

Democracy thrives when...

Cities Vote

MUNICIPAL ACTION GUIDE



About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America’s cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC’s Center for City Solutions provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities and creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities.

About NLC’s Local Democracy Initiative

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Cities Vote is a network of mayors and their staff who are committed to taking action to grow voter engagement—they are aware that there is a deepening demand from residents to feel included and empowered in the democratic process at every level, including the most local. They are also aware that both community-based organizations and civic engagement leaders have been laying the groundwork to grow voter turnout for years. As the most trusted level of government, city leaders are ready to lead as powerful local conveners that can increase participation rates nationwide—starting locally.

You’re committed to making every vote count in every election. But where do you start?

The Local Democracy Initiative is developing a high-impact and concise Civic Cities municipal action guide for mayors ready to embrace the challenges of achieving 100% democratic participation in their cities. We will both support mayors in committing to and executing high quality voter engagement plans and facilitate learning between municipal leaders, steering cities towards strengthened local democracy. Examples of interventions we will develop mayors to execute:

- Making voting accessible**
Reducing barriers to voter registration, strengthening partnerships with state and local partners
- Making voting more convenient**
Improving the voting experience, working with local elections officials to reduce friction of participation
- Making voting more meaningful**
Reducing voter apathy, elevating schools, community groups and local influencers who can deliver education about meaningful democracy

Here is a list of twenty interventions that can have high impact in increasing voter turnout in your city; pick and choose from them like a menu and list them in your Cities Vote Action Plan!

1 Set a city-wide goal for voter participation and implement an action plan!

- You’ve already taken the first step! Joining Cities Vote prepares your city to understand where it’s at, and how to set goals to increase voter participation. Setting a city-wide goal using our “voter engagement plan” template will help you and your team stay on track and see real results in voter turnout.
- Issue a press release! Show other cities what leadership on voter turnout looks like.
- Have your city participate in a nation-wide competition, like When We All Vote’s Civic Cities Challenge, and be eligible to win prizes for your successes around voter engagement!

2 Make participation a celebration!

- Throw a party! Organize a city-wide, community-driven festival on early vote day or election day to celebrate voting with food and music provided by local organizations, institutions and companies.
 - Consider non-partisan community-driven election day celebrations through [#VoteTogether](#), an initiative that focuses on transforming the culture of voting

- Recognize civic leaders who are making a difference in your community. Do you know a volunteer who is registering all of the people on her block? Give her a shout out on social media! Do you work with a resident who models how to live a fully civic life; invite them to an event where they can be celebrated. Informally celebrate a day in their honor. Some cities have gone so far as to award mini “civic life grants” or “super organizer” grants to stellar citizens or organizations—awarding them a \$500 grant to continue the work they are doing can go a long way! Honoring individuals can motivate and inspire others to get involved too.

3 Adopt a local ordinance requiring landlords to provide new residents voter registration forms.

4 Embed voter registration throughout city services.

- What if you didn’t have to go any further than your own local city agencies to drastically increase your voter registration rates? Where city agencies administer public services and benefits, they can also actively register people to vote. Agencies that administer health services, housing voucher programs, and SNAP benefits work with low-income communities who are less likely to benefit from standard voter registration efforts.
- Where county agencies offer social services to your residents, join or build a coalition of other city leaders in your area to advocate to the county that they do the same.

5 Use your megaphone.

- Residents are excited to hear directly from their mayors or councilmembers. Identify venues that would welcome insights from city leaders, like your city’s Chambers of Commerce or service communities like local [Rotary Clubs](#).
- Plug into your community’s milestone moments: speak at high school graduations about the importance of voting or use the 4th of July as a time to remind residents to get engaged as election judges, voter registration guides and as voters themselves.
- Issue a city-wide challenge; if focusing on schools, talk to your board of education to create a competition between local high schools around civic service or volunteerism around voter registration.
- You’re a local celebrity! Radio stations and local television are interested in hearing directly from you. Issue a press release about your participation in Cities Vote. Or create a PSA on voter engagement. You can work with organizations like [Hometown Project to contact celebrities from your city to get involved on voter engagement locally](#).
- Engage with your contacts in local media to increase public awareness around voting deadlines and events.

6 Be online.

- Use your city’s website as a central hub of voter information; include voter registration deadlines, election dates and even publish your commitment to making voting more accessible and more meaningful for your residents!
- Create a flash site where city leaders can talk about their experiences as first-time voters; create a space where residents themselves can commit to voting.
- Build a social media strategy: it should be fun and inspiring but also function as a reminder for folks on key dates such as the close of registration and the opening of early voting. Share links to help people find the address of their polling location during early vote or on election day. Consider tapping someone in your office that focuses on Youth Engagement; they may be best equipped to help your city become more comfortable online.

7 Advocate to election commissions on behalf of your residents.

- Ask election commissions to explore creating convenient voting centers or satellite voting locations. Vote centers allow residents to cast their ballots at any of the vote centers in their community, as opposed to the assigned neighborhood precinct which might be out of the way or have long lines.

8 **Make a phone call to your local College or University President and encourage them to work with student voter programs like the All-In Challenge and Campus Vote Project. Lift up colleges and universities that are already participating. Don't forget to reach out to junior colleges and community colleges in your city, who are amazing local partners.**

- [All-In Campus Democracy Challenge](#)
- [Campus Vote Project](#)

9 **Deputize trusted messengers in your community.**

Faith Leaders

- Work with your Inter-Faith Council or host a Faith Leaders Breakfast where you encourage religious leaders like pastors, priests, rabbis and other clergy leaders to speak with their congregations about the importance of voting. Give them talking points and information about activating their congregation. Encourage them to hold weekly voter registration drives. Provide resources for them to have snacks and drinks for congregants who participate in voter registration.
 - What was successful in your Census preparation and outreach? Many faith leaders were activated to support Get Out The Count efforts around Census...in what ways can they replicate creating sermons about Democracy? In some communities, faith leaders all agreed to host a "Census Worship" Sunday, where they all talked about the Census in their services. Ask faith leaders to consider having a "Holy Day of Democracy" together.

- Find faith-based communities that are already activated to help Get Out The Vote! Souls to the Polls is just one example of how faith leaders are supporting voter turnout. How else are your community's faith leaders building democracy? Lift up those initiatives and show your support. Shout them out on social media or attend one of their events.

Small Businesses

- Small businesses such as bookstores or coffee shops can train staff to do voter registration
- Develop "train the trainer" programs with small businesses that have close, ongoing relationships with their customers, like barbershops and beauty parlors.
- Work with nontraditional businesses in your community that are not typically identified as "community centers" but which people frequent; like casinos, grocery stores, liquor stores or even big chain stores in your community.

Non-Profits

- Non-profits do the amazing work of connecting with your residents every day. Non-profits are often explicitly non-partisan, which make them excellent communicators about the importance of voting. For non-profits like the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, fraternities and sororities (which hold non-partisan, nonprofit status as c3s), civic engagement is already part of their annual work and budgets. Lift them up and support the work they are doing on the ground.
- Many non-profits don't know yet how to get civically engaged. Nominate them to participate in a [Nonprofit VOTE](#) training, which will teach their staff how to start doing voter engagement work.

10 **Remove transportation barriers.**

- Offer free public transportation on election day or reduced fares during early vote periods. Be aware of what micromobility companies are doing in your community—maybe Lime, Bird or other e-scooter companies have made rides free. Shout that out on your social media. The same goes for bike share companies. Check to see what deals Lyft and Uber have come up with to reduce transportation costs on election day.

11 **Commit to a "[Your city's name] Votes! Week of Action"**

- This can be the time you host your #VoteTogether parties, civic kids days or voter registration days. Be creative about connecting to your community!

12 **Congratulations, High School Graduate! Stepping into a new generation of voters.**

- Create a goal of registering every eligible high school senior while they are still in school.
- Partner with your local school district to commit to having voter registration forms distributed, completed, collected and processed for every high school senior.

13 **Build "voter" into young people's identities.**

- Pre-register 16 and 17 year olds. This will automatically add them to voter rolls when they turn 18. Simple changes to the current voter registration database would allow for "pre-registered" students to maintain a "pending" status until they turn 18. This is a LOW COST, HIGH IMPACT option.
- Allow college students to use student IDs to vote.
- Work with amazing organizations like [My School Votes](#) to start building voter engagement work into middle schools and high schools.

14 **Democracy is about celebration! Why not transform it...into a holiday!**

- If your city has early voting, celebrate "[Vote Early Day!](#)" on October 24th. Vote Early Day helps all eligible voters learn about their early voting options and celebrate the act of voting early. It's not a coalition, it's a holiday. This collaborative, open-source model - similar to Giving Tuesday and National Voter Registration Day - will ensure that millions more Americans take advantage of their early voting options this fall.
- Make "National Voter Registration Day" on September 24th a local holiday!

15 Commit to voter education in schools.

- This is a larger commitment. Support school districts committing to civics education. We know this is a complex issue with many stakeholders and often outside the city's purview, but as city leaders you can lift up the voices that are already doing this work. If you can, work with the DOE to upgrade civics education within the school curriculum. Locate those local educators who are already enhancing voter education and civic engagement and feature and celebrate them. Create a Youth Commission on Voting. Look for opportunities to support after school and summer programs that focus on civics education. Work with local supplemental education and summer camps, YMCA or other civic-minded organizations to sponsor summer civic engagement days.
- Lean on digital resources like [iCivics](#) and share this resource with teachers in your community.

16 Don't be afraid to pursue innovative partnerships!

- Create a goal of registering every 1. Follow the Filer Voter model; conduct voter registration drives at sites providing free income tax preparation assistance.
- Work with local utility companies or phone service providers to include nudges and reminders about voter registration and election day on sewer bill mailings or phone and cable bills.
- Work with groups like VotER to engage with hospitals to provided voter registration platforms for patients while they wait to be seen.

17 Provide ballot information and voter information in several languages.

18 And now for some fun!

- Find organizations like [Get In The Game who register voters at sports games and educate voters about the elections process.](#)
- Work with local artists to design media and posters inspired by voting and democracy to share within your community. For examples of some amazing young people and their democracy-inspired art, visit [Voting Vanguard](#)s.

We know voter engagement is a permanent commitment for city leaders. While there are many interventions that can change the culture around voting, some are multi-year efforts that require significant buy-in from your community. Here are some examples of democracy-strengthening interventions that can move the needle on voter engagement long-term.

- Fortify your city's IT departments to support the elections process. Offer incentives to technically trained city staff to volunteer as elections judges and on technical election support teams.
- Increasing municipal authority.
 - In your community, election administration may be held by the county, the state or the federal government rather than municipal city leaders. Thus decisions for your residents may be in the hands of organizations and individuals who don't have the level of local knowledge that you and your city staff and local partners have. This often results in inaccessible voting structures, barriers to voter registration and ultimately voter apathy. Talk to your state representatives and argue for reducing any barriers that create stickiness or obstacles to voting. If you have specific talking points or policies to share work with your grassroots community leaders to engage state representatives. Engage on social media with your federal representatives, challenging them to make voting easier for everyone especially with your residents. If structural change is beyond the city's reach, consider what you can do locally to eliminate friction to voting. In New York City for example the city created a Civic Engagement Commission charged with increasing language accessibility for all.
- Municipal leaders have a unique ability to advocate for their residents as the most local level of government to decision-makers that have no knowledge of your residents. To learn more about local authority and the ways to manage it, check out our [Local Authority and Preemption Guide](#).
- Election security is a huge concern for cities and voters. You can work to advocate to federal government that you need support for elections security. For some insight into how different states are handling these issues, check out this Brennan Center for Justice report on [Defending Elections](#).

Building strong partnerships with the organizations on the ground who have been connected to civic engagement for years is a strong strategy for success. We've identified voter engagement organizations who have a national footprint and are committed to helping increase voter participation. Program Experts we encourage you to work with include:

■ **When We All Vote**

<https://www.whenweallvote.org/about-us/>

When We All Vote is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that is on a mission to increase participation in every election and close the race and age voting gap by changing the culture around voting, harnessing grassroots energy, and through strategic partnerships to reach every American.

■ **#VoteTogether**

<https://votetogetherusa.org/faqs/>

#VoteTogether is a national campaign to increase voter participation by making voting fun and celebratory. At thousands of nonpartisan events hosted at and near polling places across the country, #VoteTogether partners will bring together families, friends and neighbors in a celebration of civic engagement and the act of voting.

#VoteTogether events—including block parties, BBQs, and parades—will take place during early voting and on Election Day. The program is launching in partnership with 150 state and local organizations, several corporate partners, and with 500 confirmed events.

■ **ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge**

<https://www.allinchallenge.org/>

The All IN Campus Democracy Challenge is a national awards program. By recognizing colleges and universities for their commitment to increasing student voting rates, the Challenge encourages higher education institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship, make democratic participation a core value on their campus, and cultivate generations of engaged citizens who are essential to a healthy democracy.

■ **Campus Vote Project**

<https://www.campusvoteproject.org/>

Campus Vote Project works with universities, community colleges, faculty, students and election officials to reduce barriers to student voting. Our goal is to help campuses institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote. Campus vote project works with over 2 million students across 150 universities in 30 states.

■ **Early Vote Day**

<https://www.voteearlyday.org/>

■ **Filer Voter Project**

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-filer-voter-experiment-how-effective-is-voter-registration-at-tax-time/>

Voter registration at tax time has the potential to not only increase the voter pool, but to make the voting population more closely mirror the citizenry as a whole. Tax time may be an especially effective time to encourage lower-income citizens to register.

■ **Get In the Game**

<http://www.gitg-vote.com/>

Get In the Game is a nonpartisan voter development initiative. This project is designed to encourage all sports fans to register to vote and participate in the electoral process. This year our focus is on Major League Baseball and volunteers will be visiting ballparks nationwide in an effort to educate all Americans about voting. Furthermore, we will be registering them at the stadiums and teaching them to engage family and friends in the political process. In future years, we plan to expand our efforts to included other sports.

■ **iCivics**

<https://www.icivics.org/search-results?keywords=voting>

Founded by retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor iCivics works to ensure every student in America receives a quality and engaging civic education and graduates from high school well prepared and enthusiastic for citizenship. ICivics has multiple learning modules on voting.

■ **League of Conservation Voters**

<https://www.lcv.org/>

The League of Conservation Voters (LCV) works to turn environmental values into national, state and local priorities. LCV, as part of the Conservation Voter Movement along with our state LCV partners, advocates for sound environmental laws and policies, holds elected officials accountable for their votes and actions, and elects pro-environment candidates who will champion our priority issues

■ **League of Women Voters**

<https://www.lwv.org/elections>

<https://www.lwv.org/voting-rights>

The League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) works to register voters, provide voters with election information through voter guides as well as candidate forums and debates.

■ National Voter Registration Day

<https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org>

National Voter Registration Day is a national holiday celebrating our democracy. It was first observed in 2012 and has been growing in popularity every year since. Held on the fourth Tuesday of September, National Voter Registration Day will take place on September 22, 2020. The holiday has been endorsed by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS). It is further supported by the National Association of State Election Directors (NASSED), the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC), and the National Association of Election Officials (The Election Center).

■ Non Profit Vote

<https://www.nonprofitvote.org/>

Nonprofit VOTE partners with America's nonprofits to help the people they serve participate and vote. We are the largest source of nonpartisan resources to help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services.

■ Souls to the Polls/The Equity Alliance/Interdenominational Ministers Fellowship

<https://theequityalliance.org/soulstothe polls/>

Faith-based community organizing has been a tried-and-true strategy to reach black voters since the Civil Rights Movement. In an effort to get Souls to the Polls, The Equity Alliance partners with the Interdenominational Ministers Fellowship (IMF) to conduct voter registration drives at African-American churches in Nashville. Our goal is to have 100% of eligible church membership registered to vote. Volunteers are deployed to church services on Sundays to engage and register voters. We host various GOTV activities, including block parties, rallies, phone banking, and rides to the polls.

■ Rejoice the Vote

<http://www.rejoicethevote.org/>

Is America possible without a free fully democratic process equally accessible to all citizens? Rejoice The Vote's three-pronged approach is geared to honor the past, celebrate the present, and challenge the future. It is aimed at changing the culture of voting from a chore to a joyful celebration.

■ VotER

<https://vot-er.org/>

VotER works with Hospitals across the country to provide convenient nonpartisan voter registration platforms for patients while they wait.

➔ **We are asking all Civic Cities participants to commit to between one and three of the interventions above in their voter engagement plans which they will then share online.** Critical to the success of each mayor's voter engagement plan in their city is their ability to promote successes and navigate challenges with peer cities in real time. City leaders are uniquely positioned to understand and address local challenges even in the context of cities that are not their own. The Civic Cities peer to peer learning network will have access to one another for meaningful peer-to-peer service and problem-solving dialogue.

Democratic participation has historically been seen through the lens of being a national challenge, but cities, towns and villages have the unique opportunity to be their residents' strongest advocates in increasing civic participation. Civic participation has a direct, correlative impact on the long-term strength and resilience of local communities. The Civic Cities program will help cities inspire their residents to invest in their leaders and in one another, and to get out and vote.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING; SOME AMAZING STRATEGIES TO TACKLE TODAY!

- [All-In Campus Democracy Challenge!](#)
- Follow the Filer Voter model; conduct voter registration drives at sites providing free income tax preparation assistance.
- Find organizations like Get In The Game who register voters at baseball games and educate voters about the elections process.
- Have your city participate in a nation-wide competition, like When We All Vote's Civic Cities Challenge, and be eligible to win prizes for your successes around voter engagement!

For more information on how to get these partnerships started, [join the Cities Vote cohort](#) and get real-time assistance in setting up your voter engagement plan!

Notes

