about what will occur – who asks questions, when the audience participates and how, expected decorum, etc.





## Candidate questionnaires

Candidate questionnaires serve two purposes. First, they collect information about the candidates for voters. Second, they let candidates know the range of issues of concern to the organization(s) preparing the guide. Questionnaires do take time to prepare and require care to ensure they are nonpartisan. If you wish to do a candidate questionnaire, consider these key factors in determining whether a voter engagement guide is nonpartisan:

- Do the questions cover a broad range of issues related to the broad interests of the electorate? For example, do the questions address a range of issues relevant to a specific elected office or reflect a truly broad range of concerns within your issue area?
- Are the questions or any description of the issues clear and unbiased in both structure and content?
- Are the questions posed to candidates identical to the questions you later publicly print or post online? (They should be.)
- Are the candidates given a reasonable amount of time to respond?
- If the questions ask the candidates to respond with "Yes" or "No" or "Undecided," are candidates given the opportunity to give short one or two sentence explanations to explain their positions in their own words?
- Have all major candidates responded?



### Q: What if the candidate does not respond?

You may list "Did Not Respond." When a candidate fails to respond, some 501(c)(3)s choose to provide information about the candidate that is a matter of public record or on their website. If you do, be sure to stick strictly to factual information – name, address, etc. – and avoid efforts to summarize the candidate's positions on issues, which might appear to be slanted to favor or disfavor the candidate. You should provide all candidates with the same reasonable time period – for example, three weeks – to give their responses and information. As the deadline nears, let the candidates know that if they don't respond, you will print "did not respond." While not required, it is a good practice to give the candidates the chance to review the final draft of their information and make any last-minute corrections.

### Reminder

Federal law requires that all 501(c)(3) organizations – charitable nonprofits, private foundations, and houses of worship – remain strictly nonpartisan when doing any voter engagement activity. While the law does not require you to have an attorney provide advice about any of the activities, legal assistance is still advised in many circumstances.

The most visible of all the activities are the "Candidate Engagement" options. These present more opportunity for an organization to be accused of being partisan or showing bias in favor of, or in opposition to, a particular candidate or political party. The steps a 501(c)(3) nonprofit needs to take to prevent bias or partisanship in "Candidate Engagement" activities may vary depending on the nature of the issues that would be covered in a candidate forum or questionnaire and other specifics about the nonprofit and the elections at issue. Among "Candidate Engagement" activities, it can be easier for a candidate who doesn't want to be held accountable to refuse to answer by alleging bias in a questionnaire.

Therefore, when "Making a Plan" and "Selecting the Best Activities", organizations with less experience may wish to consider starting with activities other than "Candidate Engagement" to build more experience. It is a sign of respect for the law in your desire to remain nonpartisan and an acknowledgment that legal assistance may be needed.





## Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small towns

Rural areas and small towns hold some of the nation's closest elections, but they are frequently overlooked by major parties. In many of these communities, food accessibility is scarce, healthcare access is limited, and public transportation is nonexistent. Yet, neighbors, nonprofits, and local leaders work together to build vibrant communities that are vital to our democracy. Every community, regardless of size, deserves adequate representation. Residents are more likely to know their local elected officials and their individual vote can have more power. In local races, a handful of votes may be enough to change the outcome of an election. And yet, most small communities continue to have lower participation rates in local elections than in federal elections.

Engaging potential voters in rural areas and small town communities may look different from how to engage people in cities or suburban areas. Here are a few strategies from nonprofits in rural areas and small towns:

### Make space for one-on-one conversations

In rural areas and small towns, a one-on-one conversation is an effective way to engage and educate people. Making space to ask how people are doing can help meet more holistic needs and connect them to other resources.

### Use physical materials to distribute information

Internet access is often harder to access in rural areas. Having printed voter registration forms and flyers that educate voters on the processes and candidates are a reliable way to engage voters.

Read about how Community Partnership Family Resource Center reaches rural communities through trusted relationships at <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/field-program/>.

### Host a meet and greet with local candidates and officials

Candidates and local officials in your small town/rural area might be neighbors you already know and work with. When people know their candidates, voting is more personal.

### Utilize the trust in the community

Organize your voter engagement around local events. Try partnering with local businesses or libraries to help increase awareness about the approaching elections because people are already going there, linking voting to something safe and familiar.





## Engaging potential voters with disabilities

A disability includes any condition that significantly impacts a person's life activities. This can include matters of mobility, cognition, hearing, and/or vision. Any of these can impact the ability to vote in unique ways. If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who have the same demographic characteristics, there would be about 1.75 million more voters. The landmark Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires states and local governments to make voting more accessible to ensure that people with disabilities have a full and equal opportunity to vote in all elections. The ADA covers all parts of voting, from voter registration to selecting a location for polling places to actually voting, whether on election day or during an early or absentee voting process. Since then, other laws such as the Help Americans Vote Act of 2002 have continued these efforts. Despite this, people with disabilities continue to face barriers to voting. In 2022, voters with disabilities were three times more likely to experience some type of difficulty in voting than people without disabilities.

### **Strategies for making voter engagement activities more accessible:**

#### **Use multiple formats in different mediums**

Make any needed adjustments for the physical and digital space in which voter registration is done. This may mean providing information in multiple formats in various visual, auditory, and tactile mediums. For visual information and forms, you may need to provide both paper printouts and digital devices so screen readers can be utilized.

- Hosting a webinar on voting information? Be sure to turn on captioning.
- Posting an image to social media? Be sure to use the "alt tag" features.
- Using the web? Use free online tools to simplify language or check for color contrast to ensure readability.



## Visualizing and walking through the steps to vote

One way to work with people with disabilities is in preparing to vote, from making sure voter information is clear and understandable to addressing potential concerns, such as: How will the voter get to the polling place? If driving, will there be accessible parking? Will the pathways to the entrance be accessible and clearly marked? How will the doors open?

- For first-time voters or if a polling place has changed, visiting the site together in advance can help to give the person a feel for the location and opportunity to identify any areas of concern.
- Any issues can be shared with the local county election office, which can be an ally in making sure accessibility requirements for polling places are met. Frame it as, "We want to help you make sure everyone can vote."
- Try reaching out to the local election office to receive a demonstration to give people with disabilities experience with the actual voting machine that will be used.

By better understanding the full range of possible disabilities and appropriate accommodations, nonprofit staff can help address some of the barriers to voter registration and education, while maintaining dignity and independence for people with disabilities.



## Additional resources

### General Resources:



[Nonprofit VOTE](#) – Get webinars, factsheets, and support for nonpartisan voter engagement.



[National Council of Nonprofits](#) – Learn more about nonpartisan ways nonprofits can and do promote voting and community engagement, how to take the 501(h) election, and the many benefits of doing so.



[Bolder Advocacy/Alliance for Justice](#) – Find answers to questions about nonpartisanship through their library of factsheets or by contacting their technical assistance team.



[National Conference of State Legislatures](#) – Learn even more about election issues, including 50-state surveys on state laws, legislation databases, podcasts, and webinars.



[Florida Nonprofit Alliance](#) – Learn more about the rules governing advocacy and lobbying for Florida's nonprofits.

### Nonpartisan Voter Information (National):



[Vote.gov](#): National governmental website for the most direct access to accurate voter registration and election information.



[Vote411](#): Provided by League of Women Voters, a decades old organization providing nonpartisan voter information.



[BallotReady](#): See what is on your ballot ahead of election time.

### National Civic Holidays:

[Civic Holidays](#)

[National Voter Registration Day](#)

[National Voter Education Week](#)

[Vote Early Day](#)

