

COVID-19 RESPONSE IN CITIES:

Making Voting and Elections Safe, Fair and Accessible

Many cities are facing challenges as they seek to keep voters informed and engaged while also navigating the realities of the pandemic, including new demands associated with remote voting, shifting primary dates and election safety. COVID-19 has forced cities to think outside the box and, in many cases, adopt innovative solutions to making voting safe and accessible. The 2020 elections are now over, but primaries, special elections, and off-cycle local races continue in 2021 and beyond. Beyond 2020's global pandemic, cities will likely have to navigate future elections under challenging conditions. Following are some key steps for strengthening local democracy both during the pandemic and beyond.

1 Offer a variety of safe and accessible options to vote, including vote-by-mail systems and early voting opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unanticipated shift to voting by mail across the country. Looking ahead, city leaders can combine vote-by-mail with a full range of options for expanding participation in future elections. During 2020, cities like [Flint, MI](#) and [Rochester, NY](#) responded heroically and creatively to COVID-related voting trends, including a sudden spike in absentee ballot requests and a need for secure drop-boxes for ballots. In other innovations, many jurisdictions (including DC and Maryland) allowed voters to cast a ballot at any polling place on Election Day, not just at their designated precinct. Many of these changes hold promise as long-term solutions for expanding voting, particularly for older voters, voters with disabilities, full-time caregivers, and other individuals for whom in-person voting can be a struggle.

NLC partnered with the Vote At Home Institute to create a [guide](#) to expanding voting access for city leaders. Regardless of exactly what options you pursue, communicating with county election officials is crucial to ensuring that cities and their residents are up to date on how people can vote. City leaders also have a vital

role to play in instilling confidence in the system. Contrary to unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud, remote voting has been found to be more secure than traditional booth machines.

Local leaders can also expand options for residents to vote in person ahead of election day. If early voting is offered in your state, encourage residents to take advantage of the opportunity. Cities also can organize town halls and post resources on the city website to educate residents about the process, including details on when, where and how to vote prior to Election Day in your city.

2 Use existing municipal infrastructure, including city services and departments, to amplify voter education messages

Even during the pandemic, municipal leaders can reach people where they are by integrating voter education messages into existing platforms already used by residents. Cities can incorporate reminders or FAQs on utility bill payment portals; at offices that offer city services like unemployment benefits, food stamps, housing support or health services; or in materials for residents applying for permits or licenses from the city. City leaders also can make voting and election materials available through existing municipal facilities such as shelters, food banks and youth centers. In 2020, both [Denver, CO](#) and [Durham, NC](#) hosted voter registration events with healthy food baskets for residents.

Leaders can also use their social media platforms, agency websites and rapid-response alert systems built and activated during the pandemic to reach constituents with timely reminders, [tools](#) and resources.

3 Educate municipal staff on cybersecurity best practices and make dual-authentication requirements standard across all agencies.

Reliance on technology in administering elections is accelerating, and cybersecurity has become a growing concern for municipalities large and small. By adopting an election security plan, coordinating with local and regional partners, and standardizing protocols, municipalities can better protect against cyber threats and reassure residents that local voting systems are safe. In 2019, Indiana dedicated [\\$4 million to pilot election-specific emergency management plans](#) and oversight programs. The Center for Applied Cybersecurity Research (CACR) at Indiana

University partnered with city clerks and election leaders across the state to develop best practices and ways to integrate election security into city crisis management plans. By committing resources to election protection in advance, cities can ensure a quick response to any breaches that may occur.

Local leaders can also reduce cybersecurity vulnerabilities by hosting data on a private host provider and increasing connection bandwidth for quick data transfers after poll sites close. The **City of Chicago, IL** focused on these priorities through a [partnership with Verizon](#) in the 2020 election to ensure safe polling sites. Chicago was able to transfer the data after the polls closed in less than 10 minutes and publicize results by 11 p.m. on election night during the primaries. Finally, city leaders can ensure safe elections by standardizing dual-authentication requirements across all departments to quickly verify authorized users and allow access to sensitive voter databases.

Harvard University's [State and Local Election Cybersecurity Playbook](#) can help local leaders ensure that your city's next election is safe and earns residents' trust.

4 Engage community leaders and trusted messengers to create a vibrant culture of civic engagement in your city, town or village.

Cities should consider all of the ways they can make voter engagement an ongoing priority during election seasons and in between. One key to success: partnering with nonpartisan groups also doing this work on the ground. Census Complete Count Committees in localities across the country can turn to voter engagement activities. Meanwhile, officials can collaborate with national organizations such as the [League of Women Voters](#), [NALEO Education Fund](#), and When We All Vote on regular registration drives, voter education, and voter turnout initiatives. Cities have successfully collaborated with local business leaders, sports teams, [faith leaders](#), Chambers of Commerce, and schools on similar efforts. For example, during the 2020 election season, **Orlando, FL** hosted a [voter registration drive](#) in partnership with the Orlando Magic. The city of **Tampa, FL** partnered with [Emgage Action](#) to encourage voter registration in the Muslim community. City leaders also can work together to set registration and turnout goals and develop plans to move toward full participation in elections. You can set the process in motion by committing to increasing voter engagement by taking the [Cities Vote Election Pledge](#).

5 Declare Election Day a city holiday and support city employees to be poll workers.

In a U.S. Census Bureau survey of roughly 19 million registered voters who did not vote in the 2016 general election, 14.3 percent said busy schedules were the main reason. Federal law does not require that employees have time off to vote, and several states lack protections for workers to take time to do so. Making Election Day a holiday has broad, bipartisan support; 71 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents and 59 percent of Republicans and GOP-leaning independents say they would support making Election Day a national holiday. While city leaders are not empowered to mandate a federal holiday or change the timing of a federal election, they can empower their communities by declaring a city holiday and providing paid time off for city employees to be poll workers. Local leaders also can [encourage local companies](#) to observe Election Day on their own calendars and give employees the day off.

The 2020 election has highlighted the critical role that cities play in staffing poll sites, and mayors of major cities have taken concrete steps to fill the need. In **Atlanta, GA**, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms [announced](#) that city employees would have up to eight hours of paid time off to serve as poll workers and four hours of paid time off to vote. The **City of Austin, TX**, [declared](#) November 3 “Let Texas Vote Day,” allowing its employees to request paid time off to vote, serve as poll workers, or participate in election-related activities. **Columbus, OH** Mayor Andrew Ginther [announced](#) that city employees could volunteer as poll workers without using vacation time. These types of policies generate the dual benefits of allowing employees to be more civically engaged and increasing staffing at poll sites, with the end result of making local democracy stronger.

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