

How To Engage High Potential Voters

By switching our framing from focusing on “non-voters” to focusing on the untapped potential voters and acknowledging the resources at our disposal, nonprofits can be highly effective players in boosting turnout in local, state, and national elections.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NONPROFIT THAT EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE VOTERS

Access to the people they serve

Traditional campaigns are driven by win-lose stakes and tight deadlines. They often pass over eligible voters that don't have a strong history of turnout. Many organizations report that when they begin voter engagement activities they hear from voters who have never been asked to register or vote in the past and that the outreach and support from the nonprofit is meaningful to them.

Trust with navigating systems

The people you serve trust you to assist them, often navigating complex systems such as EBT benefits, healthcare enrollment, or legal issues and supporting them without judgment. Your organization can leverage that trust to help them register, apply for a mail ballot, or get answers to their questions about voting.

Cultural competency (including language and ability)

Many nonprofits hire staff with similar backgrounds to the people the organization serves. If you have staff that are culturally competent, can communicate with voters in their preferred language, and meet them at their ability level, you can break through to the voters most marginalized by the election system.

Nonpartisanship

Because your 501(c)(3) organization must remain nonpartisan, you will never be expected to pick sides in a race for office. This is a major benefit because you can engage candidates on both sides in a race for office. This is a major benefit because you can engage candidates on both sides of the aisle and do not need to comment on candidates' platforms or prospects. Your voter engagement work is about making sure the people you serve are heard year after year, not influencing the outcome of a single election.

The Knight Foundation conducted the largest ever **survey of eligible voters** that do not participate in elections. The results of the 2019 study found a relatively even split among these individuals in terms of political alignment, but more importantly, it shed new light on some of the perceptions and challenges of “non-voters.”

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Below we cover some of the top reasons given for why people did not vote, and how your nonprofit can respond:

They don't like the candidates or don't feel well enough informed about who is voting or the issues.

- Hold a voter education event or provide nonpartisan voter guides to help people make decisions about who to support.
- Host a candidate forum so that the community can engage with the candidate directly.
- Share information about how to run for office and encourage people in your community to take leadership roles.

- Talk about voting history, including the fights to give women, people of color, and 18 year olds the right to vote. Screen a documentary about voting or spotlight a leader like John Lewis or Alice Paul in your next newsletter.
- Get involved in voting advocacy in your state to show that you and your community are committed to making sure eligible voters can participate with fewer barriers.
- Host an event with a local election official so people can learn more about the process of conducting an election and how votes are counted. Encourage people to sign up as poll workers to see democracy in action.

They think their vote doesn't matter or that the system is corrupt.

They did not have enough time, weren't registered, didn't have transportation, or didn't know an election was happening.

- Provide reminders about upcoming elections and registration deadlines, and let people know about their different options for voting, including early voting and voting by mailed ballot.
- Connect people with rides to the polls programs (your local League of Women Voters may organize one and candidates often provide rides regardless of who the voter will vote for) or organize your own rides to the polls program. Some rideshare services will offer discounts on election day.

- Cite an issue specific to your nonprofit or community like health care access, affordable housing, school funding, etc. Who we elect can be as much about protecting a program as it is starting a new one.
- Mention an important or high profile race they might know about. Even if the election doesn't look close, the size of the victory or loss can make a difference in what happens next.
- Host an event with a local election official so people can learn more about the process of conducting an election and how votes are counted. Encourage people to sign up as poll workers to see democracy in action.

Get voters excited by letting them know what's at stake.