



**SIDE-BY-SIDE:**  
**Lessons Learned from  
2020 Census + Voting Initiatives**

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City leaders are at the forefront of promoting and implementing local democracy by ensuring that everyone who lives in their municipality are counted in the census and all eligible voters are able to participate in elections.

National League of Cities surveyed over 100 cities of varying sizes to understand their experiences with the 2020 Census count and the 2020 elections cycle. The primary conclusion from our findings: cities must make permanent investment in the hard and soft infrastructure of local democracy to be well-positioned to address future challenges, reduce barriers to access, and to ensure inclusive representation, particularly among historically undercounted and underrepresented groups.

## Key Takeaways

- Municipalities must make **permanent, ongoing investment in local democracy**
- **Federal government and national coalition leadership is necessary** to stand up operational infrastructure and facilitate community partnerships that **enable a successful cycle**, whether it's census or voting and elections, and especially in smaller municipalities
- How **large and small cities** leverage the different channels of **funding and partnership is a tale of two cities** and this **impacts their capacity to implement** census, voting, and election work on the ground

## » Federal leadership, national partnerships, and robust funding from multiple sources are necessary enablers for effective local democracy outreach

The national leadership of a centralized agency, the U.S. Census Bureau, which drove community outreach, partnerships, and produced communication resources meant that as rocky and confusing as the 2020 Census count has been, there was a well-known federal agency guiding the national effort. Having a single agency also provided an easily identifiable counterpart for critical coordination, partnership, funding, and communication with and among the coalition of national and local nonprofits, spearheaded by the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights' Census Counts campaign.

There is no comparable federal agency or public-private collaboration on the voting and elections side.<sup>1</sup>

### 63% of all cities

surveyed received some funding for census while only 39% of cities received some funding for voting/election work

### 100% of surveyed large cities

with a population over 300,000 received some funding for the Census versus only 33% of large cities received some funding for voting/election work

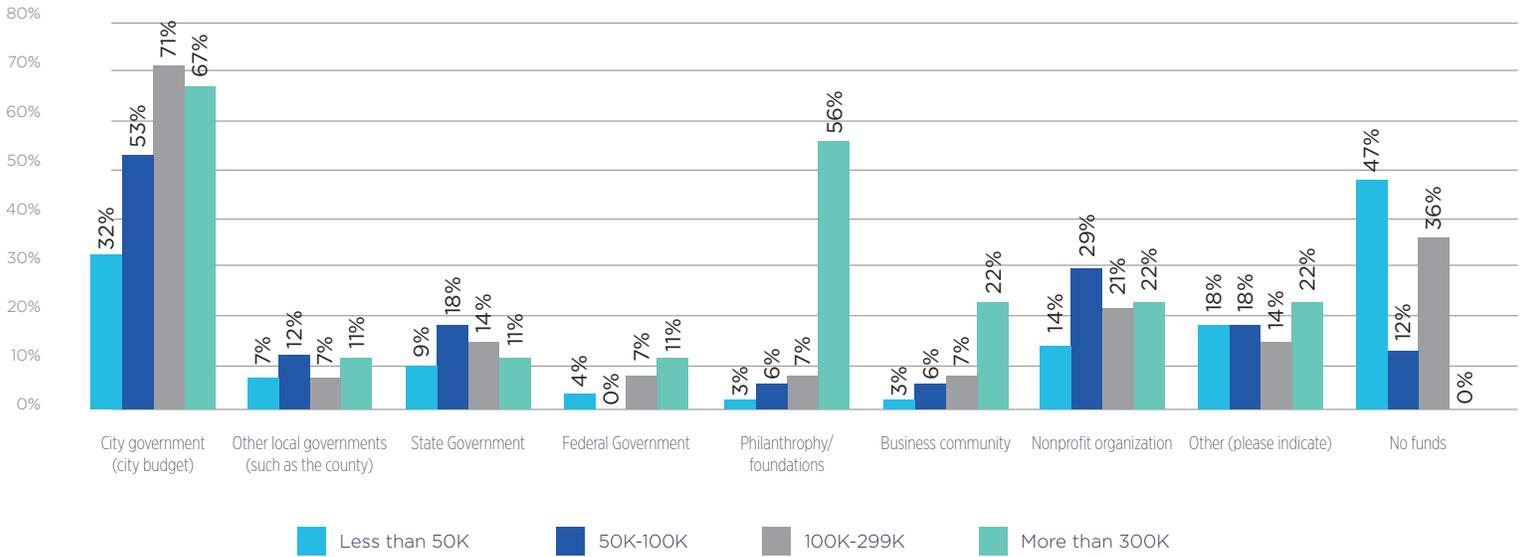
### 56% of large cities

received funding from Philanthropies/Foundations for Census work, as compared to an average 4% for small- and medium-sized municipalities.

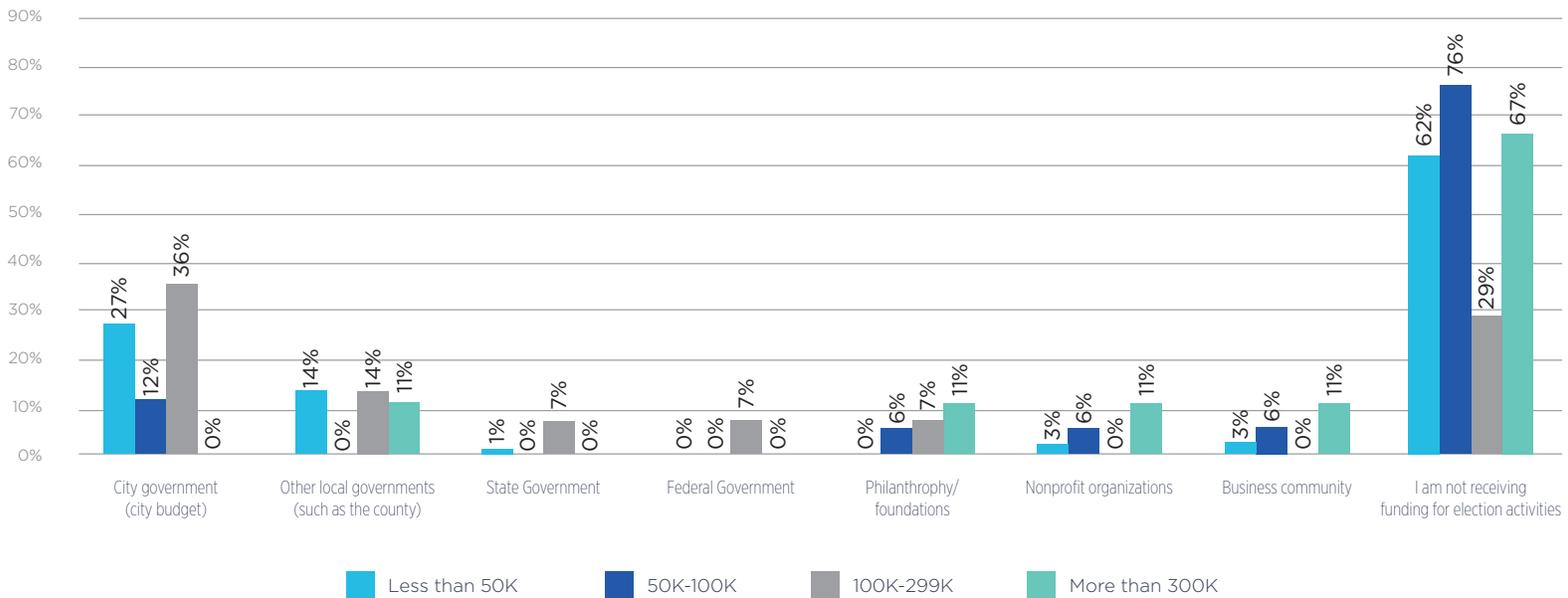
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<sup>1</sup>The [U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#) is the only federal agency with goal of encouraging voter participation and monitoring voting and elections infrastructure, however, it does not lead a nationally coordinated voter outreach campaign.

### CENSUS FUNDING SOURCES, BY CITY SIZE



### ELECTION FUNDING SOURCES, BY CITY SIZE



## Funding Sources - A Tale of Two Cities, Large and Small

The 2020 Census has been a roller coaster of lockdowns, suspended operations, and moving timelines. Through this, municipal and community outreach efforts were able to continue due to the unprecedented level of financial support and funding coordination that cities received for the once-in-a-decade accounting of the people who live in the United States.

During approximately the same timeframe and a general election year, **the most likely type of funding that cities received for 2020 voting and elections outreach was *none at all*.**

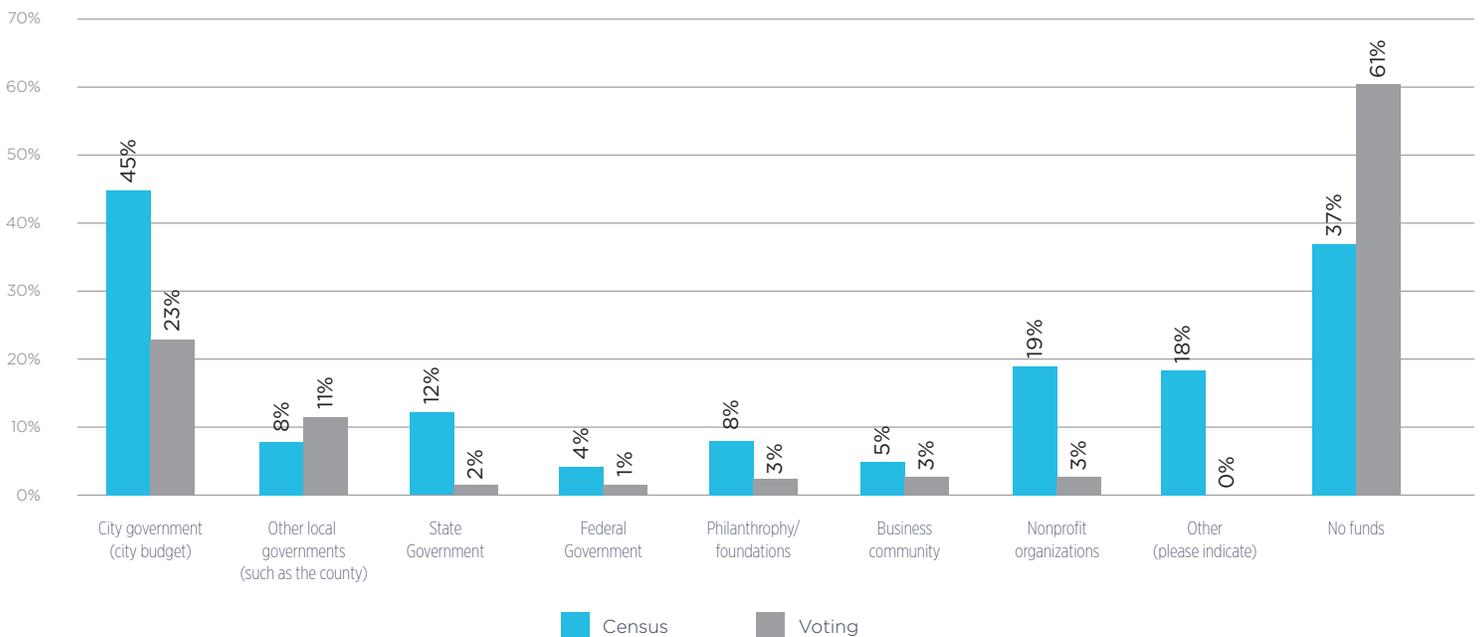
### TOP CENSUS FUNDING SOURCES INCLUDED



### TOP ELECTION FUNDING SOURCES INCLUDED



### CENSUS VERSUS VOTING & ELECTIONS - COMPARISON OF FUNDING SOURCES



## Philanthropy and Foundations in Funding Municipal Civic Engagement Efforts

The long-standing relationships between philanthropies and large cities with more than 300,000 in population was very effectively leveraged for 2020 Census outreach. There is a similar opportunity for this on the voting and elections side for cities of all sizes. Yet, regulations on how philanthropic dollars can be used in voter outreach, concern around the risk of partisanship, and the absence of that centralized federal coordinating counterpart may be preventing philanthropic dollars from making their way to municipal civic engagement efforts for voter engagement, voter education, and voter participation.

The bottom line is that municipalities must do the work of implementing census, voting, and elections, and the funding for this work must come from somewhere. In many ways, municipalities are ideal partners for philanthropic civic engagement dollars because, by definition and structure, they are often non-partisan entities that must serve the needs and represent everyone in their boundaries.

Due to COVID-related impacts, the next several years will see significantly smaller municipal budgets and more furloughed staff even as cities face ever increasing demand on their services. Philanthropic dollars filled the funding gap for census outreach – there is opportunity for it to do the same to support city efforts to engage and turnout the electorate for general and local elections.

## » Municipalities are the on-the-ground implementers of national census, voting, and elections work – and federal resources are critical for smaller cities to do this work

The Census Bureau provided hard infrastructure of in-person census enumerators, multiple language flyers encouraging self-response, and giveaway swag, as well as the soft infrastructure of partnership specialists and networks. These were useful for cities of all sizes, but imperative to fill the capacity and resource gap for small- and medium-sized cities.

### 70% of all cities

identified the Census Bureau as an effective partner.

### 73% of small towns

cited the Census Bureau as an effective partner while less than half (44%) of large cities felt similarly.

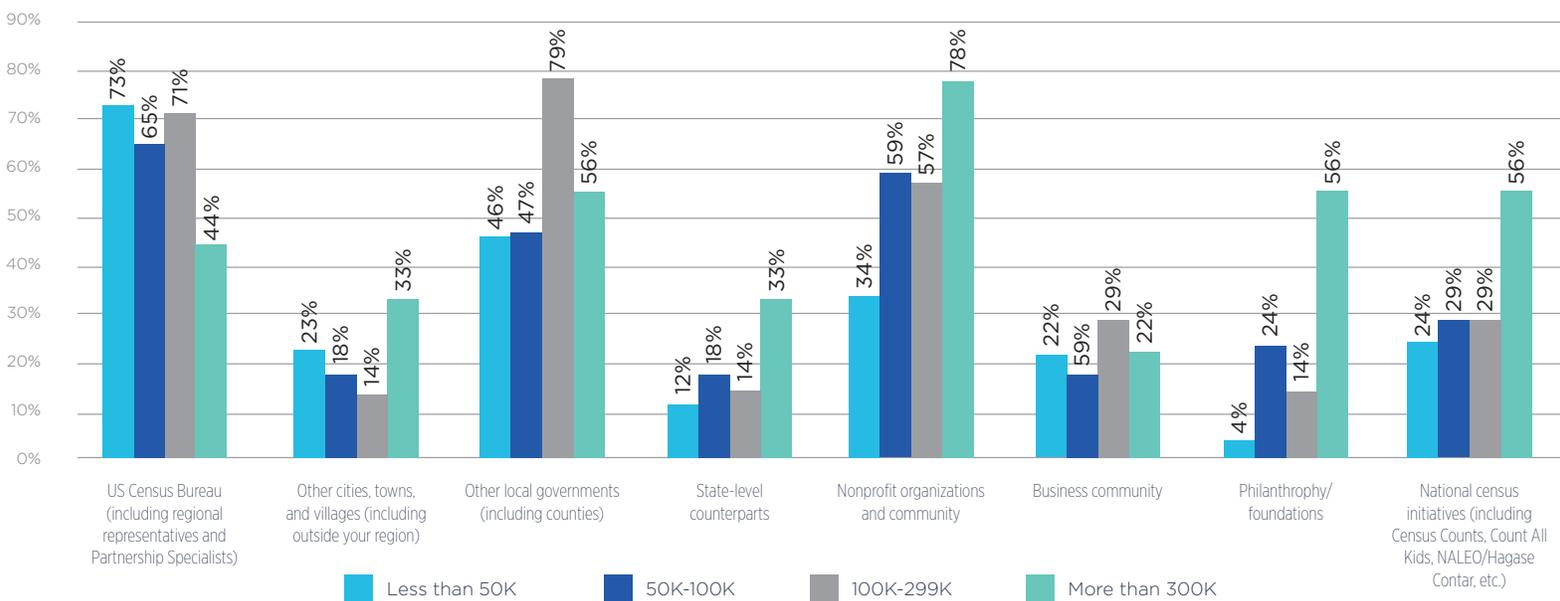
### Only 1% of cities

received federal support for voting and elections work, where there is no comparable level of federal-local partnership.

### 78% of large cities

found the best partners in nonprofit and community organizations, as well as philanthropies and foundations (56%)

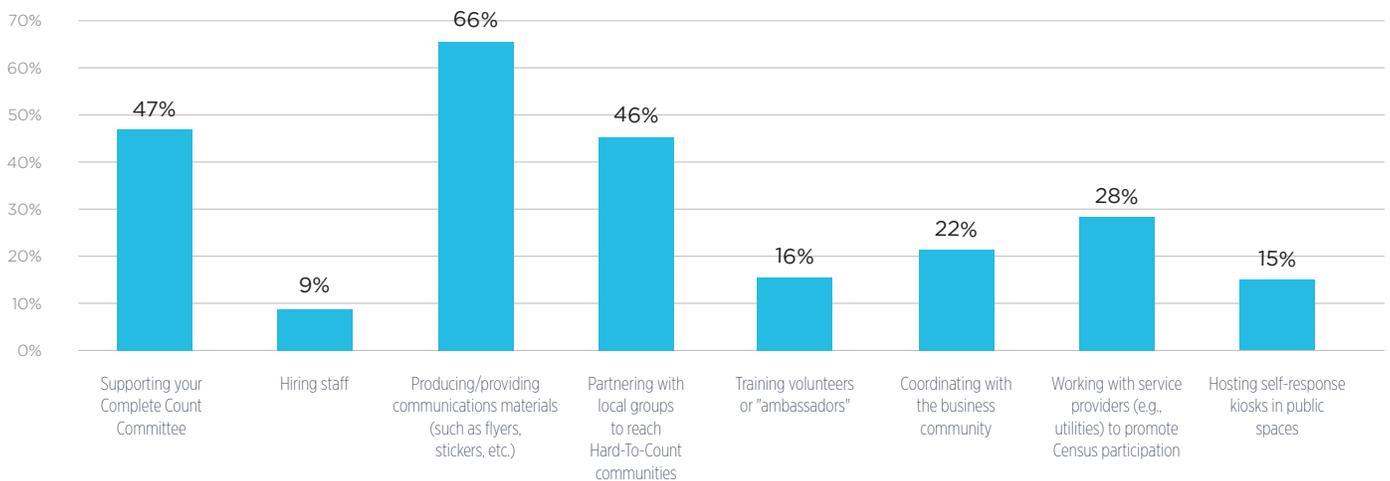
**WHAT, IF ANY, PARTNERSHIPS WERE MOST EFFECTIVE FOR YOUR 2020 CENSUS WORK? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY), BY CITY SIZE**



## Cities creatively responded to the unprecedented events of 2020 and adapted effective GOTC strategies to address election concerns

Amidst the unique obstacles presented by COVID-19 and the challenge of ensuring historically undercounted communities were engaged in the census while reeling from the disproportionate impacts of COVID and the movement for racial justice in their communities, cities rose to the challenge and creatively adapted to the circumstances to get-out-the-count.

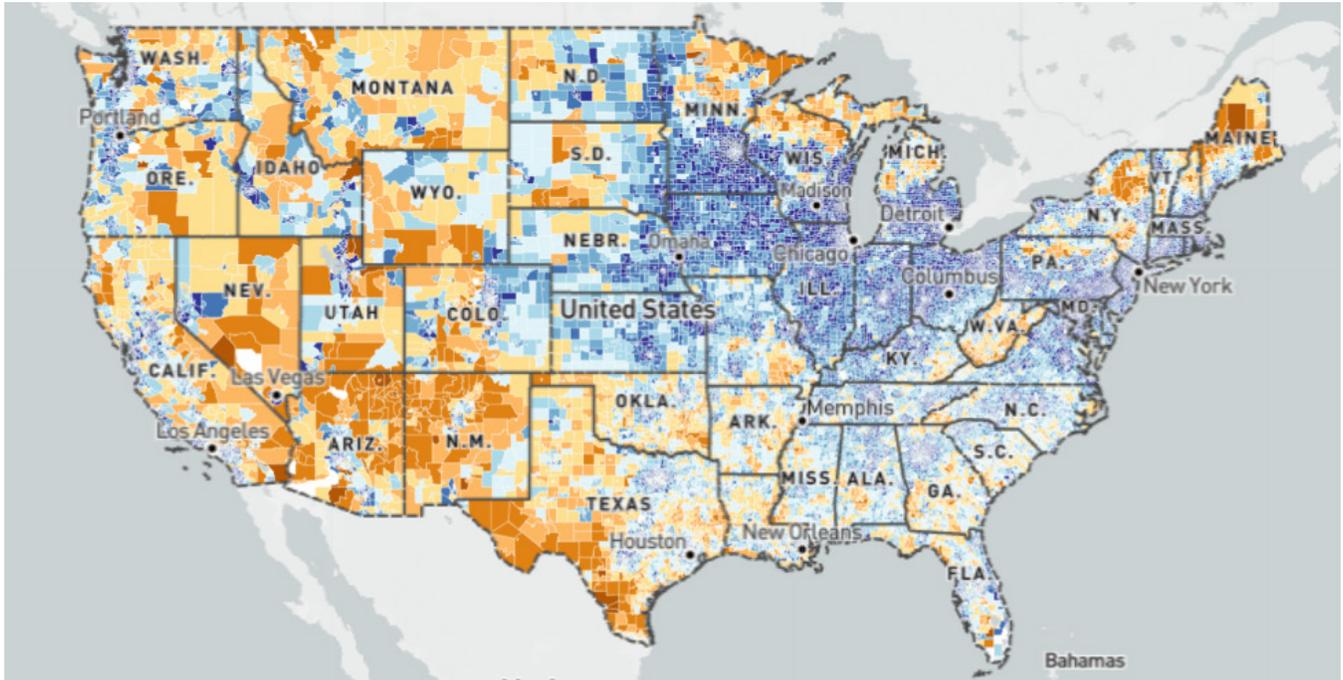
**WHAT ACTIVITIES HAVE PROVIDED THE HIGHEST RETURN-ON-INVESTMENT (SUCH AS INCREASED SELF-RESPONSE RATE, GREATER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, ETC.) IN YOUR GET-OUT-THE-COUNT EFFORT? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**



Even with the rallying efforts of the Census Bureau, the national census coalition, local community groups, complete count committees, and individual municipal census outreach initiatives, large swathes of the country, have

response rates well below 50%, especially urban centers and rural areas with large populations of historically undercounted BIPOC communities (areas in beige and brown in the maps below).

**CENSUS SELF RESPONSE RATE, BY CENSUS TRACT**

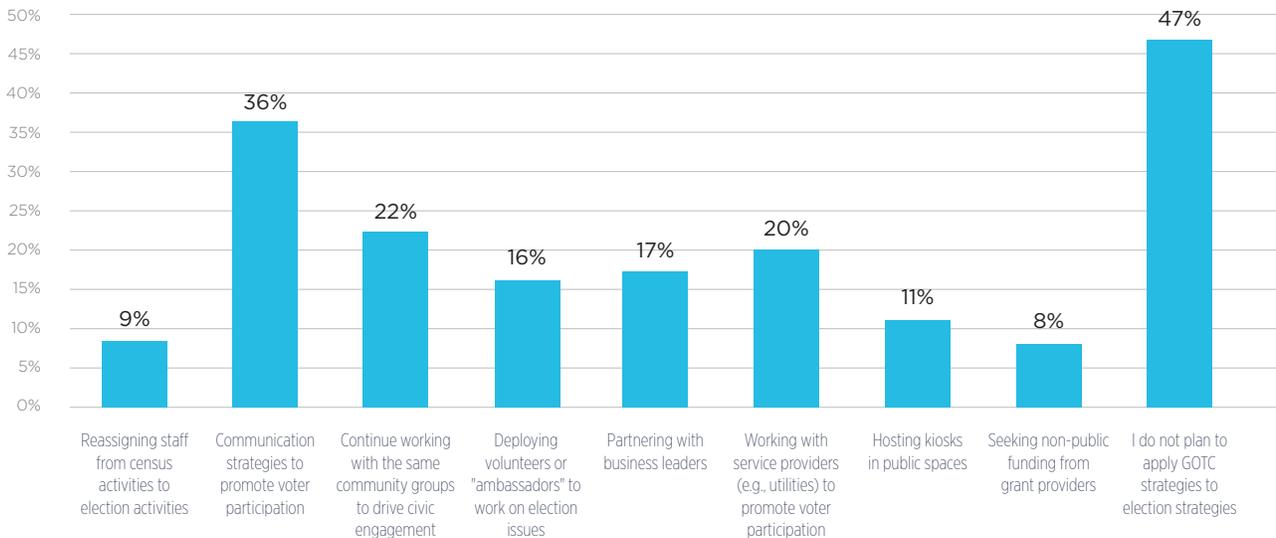


Note: Data as of October 2020. Blue indicates over 50% self response rate, while orange indicates less than 50% self response.  
 Source: <https://www.censushardtocountmaps2020.us/>

Cities are also leveraging lessons learned from their census outreach experience and community group relationships to repurpose effective GOTC

techniques for GOTV (get-out-the-vote) outreach efforts.

**WHICH GET-OUT-THE-COUNT STRATEGIES DO YOU PLAN TO APPLY TO THE UPCOMING ELECTION? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**



Despite preparations and planning, cities identified three top concerns for voting and elections in 2020:

**24% worried**

there would not be enough poll workers

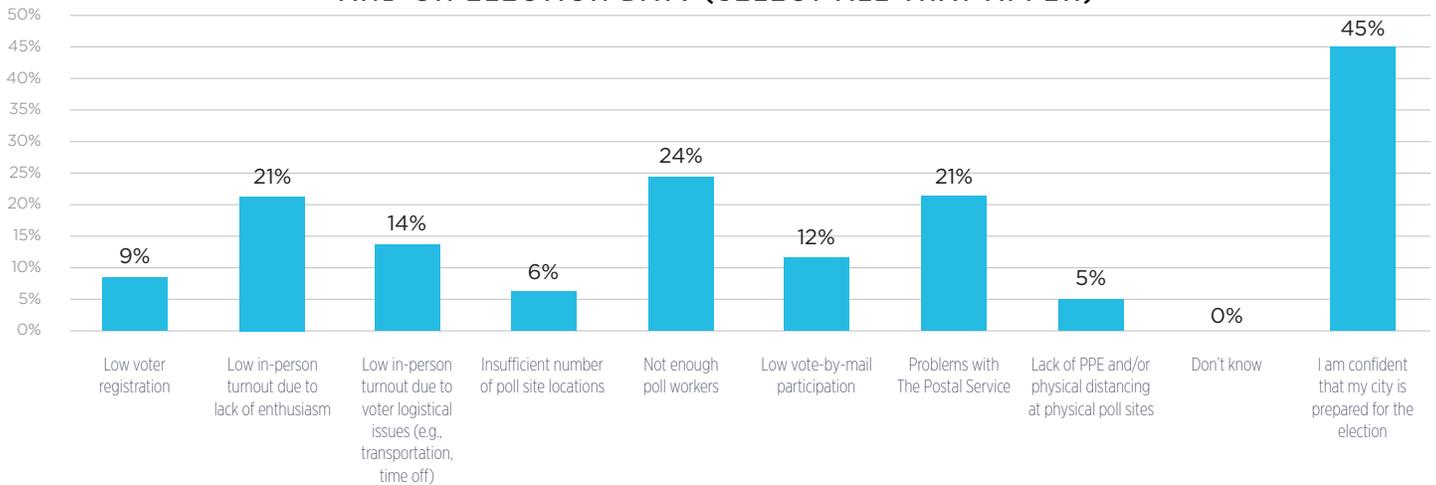
**21% were concerned**

about problems with the US Postal Service

**21% feared low in-person turnout**

due to lack of enthusiasm

**WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE YOUR CITY WILL FACE BEFORE AND ON ELECTION DAY? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**



To address these concerns, municipalities must focus on increased funding and partnerships to support cities in their election and voting work as well as implement proven actions to promote civic engagement.

53% of cities plan to utilize GOTC strategies in their election work, which could help to address some of these concerns through a focus on both infrastructure and community engagement.

- Infrastructure GOTC Strategies
  - Working with service providers (20%)
  - Hosting kiosks in public spaces (11%)
- Community Engagement GOTC Strategies
  - Communication strategies to promote voter participation (36%)
  - Continue working with the same community groups to drive civic engagement, including on redistricting, participatory budgeting, voter participation issues, etc. (22%)

- Deploying volunteers or “ambassadors” to work on election issues (16%)

These are the types of ongoing activities municipalities need to undertake as a foundation for permanent local democracy infrastructure. Cities pushed through with such activities during the most challenging census count in decades, now they must keep it going with voting and elections outreach to their residents, particularly among historically underrepresented groups.

- Additional GOTC Strategies that cities highlighted as having high ROI
  - Providing communication materials (66%)
  - Partnering with local groups to target Hard to Reach Communities (46%)
  - Coordinating with the business community (22%)
  - Training volunteers or “ambassadors” (16%)

## » A Call To Action for Municipalities – Permanent Investment in Local Democracy

Rather than taking an approach of census as “behind” us and voting “ahead”, cities, towns, and villages must look ahead to both as municipalities make permanent investments in both physical and social infrastructure as well as funding in the ongoing work of local democracy.

By committing to ongoing investment in civic engagement, the long-term benefits and efforts could mean more representative data about cities’ residents and communities, more accurate funding for the demand on city services and federal services implemented by cities, and a more participatory electorate in local, state, and federal elections.

Municipalities can lean into and assume even greater leadership in civic engagement efforts, but they will require increased funding and ongoing trusted partnerships in order to accomplish these objectives.

### Actions:

- Center the concepts that everyone counts and everyone’s vote counts as key values for municipal civic engagement.
- Embrace and cultivate deep relationships with community groups that are trusted messengers to achieve goals of increased representation in census, voting, and elections.
- Ensure funding for ongoing census and voter outreach via municipal budgets and multiple additional funding sources, especially from state and federal government, as well as philanthropy.

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### Acknowledgments:

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*Methodology:* This survey was conducted between September 11-25, 2020. A total of 116 cities, towns and villages from 36 states and the District of Columbia provided information to NLC.