

A Voter Registration Toolkit

FOR NONPROFITS AND SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Registering to vote is the first step toward becoming an active and engaged voter. Nonprofits are powerful vehicles for ensuring our communities register, participate and vote. This guide explains the basics of conducting voter registration for 501(c)(3) nonprofits. To learn even more about voter registration, visit Nonprofit VOTE's website at: www.nonprofitvote.org/voter-registration.html

Why Voter Registration and Why Nonprofits?

Although other forms of voter engagement play an important role in helping underrepresented communities participate and vote, voter registration can be particularly impactful. Voter registration is the first step to becoming an engaged voter, whether you're a newly eligible voter registering for the first time or simply need to update your registration. Voter registration efforts have a significant impact on voter participation—in a presidential election, nine out of ten registered voters will turn out to vote. Research by Nonprofit VOTE demonstrates that when nonprofits talk to and assist their clients with registering to vote, individuals are much more likely to vote—and more likely to talk to their friends and family about voting.¹

Nonprofits play a unique and important role in voter registration efforts. As trusted and respected community institutions with frequent face-to-face contact with clients and constituents, nonprofits can reach and register individuals often missed by traditional political campaigns and advocacy organizations.

Seven Basic Principles of Agency-Based Voter Registration

1. Planning Ahead

The first step to successfully registering voters is to plan ahead. Here are several factors to consider:

Deciding when and where: Decide when and where it is appropriate to integrate voter registration into

your work, whether at a central location, as a part of a specific service or program, or at special events or on particular days.



Who's in charge: Similar to any coordinated effort, voter registration works best when a designated staff person takes the lead on coordinating registration activities. This person is responsible for getting and returning voter registration forms and also serves as a resource for other staff members. Depending on how large your voter registration efforts become, you may also want to recruit volunteers to assist with these tasks.

Gaining Buy-in: The passion of one individual is often enough to launch voter registration efforts within an agency, but building broader buy-in is essential to ensure continued success. It is particularly important to get buy-in from the Executive Director and other staff before voter registration activities begin.

¹ Visit www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-voter-engagement-research.html for more on the 2010 study.

2. When to Do It

Voter registration is an important service nonprofits can offer year-round, especially when it is integrated into the organization's ongoing activities. Research has shown that *the best time to encourage individuals to register to vote is in the month leading up to your state's registration deadline* when visibility and interest from voters is at its peak.

3. Where to Do It

At Your Agency or Office: One of the best—and most effective—places to register voters is in your agency or office because community members come to you. By conducting voter registration on-site, you also leverage the trust and respect you have earned from the community.

At Events: You can register voters at special events sponsored by your nonprofit, such as an annual meeting, a special forum, or trainings. Voter registration is also effective at local events such as a high school graduation, a citizenship ceremony, a local community fair, or workshops and classes. Set up a voter registration table or have volunteers carry clipboards and mingle among the crowd.



In the Community: Highly trafficked areas in your community offer another good opportunity to reach and register voters. Consider sending a youth or volunteer team to a transit stop, supermarket, or other busy area.

4. Know the Voter Registration Rules in Your State

Voter registration rules vary from state to state. It's important to know the rules in your state, including:

Registration Deadline: Make sure you know the registration deadline in your state. Visit our site for upcoming deadlines in your state.

Eligibility:

Age: The general rule is that you can register as long as you will be 18 on or before Election Day. However, some states offer pre-registration for 16 and 17 year olds. Visit our site to learn whether your state is one of them.

Past Felony Conviction: Most states restore full voting rights to a person with a felony conviction upon release from prison or completion of their sentence. However state laws vary. Visit your state's voter registration page on our site to learn more about registering to vote as an ex-offender.

How to Get Registration Forms:

From an Elections Official: You can get forms from elections officials in your county, city, or town or from your state election office. Visit our site to find your local elections official.

Printed out: Voter registration forms can also be downloaded and printed from the internet, then mailed directly to your local elections office. In many cases, the forms can be filled out on a computer and then printed, signed and returned to a local elections official.

Online: Several states allow online registration, without any paper form. Visit our site to learn whether your state currently offers online registration.

Returning Registration Forms: Return completed registration forms promptly to your local election clerk either in person or by mail. Some states require that completed forms be returned within a certain number of days. Visit our site to learn more about turnaround times in your state.

Other Special Requirements: Some states have special requirements for organizations that want



to conduct voter registration or hold a registration drive. Most don't. Visit our site to learn more.

5. Helping Voters Complete the Form

For first-time voters or individuals less familiar with the process, assistance can be helpful and can put them at ease. Double check that the forms have been filled out correctly and include all of the required information, such as:

Eligibility Check Boxes: Don't forget to check the two boxes verifying that the person registering will be 18 on or before Election Day and is a U.S. citizen.

Date of birth: The date of birth is often only partially completed or missed altogether.

ID number: In most states "ID Number" means a *driver's license or state-issued ID number*. If someone doesn't have a valid state-issued ID, they can use the *last four digits* of their social security number. Some states ask for the full social security number.

Signature: The form isn't complete without a signature!

6. Dealing with Special Circumstances

Some community members may have special circumstances that affect their ability to both register and vote. Examples include individuals who are homeless, victims of domestic violence, and people with mental or physical disabilities. Visit our site to learn more about how these and other circumstances affect the registration process in your state.

7. Staying Nonpartisan

Voter registration is a perfectly safe and legal activity for 501(c)(3) nonprofits², as long as it is done in a nonpartisan manner. Three main guidelines exist for nonprofits:

1. Nonprofit staff or volunteers may not suggest what candidate to support or what party to join. You may, however, explain the difference between joining a party and registering without party affiliation. For example, in states with a closed primary system, only members of a party may vote in that party's primary

election. In others, unaffiliated voters may choose which party primary to vote in. It's easy to quickly learn your state's rules.

2. When answering questions about candidates and parties, volunteers and staff may refer people to other sources, such as a local newspaper or other nonpartisan voter guide.

3. Nonprofits are free to register all the people they serve, including staff, volunteers and the local community, regardless of perceptions that certain communities vote a certain way. Nonprofits may also target underserved areas with a history of lower voter participation.



The IRS specifically cites voter registration as an appropriate nonpartisan activity for 501(c)(3) organizations. It is also worth noting that many government agencies are required by law—under the National Voter Registration Act—to offer voter registration, including all federal agencies offering public assistance (WIC, Medicaid, etc.), departments of motor vehicles, and state-funded disability organizations. Refer to Nonprofit VOTE's factsheet on the National Voter Registration Act to learn more.

² The four exceptions to this rule are AmeriCorps, Head Start, Legal Services and Community Action Agencies. Visit our site to learn more.



A Voter Registration Checklist:

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- Make a **PLAN** – the who, how, when and where
- Get **BUY IN** from the Executive Director and other staff
- Make **STAFFING** decisions
 - *Who will lead your voter registration efforts?*
- Decide **WHEN** you will do voter registration
 - *On an ongoing basis*
 - *As part of a registration drive*
 - *On a single “Registration Day”*
- Get **REGISTRATION FORMS** or set up a computer for online voter registration
- Decide who will be responsible for **RETURNING** completed registration forms in a timely manner
- Get any **SUPPLIES** you may need
 - *Supplies for your office*
 - *Supplies for off-site registration*
- Know the **REGISTRATION RULES** in your state
 - *The registration deadline*
 - *Eligibility requirements (e.g. Ex-offenders and voting)*
 - *Where to return the forms*
- TRAIN** staff and volunteers on how to fill out the form
 - *Things to look out for: age and citizenship check boxes, date of birth, license number or last four digits of SS#, and signature*
- Create a voter registration **DISPLAY** in your office
 - *Hang up Nonprofit VOTE’s “Register to Vote” poster*
 - *Put out signs and factsheets like the registration deadline*
 - *Make your registration area or kiosk stand out*
- PROMOTE** your registration activities
 - *Highlight it in your internal and external communications*
 - *Have your staff to talk to people about registering to vote*
- Keep **TRACK** of your registration forms
 - *Copy completed forms or capture contact info for follow up*



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