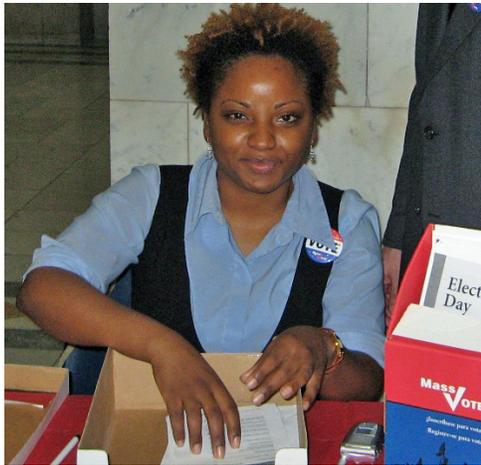


# Voter Engagement Toolkit for Private Foundations



- Strategies and Case Studies -  
APRIL 2018



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[Visit nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit](https://nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit) to download report or view related resources.

Prepared by George Pillsbury, Senior Consultant, Nonprofit VOTE.  
Design by Robert Calmer, Adgraphics911.com



## INTRODUCTION

**Active civic engagement, including voting, contributes to the health and economic vitality of local communities. Research shows that civic and voter participation comes with a host of benefits. People who vote are more likely to connect with neighbors, talk to elected officials, and engage civically in other ways. Communities that vote get more attention from candidates and greater clout before and after Election Day.**

Foundations and nonprofits are well positioned to increase voter and civic participation within the communities they serve. They're trusted messengers, deeply rooted in local communities, and invested for the long term. Increasing participation fits well into the social missions and goals of philanthropic organizations.

There is strong data backing up the effectiveness of nonprofits doing nonpartisan voter engagement with the communities they serve. Studies like Nonprofit VOTE's *Engaging New Voters*<sup>1</sup> report show that nonprofits reach populations most likely to be overlooked by partisan campaigns and have a markedly positive impact on voter turnout with those they engage. Further, because nonprofits and community foundations are part of the fabric of their communities, their impact builds over time.

### **GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES FOR VOTER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES**

This guide is a companion toolkit for community foundations. It lifts up concrete ideas and examples for how private foundations can encourage voter engagement among their grantees and networks. Private foundations, like public foundations, may support a range of voter engagement activities as long as it's on a nonpartisan basis. The two important differences are funding voter registration drives or ballot measures and are explained in the nonpartisan section.

The strategies highlighted in the toolkit's case studies and examples all take a broader approach to voter engagement. They range from communications initiatives, trainings, or incorporating voter engagement as part of the foundation's support for civic participation, advocacy, community engagement, and active citizenship. It's never only voter registration. Voter engagement is never a separate program but rather integrated into a broader set of strategies to build healthy communities, give voice across all neighborhoods, and increase the impact and effectiveness of grantees to achieve their goals.

Elections provide a unique educational and engagement opportunity. They're a chance to connect differently with the people you serve, focusing on their role as citizens and voters. An election season is a window of opportunity to talk about issues with candidates and future elected officials at a point when they're often more accessible and more apt to listen. For example:

1 Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout, Nonprofit VOTE, [nonprofitvote.org/engaging\\_new\\_voters](https://nonprofitvote.org/engaging_new_voters)





## INTRODUCTION

**“The heightened engagement and re-building efforts after Hurricane Harvey reinforced a commitment to deeper civic participation.”**

- The *Houston Endowment* adopted a new strategic framework, making civic engagement and participation a priority. It started pursuing peer learning at networks like the Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) and Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation and local Texas funders. Based on input from grantees it began developing a common agenda for civic engagement. This effort has led to the establishment of the Harris County Civic Engagement Initiative to address voter access, voting, and transforming civic engagement in greater Houston.
- In 2016, the *Graves Foundation* organized a communications and education campaign called “Animate the Race Initiative” to increase participation in a typically low turnout Minneapolis School Board election. In the middle of a presidential election it didn’t want parents, families and others with a stake in public education to miss the race for lack of knowledge of who was running and issues at stake. It used the audience and talents of community-based bloggers to engage voters and neighborhood activists to create visibility and start conversations. It promoted candidate and educational forums, and asked grantees to reach out to their audiences. It’s continuing the initiative in 2018.
- In 2017, *The Fund for New Jersey* took the opportunity of an open governor’s seat and legislative elections to share research and policy ideas with candidates and policymakers. The Fund worked with grantees and research partners to develop seven in-depth public policy reports on issues like criminal justice reform, education, and transportation. The reports were designed to inform candidate debate and the upcoming legislative session. With the assistance of a communications consultant, the Fund held press briefings; met with editorial boards of local newspapers; published op-eds; produced a short video; conducted a robust social media strategy; and more.

The philanthropic and voluntary sector has long been part of the bedrock of democratic participation and civic innovation. Our hope is that you will find something in the ideas and examples offered in this toolkit that will be appropriate for your foundation. Our goal is that it will contribute to a conversation among your board, donors, and grantees to promote active citizenship, strengthen communities, and help make democracy work.

.....

*This private foundation guide is a companion guide to the one for community foundations. We’d like to learn from you about what’s helpful and what’s missing for a new edition next year. Please send your feedback and examples to [foundationtoolkit@nonprofitvote.org](mailto:foundationtoolkit@nonprofitvote.org)*





## GUIDELINES FOR STAYING NONPARTISAN

Prepared by Greg Colvin and Eric Gorovitz, Adler & Colvin

*Greg Colvin is Senior Counsel and Eric Gorovitz is a Principal Attorney at Adler & Colvin, a group of seasoned attorneys in San Francisco deeply committed to serving the legal needs of the nonprofit sector nationwide.*

### Like community foundations, private foundations can use their resources to strengthen democracy and give voice to the communities they serve.

Private foundations can directly conduct, or support through grants to others, a wide range of nonpartisan election-related activities to educate voters and increase voter engagement and participation. Although federal tax law sets limits on certain election-related activities, private foundations can be active allies in efforts to affect policy through expanded voter understanding and involvement.

Private foundations can participate in elections in two basic ways:

- 1. Candidate Elections:** Private foundations can support or promote a wide range of nonpartisan voter engagement, voter education, and candidate engagement activities as long as they don't take sides (i.e., remain "nonpartisan") or, except in limited circumstances described briefly below, conduct voter registration drives.
- 2. Ballot Measure Elections:** Private foundations can conduct nonpartisan voter engagement and education on ballot measures, including initiatives, referenda, and bonds. However, unlike community foundations, private foundations *cannot deploy their resources, directly or through earmarked grants to others, to take sides on ballot measures.*

Although a detailed discussion of the rules is beyond the scope of this Toolkit, these guidelines briefly summarize these two key concepts. They are derived from Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (the "Code"), which sets the qualifications for tax exemption of charities, including private foundations and from Section 4945 of the Code, which sets additional limits on the activities of private foundations.

### CANDIDATE ELECTIONS

Section 501(c)(3) prohibits all charities, including private foundations, from engaging in activities that support or oppose any candidate, or group of candidates such as a political party, for election to public office. However, the Code places no limit on the amount of nonpartisan activities (except certain voter registration drives) a private foundation may conduct in pursuit of its charitable or educational purposes.





## GUIDELINES FOR STAYING NONPARTISAN

Being nonpartisan means a private foundation cannot endorse or contribute to any candidate campaign nor engage in any communication, conduct, or use of resources that favors or disfavors a candidate or party. This includes activities such as rating candidates or labeling them with partisan identifiers such as “pro-choice” or “anti-tax.” The safest strategy is to make no reference to any candidate or party except in the context of nonpartisan educational activities where multiple opposing candidates are presented, or in a context completely separate from any election, such as attempting to influence an incumbent’s administrative action as an executive officeholder.

If it avoids partisan content and acts independently from any candidate or political group, a private foundation can provide information on voting or encourage greater voter participation by any community or demographic of people chosen without regard to political affiliation or preference.

Further, private foundations can educate voters about the candidates by using or funding unbiased, even-handed methods such as nonpartisan debates, forums, questionnaires, voter guides, news reporting, social media, and web links – if they follow IRS guidance or advice from respected experts in the field like Nonprofit VOTE and Bolder Advocacy explaining how to do it safely.<sup>2</sup>

One thing private foundations cannot do easily, however, that community foundations can, is conduct or fund a voter registration drive targeted to a specific time or place. Private foundations can conduct or fund any registration-related activity that is not a voter registration “drive.” However, a private foundation that wants to conduct or fund a “drive” can do so only by making a grant to an organization recognized by the IRS as meeting very specific qualifications, set forth in Section 4945(f) of the Code.

### BALLOT MEASURE ELECTIONS

About half the states and many localities have ballot measures by which voters may enact new laws at public elections. Unlike community foundations, private foundations cannot directly support or oppose ballot measures, and cannot earmark grants to do so. For measures placed on the ballot by citizen petition, a special rule allows private foundations (and other charities) to discuss the subject of the measure, and even express a view about it, until signature petitions begin to circulate. Before that moment, a potential ballot measure is not considered “specific legislation” for federal tax purposes, and referring to it is not lobbying. Once petitions begin to circulate, however, the measure becomes “specific legislation”, and a communication that refers to and reflects a view on the measure thereafter will constitute lobbying unless the communication fits within the exception for “nonpartisan study, analysis, and research.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Guidance from the IRS on how to conduct these activities on a nonpartisan basis is in Revenue Rulings 2007-41, 80-282, 78-248, and 76-456.





## GUIDELINES FOR STAYING NONPARTISAN

### FUNDING BALLOT MEASURE ACTIVITY

A private foundation cannot “ earmark ” funds for lobbying, including lobbying on a ballot measure. However, the Code provides two safe harbors within which a private foundation can make a grant to a charity that lobbies (on a ballot measure or other legislation), without adverse tax consequences for the foundation. A grant properly made under either safe harbor *need not prohibit the use of grant funds for lobbying*.<sup>3</sup>

**General Support Grant:** A private foundation grant that provides “ general support ” for all of the grantee’s activities will not be considered “ earmarked ” for lobbying, even if the grantee spends grant funds to support or oppose a ballot measure.<sup>4</sup>

**Specific Project Grant:** A private foundation grant that supports a specific project that includes lobbying will not be considered “ earmarked ” for lobbying if the amount of the grant does not exceed the non-lobbying portion of the specific project budget. This is true regardless of whether other funders of the project may prohibit the use of their funds for lobbying.

This general discussion demonstrates that private foundations can actively and safely support or conduct efforts to engage and educate voters, if they understand the practices and principles of staying nonpartisan. A private foundation seeking to fund voter engagement activities should consult knowledgeable counsel and learn from the content of this toolkit and suggested resources in the Resources section before embarking on specific activities to determine how best to accomplish its goals safely.

<sup>3</sup> A private foundation considering reliance on either of the safe harbors should consult knowledgeable counsel before making any such grant.

<sup>4</sup> Whether the grant is for general support depends on the specific facts and circumstances of the grant.





## VOTER ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS

### STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

The following sections review options for private foundations to encourage nonpartisan voter participation and candidate engagement. Each of the five sections includes examples from the case studies that are part of this report. We invite you to send us your ideas and feedback to [foundationtoolkit@nonprofitvote.org](mailto:foundationtoolkit@nonprofitvote.org) to include in future editions.

#### Communications

Use regular communications channels with grantees, partners, and staff to encourage voting and share nonpartisan resources, such as posts on National Voter Registration Day.

#### Nonprofit Trainings and Funder Collaborations

Sponsor or promote nonprofit trainings on nonpartisan election activities. Convene with others to discuss civic engagement and democracy. Partner with philanthropy supporting organizations such as the national affinity groups and/or regional associations of grantmakers to create programming on these topics and learn from their best practices.

#### Language in Grant Agreements and RFPs

Use appropriate language that is not unnecessarily restrictive to distinguish between partisan and nonpartisan activities.

#### Voter Engagement Grantmaking

Make grants to do voter education and outreach as part of the foundation's broader commitment to active citizenship and healthy communities.

#### Policy and Research for Candidate Education

Support or conduct policy development and research to make available to candidates on a nonpartisan basis and newly elected lawmakers.





## PROGRAM AND DONOR COMMUNICATIONS

**A communication to your grantees, partners, or staff can provide helpful information and a reminder about voter participation.**

It sends a message about the importance of voting as part of healthy communities, active citizenship, and having a voice in the future. Election reminders are well-suited to fit into a communication schedule. They revolve around a series of dates – from a voter registration deadline to Election Day – so there is time to plan ahead.

### Options and Sample Content for Communications

#### 1. Send Communications Around Key Dates

*Use key dates to provide reminders and information about voting.*

- **Election Day or Dates for Early Voting:** .....  
Communications are most effective in the two weeks or few days before the election.
- **A Voter Registration Deadline:** .....  
With a link to register in your state.
- **National Voter Registration Day:** .....  
Occurs annually on the fourth Tuesday of September.

#### Resources

- [nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/](https://nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/)
- [nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/](https://nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/)
- [NationalVoterRegistrationDay.org](https://NationalVoterRegistrationDay.org)
- [#NationalVoterRegistrationDay](https://twitter.com/NationalVoterRegistrationDay)

#### 2. Promote Voter Education Events

*Highlight a candidate forum or forum on ballot measures.*

- **A Candidate Forum or Ballot Measure Forum:** .....  
Sponsored by a community partner.

- [nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/candidate-engagement-2/](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/candidate-engagement-2/)
- [nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/ballot-measures-2/](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/ballot-measures-2/)

#### 3. Advertise Nonpartisan Resources for Nonprofits

*Share links to resources and guidance for your grantees and partners.*

- **A Guide or Fact Sheet on Staying Nonpartisan:** .....  
Summarizing nonpartisan guidelines for 501(c)(3) organizations.
- **Voter Engagement Activities for Nonprofits:** .....  
Best practices and tips on doing voter registration, voter education, or candidate forums.

- [nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/staying-nonpartisan-2/](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/staying-nonpartisan-2/)

- [nonprofitvote.org/all-resources/](https://nonprofitvote.org/all-resources/)

#### 4. Send Communications to Your Staff

*Send election reminders or voting information to your staff.*

- **An Election Reminder from the CEO or Senior Staff:** .....  
Reminding staff of an upcoming election or policy in regards to time off to vote.

- [nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/07/sample-email-ceoexecutive-director.docx](https://nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/07/sample-email-ceoexecutive-director.docx)





## PROGRAM AND DONOR COMMUNICATIONS

### Communication Examples

#### GRAVES FOUNDATION (Minneapolis, MN)

##### *Communications and Education Campaign*

In 2016, the Graves Foundation organized a communications and education campaign called *“Animate the Race Initiative”* to increase participation in and awareness of typically low turnout Minneapolis School Board elections.

The foundation didn’t want parents, families and anyone with a stake in public education and foster care to miss or skip the race (featured on the same year as the 2016 presidential election) for lack of knowledge of who was running and what was at stake. Some key communication elements included: recruiting well-followed bloggers to engage voters and neighborhood activists who would start conversations with others, promoting candidate and educational forums, and asking several grantees to reach out to their audiences to engage with the campaign and candidate forums.





## NONPROFIT TRAININGS AND FUNDER COLLABORATIONS

### Nonprofit Trainings

Any public facing nonprofit can benefit from knowing the nonpartisan guidelines and best practices for doing voter engagement and the benefits of doing so. Here are two ways for your foundation to provide training opportunities related to electoral and voter participation.

#### 1. Alert Grantees About Nonprofit VOTE's Voter Engagement Webinar Series

Let grantees know about Nonprofit VOTE's voter engagement webinars for 501(c)(3) organizations. Nonprofit VOTE works with national experts to provide free one-hour monthly webinars for nonprofits on a range of subjects: How to Stay Nonpartisan; Doing Voter Registration; Hosting a Candidate Forum; Nonprofits and Ballot Measures, and more. Identify one or two webinars to promote in an election year.

View the list of training webinars at – [nonprofitvote.org/webinar-series](https://nonprofitvote.org/webinar-series)

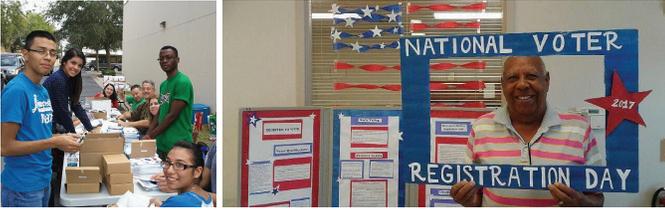
#### 2. Support or Sponsor at Voter Engagement Training by a Civic Partner

Regionally-based nonprofit networks can be a good source of trainings. Check with a nonprofit partner that offers advocacy related trainings. Here are examples:

##### *Nonprofit Trainings Supported by Grantmakers*

- **Greater Pittsburgh Nonprofit Partnership:** A program of The Forbes Funds conducts voter engagement trainings for area nonprofits.
- **Forefront:** Illinois' membership association for nonprofits, grantmakers, public agencies, advisors, and social impact sector allies. The state association of grantmakers and nonprofits announced a democracy initiative starting in 2018 to offer resources and trainings on the census outreach and democracy engagement.
- **Democracy North Carolina:** With the support of private and public foundations and donors, this statewide organization includes nonpartisan voter engagement trainings for community organizations among its civic engagement and democracy programming.





## NONPROFIT TRAININGS AND FUNDER COLLABORATIONS

### FUNDER COLLABORATIONS AND PEER EXCHANGES

Funder collaborations and peer exchanges offer foundation staff, board members, and donors an opportunity to explore civic engagement or advocacy and discuss democracy issues and initiatives. Along with the national networks listed as resources on page 21, here are examples of national and regional democracy convenings.

#### Houston Endowment

The *Houston Endowment* adopted a new strategic framework with civic engagement and participation as a priority. Its board recognized the challenge of making progress on issues if communities don't participate, vote, and act to become their own advocates. It has pursued peer exchanges and learning from other funders. The foundation has joined national affinity groups such as Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), Funders' Committee for Civic Participation, and the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Coalition, as well as consulting with local Houston foundations to increase the level of civic engagement among Houstonians.

Based on its learnings and input from grantees, it began developing a common agenda for civic engagement. The foundation contracted with a consulting firm to leverage their expertise in working with leaders and communities in search of large-scale, lasting social change. One result was the establishment of the Harris County Civic Engagement Initiative. After Hurricane Harvey left Houston devastated in August 2017, heightened civic engagement in the relief and re-building efforts has reinforced a commitment to deeper civic participation.

#### Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium

The *Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium (TEGAC)* was established in 2012 to address problems of systemic under-funding of public education. It trains and engages the trustees and staff of its 43-member foundations on what they can do to educate their state legislators and more effectively support public education policy and advocacy.





# NONPROFIT TRAININGS AND FUNDER COLLABORATIONS

## Democracy Northwest

Members of the regional grantmakers association *Philanthropy Northwest* started an affinity group called *Democracy Northwest*. The group’s members discuss their foundation’s potential to support policy advocacy and voter participation and the benefits and challenges of doing so. They’ve been exploring the role of foundations, donors and their grantees in the US Census count and public input into fair and transparent redistricting. The group is also considering opportunities for collaborative grant making.

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## PACE – Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

*PACE* is a membership network of foundations and funders that invest in civic engagement and democracy. Its mission is to inspire interest, understanding, and investment in civic engagement within philanthropy and to be a voice for philanthropy in larger conversations taking place in the fields of civic engagement, service, and democratic practice. *PACE* and its members collaborate to uncover the value of civic engagement and democratic practice and understand and showcase why it matters and is worthy of philanthropic investment.

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## Funders Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP)

*FCCP* is a Council on Foundations-recognized philanthropic affinity group with nearly 90 institutional members and additional philanthropic colleagues that participate in its programming. *FCCP* provides funders with a community in which to build connections, showcase innovations, and participate in strategic dialogue and collaboration. Its signature programs for grantmakers include an annual convening, monthly “First Monday” discussions, working groups that focus on range of key issue topics, and member-only meetings.

.....  
*Contact [trainings@nonprofitvote.org](mailto:trainings@nonprofitvote.org) to discuss a training opportunity designed for your foundation and nonprofit partners.*





## GRANT AGREEMENTS AND RFP LANGUAGE

### Review Your Grant Agreement

**A grant agreement can appear to bar all “political activities” if it does not include the term “partisan” in the definition. The IRS code only prohibits “partisan political activities” to support or oppose candidates. It does not prohibit election activities conducted on a nonpartisan basis.**

Not specifying “partisan” creates confusion among nonprofits on whether or not they can carry out even fully allowable nonpartisan voter activities such as voter education or candidate forums commonly undertaken as part of the sector’s longstanding commitment to active citizenship. Further, the IRS does not require either private or public foundations to include a statement related to partisan political activities. It’s sufficient to state funds should be used solely for charitable and educational purposes as outlined in the Internal Revenue Code.

#### 1. Grant Agreement Templates for Private Foundations

Two grant agreement templates were developed by the Council on Foundations and Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, a program of the National Council of Nonprofits, with the assistance of Marcus Owens, director of the IRS Exempt Organizations Division (1990 – 2000). The templates are linked below and on our website.

*Grant Template with language prohibiting partisan political activity available at [nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit](https://nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit)*

Key language in template: *“No funds may be used for partisan political activities, which are prohibited under Section 501(c)(3). However, the grantee may engage in any voter education and voter engagement activities conducted on a nonpartisan basis.”*

*Grant Template without a specific partisan political prohibition available at [nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit](https://nonprofitvote.org/foundationtoolkit)*

Key language in template: *“Grant funds will be used solely for charitable, religious, scientific or educational purposes as described in Section 1 70(c)(2)(B) of the Internal Revenue Code.”*

A grant agreement can inadvertently appear to bar all “political activities”... even fully allowable nonpartisan activities such as voter education or candidate forums.





## GRANT AGREEMENTS AND RFP LANGUAGE

### Add Language or a Question to an RFP

**A foundation can proactively include a question in its RFPs for grantees to better understand an applicant's civic and voter engagement activities; similar to questions that promote the values of the foundation such as community leadership development, sustainability, or outreach to diverse communities.**

Asking a question about civic engagement can be an expression of the foundation's mission and the value it places on civic engagement. Including such a question can also be a recognition that the ability of an organization to have an impact on the people it serves, or issues it addresses, depends on a healthy democracy, where civic participation is encouraged and democracy and citizenship skills are learned from an early age.

### Example

*An example of RFP questions suggested by the Foundation for Civic Leadership*

#### Encouraging Voting and Civic Learning at Colleges and Universities

A foundation that makes a grant to a higher education institution can ask a question in the RFP that colleges and universities are, in growing numbers, already asking themselves. To what extent are its students prepared to be active and informed participants in our democracy while at college and when they graduate? By asking a related question, the foundation can better understand and encourage the applicant's efforts to address voter and civic participation on their campus.

#### *Sample RFP questions for higher education grant applicants*

- **Q:** What does your institution do to promote voting and civic learning among students including voter registration and participation and other democratic engagement activities?
- **Q:** The Higher Education Act obligates colleges and universities to offer voter registration opportunities to students? What has your institution done to encourage voter registration and voter participation?
- **Q:** To comply with the Higher Education Act's requirements on student voter registration, a campus should have a voter engagement plan informed by an assessment of campus voter registration and voting rates. Has your institution developed and implemented such a plan?

Higher education institutions are increasingly taking action to address civic participation of their students. More than 1,000 colleges representing every state have signed up for a free report from the *National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)* at Tufts University on the voter registration and voting rates of their own students by age and other demographics. This data can be a great resource in assessing progress. Additional resources are described on the next page.





## GRANT AGREEMENTS AND RFP LANGUAGE

### Resources

#### *All IN Campus Democracy Challenge*

The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge is a national, nonpartisan initiative that supports and recognizes colleges and universities working to improve civic learning, political engagement, and student voter participation rates. The challenge encourages institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship, as well as institutionalize democratic engagement activities and programs. The challenge's website offers faculty, administrators and students an online [Resource Hub](#) which includes:

- ★ Action Plan Development guidelines
- ★ Sample Student Engagement Action Plans
- ★ Archive of webinars to help campuses increase democratic engagement and student participation
- ★ A list of participating campuses, including the campus' democratic engagement plan and NSLVE report
- ★ A list of campuses that have been awarded recognition seals and/or awards

Contact: Zaneeta Daver, Director, [zaneeta@civcnation.org](mailto:zaneeta@civcnation.org) | 202.930.5502

#### *National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)*

NSLVE is a program of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. It offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates. Participation is free, easy, and protective of student privacy.

Contact: [idhe@tufts.edu](mailto:idhe@tufts.edu) | 617.627.3453





## VOTER ENGAGEMENT GRANTMAKING

### Private foundations of all sizes, missions, and regions support voter education and engagement activities in their grantmaking.

The grants are part of a broader focus on capacity building, advocacy, leadership development, or doing more to ensure the voices of all communities are heard in the political process and they gain the benefit of voting or other civic participation.

### Common Features of Voter Engagement Grant Programs

- 1. Part of Broader Community Engagement:** Foundations like the ones profiled here most often support voter engagement as part of a grant that also supports the nonprofit's advocacy and policy work and other program activities.
- 2. Mentioned in Grant Guidelines, RFP, or Measurement of Success:** Foundations who wish to encourage voter participation as part of a nonprofit's civic engagement or advocacy work will highlight increasing voting in their guidelines or RFP or as a desired outcome. Prospective grantees benefit from knowing the nonpartisan voter outreach or candidate forum is valued by the funder.
- 3. Collaboration with other Foundations:** Because voter participation is not a primary area for most foundations, they draw on the expertise of other funders at an affinity group like those featured in the case studies or resource section of the toolkit. For example, the Houston Endowment reached out to PACE and the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation. Two private foundations, the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City and the REACH Healthcare Foundation, partnered with a public foundation on the Kansas Integrated Voter Engagement: Health Depends on a Vibrant Democracy.
- 4. Informed and Supported by Civic Partners and their Grantees:** Foundations support regional or statewide civic partners to train and support local nonprofits to conduct nonpartisan election activities and gain access to voter outreach best practices and tools. For example, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation supports Democracy North Carolina. Boston's Hyams Foundation and Access Strategies Fund support Mass VOTE. Foundations respond to grantees that feature voter outreach among the advocacy empowerment work.

### INVESTING IN MORE THAN ONE CYCLE

Civic organizations and many grantmakers have come to view a healthy democracy and active civic participation as vital to their missions. Each has to decide how encouraging civic and voter engagement may be reflected in their grantmaking. Ideally, efforts are sustained in in some way. Research shows voting and other civic involvement is habit-forming.





## VOTER ENGAGEMENT GRANTMAKING

### Examples of Voter Engagement and Education Grants

In 2016, Michigan's *Ruth Mott Foundation's* board moved the focus of its grantmaking to a place-based funding approach in under-resourced North Flint. Out of a series of community meetings the foundation defined its priority areas as youth, public safety, economic opportunity and neighborhood with community and resident engagement as a core principle. The foundation's strategy in North Flint is to support community voiced and driven priorities and plans, which includes community and voter engagement as a way to shape solutions intended to strengthen neighborhoods and help create and sustain opportunities to contribute and thrive. Working with grantees that have a history of work in Flint and recognized expertise, the foundation started with capacity building grants to nonprofits tasked with scaling up training, public education, and engagement to grow the advocacy and organizing potential of North Flint groups and leaders.

The *Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's* mission is to help people and places move out of poverty and achieve greater social and economic justice. Based in North Carolina, MRBF works in 11 Southern states, supporting collaborative, multi-strategy, place-based work focused on three mutually reinforcing pathways of change: democracy and civic engagement, economic opportunity, and supportive policies and institutions. The foundation makes sustained, general-support grants to help organizations remain nimble and pursue multiple strategies. MRBF and its partners view civic engagement as a broad range of year-round activities, including leadership development, community organizing and coalition building. Recognizing that a fully participatory democracy is necessary to achieve positive transformation, the foundation also supports work to increase voter participation, including voter registration, education, engagement and protection.

The Texas-based *Simmons Foundation's* mission is to partner with organizations that strengthen women, youth and families while building an educated, tolerant and resilient community. The foundation envisions a harmonious, dynamic and informed community, where all people can improve their lives in the greater Houston area. The foundation's funding has a strong focus on capacity building and advocacy. Policy change, voter and civic engagement, and leadership development are all part of their grantmaking strategy. For the foundation, Hurricane Harvey underscored the need for their work to address policy issues and the value of government and civic participation. Among its continued commitment to support for advocacy and policy change are efforts focused on nonpartisan voter education and building a pipeline for political leadership in marginalized communities. For example, one of their grantees is the Texas Freedom Network's Texas Rising. The program is a movement of young, diverse, politically-engaged Texans working to leverage their power through community organizing, electoral politics, and public policy advocacy. These youth and millennials are organizing to have public officials accountable listen to all Texans who care about policies that address reproductive rights, LGBTQ equality and fair access to the ballot.





## POLICY AND RESEARCH

**Private foundations can be source of support for research and policy development. Candidates and campaigns, especially at the local and state level, can benefit from data-driven and evidence-based research and policy ideas that focus on issues sure to be debated on the campaign trail and, if elected, may define the next legislative session.**

When a private foundation, like all 501(c)(3) organizations, shares research or policy ideas with candidates running for elective office it must make it available to all the candidates running in that race. Below is one example:

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In 2017, *The Fund for New Jersey* saw an opportunity with an open governor's seat on the horizon and the state legislature up for election, to educate and inform policymakers about the urgency of the issues and the need to act to secure a better future for New Jersey residents. The fund worked with grantees and research partners to develop and circulate "*Crossroads NJ*": a series of seven in-depth public policy reports on key issues such as criminal justice reform, education, and transportation. The reports were designed to inform debate both among candidates in the election and the upcoming legislative session. With the assistance of a communications consultant, the fund held press briefings; met with editorial boards of local newspapers; published op-eds; produced a short video; conducted a robust social media strategy; and more. The Fund for New Jersey conducted an assessment of the effort, finding wide satisfaction among respondents about the quality of the series and its influence on key New Jersey policymakers.





## GETTING STARTED

### *Steps Towards Supporting Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Activities*

#### 1. Connecting to Mission and Goals

Voter engagement and democracy activities can result from a board discussion, staff initiative, or one of your grantees. It might include a discussion on how the activities align to your strategic direction or advance program goals by strengthening the impact of grantees and the communities they serve. Support by the CEO is essential to enabling voter engagement to be one of the foundation's priorities. The board should understand the opportunity for a private foundation to support nonpartisan activities and what the guidelines are, especially when grantmaking is involved.

#### 2. Choosing an Approach

This toolkit provides a range of options. The choice depends on the foundation's program interests and stakeholders. It also depends on how the activities fit into current programming with appropriate staffing and partners. As the elections are ongoing, after a pilot project it's good to consider options that can be modified or continued for at least two cycles – and potentially longer term. For the timing of a grant or RFP process, take into account that most activities are carried out from July through Election Day for general elections.

#### 3. Peer Learning / Civic Learning

Building on a board discussion, a good place to start is talking to other grantmakers at a regional grantmaking association, democracy or civic engagement affinity group mentioned in the toolkit. Many areas have a local civic community partner experienced in nonpartisan voter engagement and state election procedures that can assist with training or assistance to the foundation and grant recipients. Any one of the national networks listed in the resource section can answer questions.

#### 4. Defining Goals

*Sample goals could include:*

- Promoting voting as part of the foundation's role as a civic leader.
- Encouraging active citizenship. Seeing voting as a gateway to broader civic engagement.
- Empowering communities to exercise their political voice and be heard on policy and public affairs.
- Narrowing voter participation gaps and increasing registration and turnout among communities with a history of low participation.
- Providing election guidance and training as part of building capacity for grantees to achieve program and advocacy goals.
- Encouraging a new generation of voters and leaders in politics and government.
- Responding to board and community interest for a local ballot measure in a partnership with grantees.
- Creating stronger neighborhoods and more effective nonprofits.





## VOTER ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

### For Foundations and Nonprofits

#### For Foundations and Nonprofits

#### GENERAL RESOURCES AND GUIDANCE

- **Nonprofit VOTE's Voter Engagement Online Resource Library:** [nonprofitvote.org/all-resources](https://nonprofitvote.org/all-resources)  
Factsheets, checklists, and guides by topic on conducting nonpartisan voter and candidate engagement.
- **Foundations Support for Election-Related Activities:** [nonprofitvote.org/documents/2018/03/foundation-support-election-related-activities.pdf/](https://nonprofitvote.org/documents/2018/03/foundation-support-election-related-activities.pdf/)  
A factsheet from Bolder Advocacy on how and why foundations can support election activities.

#### BENEFITS OF VOTING

- **Benefits of Voting Fact Sheets:** [nonprofitvote.org/benefits-voting](https://nonprofitvote.org/benefits-voting)  
Read what research says about the benefits of voting for the individuals, communities and nonprofits.
- **Engaging New Voters: The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach:** [nonprofitvote.org/engaging\\_new\\_voters](https://nonprofitvote.org/engaging_new_voters)  
This important research highlights how nonprofits not only reach their target clients but also activate them at the polls.

#### GUIDE TO VOTING PROCEDURES IN YOUR STATE

- **A 50-state guide by Nonprofit VOTE with the National Association of Secretaries of State:** [nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state](https://nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state)  
Link to official information from your state's election website on voting procedures: Election dates and deadlines, register to vote, voting early or by mail, finding polling locations, contact information for all local or state election offices.

#### FOUNDATIONS AND BALLOT MEASURES

- **Ballot Measure Resources from Nonprofit VOTE:** [nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/ballot-measures-2/](https://nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/ballot-measures-2/)  
Factsheets, guides, presentations on how nonprofits and foundations can support ballot measures.
- **Foundations and Ballot Measures from Bolder Advocacy:** [bolderadvocacy.org/tools-for-effective-advocacy/toolkits/ballot-measures/foundations-and-ballot-measures](https://bolderadvocacy.org/tools-for-effective-advocacy/toolkits/ballot-measures/foundations-and-ballot-measures)  
Practical and legal guidance for private and public foundations on supporting ballot measures.

#### NATIONAL GRANTMAKER NETWORKS

Council on Foundations	<a href="https://cof.org/public-policy/nonprofit-political-activity">cof.org/public-policy/nonprofit-political-activity</a>
Independent Sector	<a href="https://independentsector.org/policy/policy-issues">independentsector.org/policy/policy-issues</a>
Exponent Philanthropy	<a href="https://exponentphilanthropy.org">exponentphilanthropy.org</a>
Funder's Committee for Civic Participation	<a href="https://funderscommittee.org">funderscommittee.org</a>
PACE: Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement	<a href="https://pacefunders.org">pacefunders.org</a>
Philanthropy Roundtable	<a href="https://philanthropyroundtable.org">philanthropyroundtable.org</a>
United Philanthropy Forum	<a href="https://unitedphilforum.org">unitedphilforum.org</a>





## APPENDIX A

### Common Nonpartisan Voter Engagement Activities

*For 501(c)(3) Nonprofits and Other Nonpartisan Initiatives*

#### 1. Voter Outreach and Education

##### *Conduct or Promote Voter Registration*

- ★ Conduct a voter registration drive at your nonprofit or in your community.
- ★ Encourage people to register to vote in your communications, on your website or at events.
- ★ Participate in National Voter Registration Day.

##### *Educate Voters on the Voting Process*

- ★ Provide information on when and where to vote - links to poll finders, an election website.
- ★ Remind people of registration or election deadlines and dates.

##### *Share a Nonpartisan Voter Guide*

- ★ Provide nonpartisan information about what's on the ballot.
- ★ Share a nonpartisan voter guide or official sample ballot from your locality or state.

##### *Encourage People to Participate and Vote*

- ★ Send reminders to your staff, clients and constituents about voting in the next election.
- ★ Conduct a get-out-the-vote activity.

##### *Provide Election Assistance*

- ★ Assist voters with disabilities, language barriers, or in need of special assistance to participate.
- ★ Publicize a voter information line or website to help answer questions about early voting or polling locations.

#### 2. Candidate Engagement

##### *Host a Candidate Forum*

- ★ Sponsor a candidate forum with other community partners for all the candidates.
- ★ Promote a candidate forum sponsored by a trusted partner.

##### *Create a Candidate Questionnaire*

- ★ Submit questions to the candidates in a race of interest to your nonprofits.
- ★ Use Nonprofit VOTE's fact sheet or Bolder Advocacy's fact sheet on creating a candidate questionnaire for specific guidelines to follow to remain nonpartisan.

#### 3. Ballot Measures and Issue Advocacy

##### *Continue Issue Advocacy During an Election*

- ★ Continue your regular advocacy or lobbying activities during the election period, as long it is related to pending legislation on issues you have a history of working on and not timed or otherwise structured to influence how people vote.

##### *Support or Oppose a Ballot Measure (or provide neutral voter education on the issue)*

- ★ Have your board take a position for or against a question on the ballot.
- ★ Educate the public on your position within your normal lobbying limits.





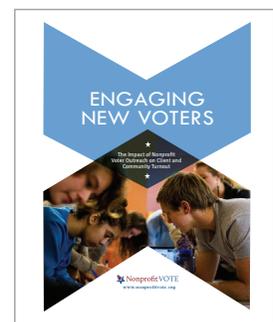
## APPENDIX B

### Sample Evaluation Components for Voter Engagement Grantmaking

*A post-election assessment of the impact of voter engagement activities can include evidence of:*

- ★ How the voter engagement contributed to other kinds of community engagement and leadership development across populations served. Did it create new partners?
- ★ Numbers of people engaged relative to initial goals. Who was registered, signed a pledge to vote, or engaged in get-out-the-vote or other activities?
- ★ Change in voter turnout in precincts where the nonprofit targeted most of their outreach compared to the last similar election (two or four years earlier).
- ★ Comparing the demographics and voter turnout of the people your organization contacted to register or vote compared to all voters in the same jurisdiction of similar demographics. This requires access to the state voter file after it's been updated post-election. To do this kind of analysis you need:
  - Grantees to accurately track contact information of voters that register, fill out a pledge to vote or other card, or were personally contacted about voting.
  - A partner with access to the state or county voter file and the ability to provide relevant data on who voted, past voting history, demographics, and other kinds of election data.
- ★ Its impact on the nonprofit's issue advocacy. For example, are candidates more responsive to a nonprofit during the election, or once elected? Does it lead to more access to policy makers, elected officials, or other community leaders?
- ★ The specific success or challenges of activities funded, including the organization's capacity to carry out its planned activities.
- ★ Its sustainability and likelihood to continue in future state or local elections.

Nonprofit VOTE and its research partner, Grassroots Solutions, analyze the impact of 122 nonprofits across nine states in the 2016 election cycle. The analysis shows that hard-to-reach young voters who were engaged by nonprofits turnout out at a rate 5.7 points higher than their counterparts. Young women showed the biggest gain with a 6.5 point advantage. The report also documents the demographics reached and best practices for doing so. The report is online at [nonprofitvote.org/engaging\\_new\\_voters](http://nonprofitvote.org/engaging_new_voters)





## APPENDIX C

### Voter Engagement Terms

**Voter Registration:** Voter registration is helping people register to vote or update their voter registration. Voters may register by mail, in-person, or online. Many states also allow voters to register on Election Day and during early voting. Others require registration up to 30 days in advance of the election.

**Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV):** Get-out-the-vote activities before the election come in many forms. The more personal, the more effective they are. They can involve:

- ★ Contacting voters about the election through social media, texts, at public events, or any nonprofit service or activity.
- ★ Campaign-style GOTV using voter lists to canvass, mail, or make calls in the final weeks of election.
- ★ Voter assistance that answers questions can also increase citizens' likelihood to vote.

**Voter Education:** Voter education has two categories. One is learning about the process of voting. The other is what's on the ballot. Process information includes where, when, and how to vote or to register or update your registration. For example, when's early voting or what do voters need to be able to vote? What's on the ballot is learning about the candidates, ballot measures, and issues at stake.

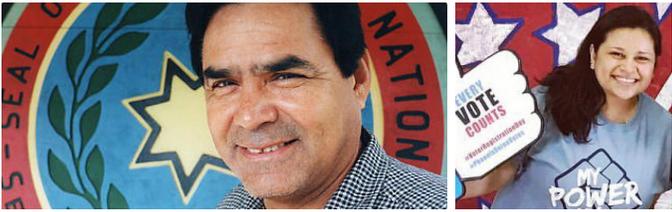
**Candidate Engagement:** Common activities are candidate forums, candidate questionnaires, inviting candidates to events, sharing policy research, or asking questions at their events. It's about raising the profile of your organization, developing relationships with future office holders, and educating candidates about issues important to your community.

**Issue Advocacy:** Speaking out in support or opposition to policies is issue advocacy. For the purposes of this election-related toolkit, it includes taking a position for or against ballot measures (considered a lobbying activity) and continuing issue advocacy during an election cycle.

**Voter Engagement:** The broad term that's used to include any type of election activity, from voter registration and voter education to getting-out-the-vote and offering voter assistance.

**Civic Engagement:** Any type of civic action or engagement from voting, advocacy, and community organizing to volunteering or civic education, or any way of being active participants in building and strengthening their communities.





## APPENDIX D

### Philanthropy and the 2020 Census

A number of foundations and networks mentioned here and around the country are also planning for the 2020 Census. The census count influences the allocation of federal resources, decisions of business, schools, and localities, and the apportionment and make up of election districts for ten years. More than \$600 billion annually in federal assistance to states, localities, and families is distributed based on census data.

Foundations are developing strategies and resources to promote a complete and accurate count of their communities. Find resources:

- ★ *The Funders Census Initiative 2020* Fact Sheet, Funder's Committee for Civic Participation  
[funderscommittee.org/resource/funders-census-initiative-2020-fact-sheet](https://funderscommittee.org/resource/funders-census-initiative-2020-fact-sheet)
- ★ *Census 2020: Why an Accurate Count Matters to Philanthropy*, United Philanthropy Forum-Census 2020  
[unitedphilforum.org/census2020](https://unitedphilforum.org/census2020)
- ★ *Everyone Counts: How 2020 Census Data Matter to Your Bottom Line*, National Association of Counties  
[naco.org/resources/everyone-counts-how-2020-census-data-matter-your-bottom-line](https://naco.org/resources/everyone-counts-how-2020-census-data-matter-your-bottom-line)
- ★ *Because It Counts: Tools for Ensuring an Accurate 2020 Census*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation  
[aecf.org/blog/because-it-counts-tools-for-ensuring-an-accurate-2020-census](https://aecf.org/blog/because-it-counts-tools-for-ensuring-an-accurate-2020-census)





## CASE STUDIES

### FOUNDATION

### TYPE OF ACTIVITY

**Graves Foundation**

*Communications, Voter Education, Candidate Forums*

**Houston Endowment**

*Nonprofit Convening and Training, Peer Learning at Foundation Convenings*

**Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation**

*Advocacy and Voter Engagement Grantmaking*

**Ruth Mott Foundation**

*Voter Participation as part of Place-based Community Engagement Grantmaking*

**Simmons Foundation**

*Advocacy and Voter Engagement Grantmaking, Political Leadership Training*

**The Fund For New Jersey**

*Policy and Research for Candidate Education*

Additional examples of voter and civic engagement grantmaking can be found among the members of the Funder's Committee for Civic Participation and PACE – Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, or your regional grantmaking association.





## GRAVES FOUNDATION – MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

### Communications, Voter Education, Candidate Forums

*Contact: Bill Graves, President*

The *Graves Foundation* partners with emerging leaders in education and foster care to transform the lives of children in Hennepin County, including Minneapolis and many of its suburbs. In 2016, it ran an initiative to increase participation and awareness of the Minneapolis School Board election, typically a lower turnout type of election.

#### FIT WITH MISSION

The foundation approaches its work on youth and education through an equity lens, putting resources into communities that have been historically under-invested. Its funding revolves around four priorities:

- Support the vision of proven school leaders to achieve real impact within the communities.
- Advance system-wide policy change needed to create great schools.
- Promote involvement in schools by organizations that support the voices, advocacy and engagement of parents and students within education.
- Address the gap in supports for youth transitioning out of traditional foster care.

The School Board election gears their orientation towards community engagement, issue advocacy, and leadership development for all local residents to have a seat at the table.

#### VOTER ENGAGEMENT IN A SCHOOL BOARD ELECTION

In 2016, The Graves Foundation organized the “Animate the Race Initiative” to increase participation in and awareness of typically low turnout Minneapolis School Board elections. Unlike during the city council or mayoral election held the previous year, in the 2016 school board, there was less involvement from other civic groups. The foundation played a leading role in doing candidate forums or voter education for parents and local communities. As much as possible, the Graves Foundation didn’t want people – parents, families and anyone with a stake in public education and foster care – to miss or skip the race on their 2016 ballot at the same time as the presidential election for lack of knowledge of who was running and what was at stake. In their view, someone who voted was more likely to get involved with their school or foster care organizations.





## GRAVES FOUNDATION – MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

### Communications, Voter Education, Candidate Forums

#### STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED

Its “Animate the Race” initiative involved a mix of collaboration, communication, and education within the lower turnout communities. Some key elements included:

- 1. Neighborhood based social media:** The foundation recruited “Animate the Race fellows” – well-followed bloggers from diverse backgrounds and vocations to cover the race. The communications sought to engage voters and neighborhood activists who would start conversation with others, multiplying the impact of their more than 1,000 users.
- 2. Candidate and educational forums:** The foundation organized and promoted three forums. The largest was a candidate forum the week before the election, attended by 150 people. It partnered with community organizations on each one. In 2017 as well, the foundation co-sponsored a City Council forum with 300 people which had candidates answering questions on school issues. (The mayor and city council are elected in odd years.)
- 3. Engaging their grantees:** The foundation made several asks of grantees to reach out to their audiences with reminders about the School Board election and to provide residents with nonpartisan information about the issues and the candidates.

#### PLANNING AHEAD: IDENTIFYING A VOTER EDUCATION PARTNER

The family foundation is a collaborator and convener, and not a replacement for community-based voter education efforts. Moving forward it has sought to identify a nonprofit partner that can assume more leadership on voter education. For 2018 it has selected a nonprofit partner to administer animate the race for 2018: Pollen Midwest. The firm invests in human connections and networking to fuel momentum for social change. The foundation will remain an active partner in the effort.



### Nonprofit Convening and Training, Peer Learning at Foundation Convenings

*Contacts: Elizabeth Love, Senior Program Officer; Meghna Goswami, Senior Program Officer; and Patrick Moreno-Covington, Program Associate*

Established in 1937, the *Houston Endowment* is a private foundation serving greater Houston. As part of its most recent strategic planning effort, the Houston Endowment’s staff and board had a number of discussions about the influence that local, state and federal laws and regulations have on just about every issue the foundation works on. The foundation had long invested in issue-based advocacy, but the staff and board recognized that issue-based advocacy was just part of the equation in ensuring sound policy – that it really matters who’s making these local, state and federal laws and regulations, and whether and to what extent residents are involved. It’s a challenge to make progress on any issue if communities don’t vote and don’t act to become their own advocates. As a result, the new strategic framework identified civic engagement and participation as a priority.

#### FIT WITH MISSION AND GOALS

Houston Endowment advances equity of opportunity for the people of greater Houston and enhances the vibrancy of its region. Among its top priority areas are “Thriving Residents” and a “Stronger Region.” One of its strategies for cultivating conditions in which residents can thrive is fostering resilient communities, which includes opportunities for civic engagement. Similarly, its strategies for strengthening the capacity and resiliency of greater Houston include preparing for the future, which involves increasing informed civic engagement and empowering residents to be effective advocates regarding key community issues, and a healthy environment, which involves encouraging stakeholders to advance policy and practice change.

#### INCREASING CIVIC PARTICIPATION, INCLUDING VOTING

Out of the strategic planning process emerged a greater focus on civic participation. The foundation has already started moving forward in several areas:

#### DATA COLLECTION ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION

The foundation has sought more data on civic and voter participation gaps and challenges. It has partnered with the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Houston’s Rice University and the National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC) to learn more about civic participation in Houston. NCOC is well known for its civic participation index reports created with local research partners. A few statistics stood out: among major metro areas across the U.S., only Dallas has lower voter participation, Houston also suffers from “under-voting,” meaning that even when Houstonians show up to the polls to vote for a high-profile race like president or governor, they aren’t marking their ballot for local offices like City Council and County Commissioner – positions that are just as influential to the daily lives of residents. And although Houston is one of the nation’s most diverse cities, candidates for local office don’t reflect this diversity.



**Nonprofit Convening and Training, Peer Learning at Foundation Convenings**

**FUNDER COLLABORATION AND PEER LEARNING**

The foundation has become a member of national funder affinity groups such as Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement and the Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation to network and learn from other foundations working in this space. In addition, the Houston Endowment has partnered with other local foundations to work on increasing the level of civic engagement among Houstonians. The foundation has also partnered with the Alliance for Justice to train staff members on advocacy.

**COMMUNITY COLLABORATION – A COMMON AGENDA FOR CIVIC ACTION**

The foundation met with 30 community-based organizations – many existing grantees – in April 2017. Out of the discussions came the idea of developing a common agenda for civic engagement, one that would engage and encourage collaboration among prominent community organizations. To support and advance the process, the foundation contracted with the consulting firm FSG to leverage their expertise in working with leaders and communities in search of large-scale, lasting social change. This effort has led to the establishment of the Harris County Civic Engagement Initiative. After Hurricane Harvey left Houston devastated in August 2017, heightened civic engagement in the relief and re-building efforts has reinforced a commitment to deeper civic participation.

**ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO VOTING**

The foundation is aware that, in Texas, robust voter engagement cannot be achieved without addressing barriers to voting. The state has comparatively strict voter registration laws and voter ID requirements. Its partisan redistricting has landed the state in federal court more than once. All this creates problems for voters and for community organizations trying to help residents register and vote. Election policies inevitably have to be part of the discussion.

The Harris County Civic Engagement Initiative began its work by prioritizing the political and non-political civic barriers it hopes to address, such as policies that limit access to political participation and an un-inspiring narrative around civic engagement. Utilizing this prioritization of challenges, the Initiative has developed a mission statement, shared strategies, and an organizational structure for the work.

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*With a newly-expanded commitment to increasing civic action, the foundation is using research, community collaborations, and peer exchanges to find the right fit for the Houston Endowment to incorporate voter engagement and civic participation within its programs and grantmaking.*

## Advocacy and Voter Engagement Grantmaking

*Contact: Gladys Washington, Deputy Director*

The *Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation* supports collaborative, place-based work focused on three mutually reinforcing pathways of change: democracy, economic opportunity, and supportive policies and institutions. The foundation makes sustained, general-support grants to ensure organizations remain nimble and able to employ multiple strategies.

### FIT WITH MISSION AND GOALS

The Babcock Foundation partners with organizations and networks working to alleviate poverty and increase social and economic justice in 11 southern states. It follows the lead of local leaders who know what their communities need to thrive. The foundation and its partners view civic engagement as a broad range of year-round activities, including leadership development, community organizing and coalition building. Recognizing that a fully participatory democracy is necessary to achieve positive transformation, MRBF also supports work to increase voter participation, including voter registration, education, engagement and protection.

### MAKING DEMOCRACY AND VOTING A PRIORITY

The foundation believes solutions cannot be effective or sustainable without the participation of those directly affected; therefore, a broad range of people must develop the knowledge, skills, networks and resources to build democratic systems and challenge entrenched structures. To influence the policies and decisions affecting their lives, community members must have unimpeded access to the ballot.

The foundation seeks to partner with organizations and networks that:

- Have clear, promising strategies for moving people and places out of poverty.
- Have meaningful connections with low-wealth people and communities.
- Have relationships with others in the nonprofit, public and private sectors to leverage resources and achieve impact.
- Have access to training and resources on what nonprofits can do related to issue advocacy and nonpartisan election activities.
- Take a long-term view of what is required to change systems and policies, open doors to democratic participation and economic opportunities, and move people and places out of poverty.

The Babcock Foundation recognizes that our democracy is broken and that our country remains divided along lines of race, class and political ideology. The foundation sees the need to lean into the challenge and complexity of this reality and help organizations build capacity for democracy engagement and reform.





## RUTH MOTT FOUNDATION – FLINT, MI

### Voter Participation as Part of Place-based Community Engagement Grantmaking

*Contact: Raquel Thueme, Vice President of Programs*

The *Ruth Mott Foundation* started in Flint to support arts and culture, beautification, and health promotion. The board began a new focus in its 2016 – 2020 strategic plan. It decided on a more targeted, place-based approach in the most under-resourced part of the city, North Flint. Out of a series of community meetings in North Flint, the foundation defined its priority areas as youth, public safety, economic opportunity, and neighborhoods, with community and resident engagement as a core principle.

#### FIT WITH MISSION AND GOALS

The foundation's goals for North Flint are to shape solutions intended to strengthen their neighborhoods and help create and sustain opportunities to contribute and thrive. Its strategy is to support community voiced and driven priorities and plans. Community and voter engagement is one way for residents to be part of their own destiny and active in the civic process and social and economic change.

#### COMMUNITY AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT IN NORTH FLINT

The foundation set up its first ever satellite office in North Flint, with a newly hired community engagement officer based there. Her task, as she expressed it in a recent post, is to work "to make sure residents are at the table and their voices are heard so that we know we're addressing needs and exploring what we can do differently."

It started with capacity building grants to three nonprofits tasked with scaling up trainings, public education, and engagement to grow the advocacy and organizing potential of North Flint groups and leaders. All three have had a history of work in Flint and recognized expertise. Each grantee committed to evaluation metrics based on indicators developed by RMF's grantmaking team in consultation with grantees and community organizations.

*Michigan United* is statewide organization of community members and institutions deeply committed to a participatory democracy at every level. It's conducting six advocacy and organizing trainings and will offer ongoing assistance for leadership development and resident engagement. Its metrics to evaluate its work include a goal of increasing voter turnout in North Flint wards, a major change in public policy, and evidence of effective connections between local groups working together.





*Ruth Mott Foundation*

## RUTH MOTT FOUNDATION – FLINT, MI

### Voter Participation as Part of Place-based Community Engagement Grantmaking

*CPSA Courier – The Flint Courier News* was founded in 1976 by local pastors to connect and inform Flint residents. It is the community's most relied on source of information on local government, politics, and elections. Grant funds enable the Courier to hire a journalist full time and play a larger role as a community connector. It informs and creates conversation about local issues and voting. It plans to add election coverage and do more to encourage voting. Increasing voter participation is also cited by the Courier as top metric.

The *Michigan League for Public Policy* advances economic security, racial equity, health and well-being for people in every part of Michigan through policy change. In North Flint, it is working with block clubs and community groups to empower residents as advocates and together explore what's needed to create systemic policy reform. The League can also bring its history of sponsoring candidate forums and working on the census as tools for residents to speak out and be counted.

The foundation does board education on advocacy, and nonpartisan election engagement is part of the orientation of new board members.





## THE SIMMONS FOUNDATION – HOUSTON, TX

### Advocacy and Voter Engagement Grantmaking, Political Leadership Training

*Contact: Christina Canales Gorczynski, Program Officer*

*The Simmons Foundation* started in 1993, and their funding is primarily focused on the greater Houston area, including Harris, Montgomery, Fort Bend and Galveston Counties. The Simmons Foundation's mission is to create a harmonious, dynamic and informed community, where all people can improve their lives. The foundation's funding has a strong focus on capacity building and advocacy. Policy change, voter and civic engagement, and leadership development are all part of their grantmaking strategy.

#### FIT WITH MISSION AND GOALS

The foundation is dedicated to increasing equity regardless of race and ethnicity; socioeconomic status; sexual orientation, gender identity or gender nonconformity; immigration status; or disability. The foundation invests in organizations and neighborhoods, so they become equitable, robust and sustainable. The foundation helps marginalized and vulnerable populations obtain resources and tools needed for effective civic engagement, such as leadership development, advocacy training, and community organizing capacity building. The goal is to support advocacy from the ground up to lift up community leaders and organizations with lived experience, so that they may become effective advocates for policy change on the issues impacting their community. The foundation focuses on organizations and proposals that show creative collaboration and mutually beneficial partnerships.

#### VOTER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

For the foundation, Hurricane Harvey underscored the need for their work to address policy issues and the value of government and civic participation. Among its continued commitment to support for advocacy and policy change are efforts focused on nonpartisan voter education and building a pipeline for political leadership in marginalized communities.

#### VOTER PARTICIPATION

Simmons funding for advocacy and policy change can include support for voter engagement. These grantees are examples:

- *Houston's Chinese Community Center* is the largest Asian-led social service agency in Texas. Its programs support a multi-ethnic and diverse population with an array of programs to help new immigrants settle into their new communities and acculturate, gain personal independence and economic self-sufficiency, and become active participants in their community. This includes citizenship and voting.
- *Texas Freedom Network's Texas Rising* program is a movement of young, diverse, politically engaged Texans working to leverage their power through community organizing, electoral politics, and public policy advocacy. As 25% of the electorate, these millennials are organizing to hold public officials accountable to all Texans, not special interests and the voices of intolerance and division. Texas Rising is advocating for sound public policies that address reproductive rights, voter suppression, and LGBTQ equality.





## THE SIMMONS FOUNDATION – HOUSTON, TX

### Advocacy and Voter Engagement Grantmaking, Political Leadership Training

#### EMERGING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP FOR UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITIES

The foundation has recently supported nonpartisan initiatives to train new leaders in politics, campaigns, community life, and government. These grantees are examples:

- Victory Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan organization that works to increase the number of LGBTQ people in public office and to provide programming, service and other support to help ensure their success. They are the only national organization dedicated to elevating openly LGBTQ leaders who can further equality at all levels of government. Through their training and professional development programs, each year Victory Institute assists hundreds of individuals who go on to influential careers in politics, government, business, and advocacy. Many of their trainees join the more than 1,000 openly LGBTQ elected and appointed officials now serving around the world.
- IGNITE Texas brings its youth-centered, nonpartisan approach to training young women from high schools, colleges, and universities. Its participants are passionate about bettering their communities. IGNITE teaches young women how to think critically about policy and understand where the levers of power to make change are. IGNITE has a high school curriculum, college chapters, annual conferences, and more programs where it teaches young women to become civically engaged and ultimately step into public service. In Texas, they've established a women's network where female elected officials, candidates, and policymakers speak with young women at schools, colleges, and nonprofits. The network provides civic and political engagement opportunities in the form of internships, jobs, and invitations to events.

#### GRANTEE PROFILE: NEW LEADERS COUNCIL – HOUSTON

New Leaders Council engages diverse young leaders from outside traditional power structures, giving them the tools and connections that they need to bring entrepreneurial problem-solving skills and progressive values to civic discourse. Houston's chapter, launched in 2014, is one of 44 nationwide.

NLC's chief program is its training institute. A cohort of 20 fellows meets once a month for five months. They follow a curriculum that encompasses leadership, entrepreneurship, progressive history and values, community-building, fundraising, communications, technology and new media, policy analysis, and more. The faculty is a blend of national trainers, regional policy experts, and local practitioners.

Fellows in every chapter share a basic skill set and values orientation, but also receive the local perspective on national policies and practices. They work together on a fundraising project, raising the money to support the program so that it can remain tuition-free. They also undertake capstone projects, either individually or in small groups, to help them develop a plan for achieving their professional and personal goals. Collaboration and intersectionality are core values for NLC. Many in the NLC-Houston family work for or with other agencies The Simmons Foundation supports.

NLC-Houston believes it will take leaders from every background and sector to strengthen our nation's progressive infrastructure and create a truly participatory democracy. NLC selects a diverse range of fellows – not just those working in nonprofits or government, but also in research labs, hospitals and clinics, schools, the media, banks, energy companies, and more, and people who come from historically underrepresented communities and nontraditional backgrounds. They connect with the board and alumni, and to the nationwide NLC family and the larger progressive community in Houston.





The Fund for  
New Jersey

## THE FUND FOR NEW JERSEY – NEW JERSEY

### Policy and Research for Candidate Education

*Contact: Kiki Jamieson, President*

The mission of *The Fund for New Jersey* is to improve the quality of public policy decision-making on the most significant issues affecting the people of New Jersey and the region. In advance of the 2017 gubernatorial and state legislative elections, The Fund worked with partners to develop and circulate *Crossroads NJ*: a series of seven in-depth public policy reports on key issues, designed to inform debate at this critical juncture.

#### FIT WITH THE MISSION AND GOALS

In its grantmaking, The Fund works with state and regional organizations to advance systemic and sustainable solutions to public problems through policy, advocacy, analysis, and organizing. It funds on a range of issues, including affordable housing, environment, criminal justice reform, and public education. The *Crossroads NJ* series was a robust initiative to provide candidates and other policymakers with a fact-focused view of the problems and a range of sound and workable policy recommendations that would confront the problems head-on. While not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of all issues of concern to The Fund and its grantees and while recognizing that not every challenge is under state leaders' control, nonetheless the series focused on the need for responsible and strong state policies on seven important issues:

- State Fiscal Policy
- Jobs and the Economy
- Climate and Environment
- Housing and Land Use
- Transportation Infrastructure
- Public Education
- Criminal Justice Reform

#### CROSSROADS NEW JERSEY: POLICY CHOICES THAT DEFINE OUR FUTURE

In 2017, with an open governor's seat on the horizon and all 120 seats in the state legislature up for election, the foundation saw an opportunity to educate and inform policymakers about the urgency of the issues and the need to act to secure a better future for New Jersey residents. The state elections created a window for elevating public awareness about the dangers of leaving New Jersey's problems unaddressed while advancing new policy ideas and potential solutions that would benefit a wide swath of New Jersey residents, with particular attention to its most vulnerable.





## Policy and Research for Candidate Education

For each topic, The Fund established working groups consisting of trustees, policy-focused nonprofits, and experts from area universities and institutes, among others, who helped outline the scope of work for each report, frame the problem, develop policy options, and connect the *Crossroads NJ* work to other ongoing public policy and public education efforts. Grantee organizations participated in all the working groups. Each report included descriptions of current conditions that relied on the best evidence available as well as recommendations for policy changes that would bring about desired results. Trustees of The Fund, as a group, served as the “author” of the series.

The report on criminal justice, for example, includes contributions from grantees, Trustees, and academics. The report included recommendations for reform in several phases of the criminal justice process, including arrest, bail, sentencing, post-sentencing, and re-entry. Topics ranged from changing police practices to eliminating mandatory minimum sentences to improving reentry after incarceration. The latter included the restoration of voting rights to people in prison, on parole, or on probation.

### ROLE OF THE TRUSTEES

The Fund’s Trustees were engaged and involved throughout the process. Trustees chaired each of the working groups and shepherded the policy recommendations. After considering the recommendations collectively, Trustees endorsed the policy options proposed and agreed that the series would be published with The Fund as the author. Early on, the Trustees decided to retain a communications firm to ensure that the *Crossroads NJ* series attracted broad coverage. The Fund’s Board Chair worked closely with The Fund President and the communications consultant to ensure alignment of policy ideas and consistency of structure among the various reports. This level of Trustee engagement in *Crossroads NJ* was central to the success of the project. The initiative created opportunities for Trustees to work directly with grantees in framing policy recommendations, helped foster deeper overall Trustee engagement in The Fund’s work outside of the *Crossroads NJ* project, and provided new inroads for Trustees and The Fund as a whole to engage with policymakers and the public on the state’s most important public policy issues.





The Fund for  
New Jersey

## THE FUND FOR NEW JERSEY – NEW JERSEY

### Policy and Research for Candidate Education

#### **CROSSROADS NJ SERIES RELEASE AND USE**

With the assistance of its communications consultant, the fund went through a process to find a name – *Crossroads NJ* – so the reports would be readily identified as part of a cohesive series. The consultant was instrumental in organizing press briefings for each report release, inviting and following up with press, securing meetings with editorial boards of area newspapers, and facilitating published op-eds and television and radio interviews. Each report release included short presentations and extended question-answer sessions featuring Trustees, grantees, and staff of The Fund. A robust social media strategy helped to amplify the key messages from each report. The reports were posted online on a dedicated website, which also offered two-page “Summing Up” documents for ease of reference. Electronic publication allowed live hyperlinks to the resources cited in the reports, which added to the credibility of the analysis. Copies of all reports were shared pre-release with gubernatorial candidates. The Fund, through its communications consultant, also produced a short video explaining the crisis facing New Jersey and introducing the *Crossroads NJ* series as a source of potential solutions.

Post-election, The Fund for New Jersey continued to educate policymakers and the incoming administration about *Crossroads NJ*. Several Fund Trustees, grantees, and *Crossroads NJ* contributors served on transition committees, which led to many of the reports’ themes and recommendations being included in the transition reports. Fund leadership offered to brief majority and minority staff of the New Jersey Assembly and New Jersey Senate about the reports and policy recommendations. The new governor’s inaugural address included several echoes of language contained in *Crossroads NJ*, and the subsequent state budget address similarly included many of the policy priorities highlighted in the reports. The Fund continues to reference the reports in its social media, with the result that the overall social media engagement with The Fund for New Jersey has notably increased. The Fund for New Jersey conducted an assessment of the effort, finding wide satisfaction among respondents about the quality of the series and its influence on key New Jersey policymakers.



