



DEMOCRACIES THRIVE WHEN CITIES VOTE

PLAYBOOK FOR NONPARTISAN VOTER ENGAGEMENT

About 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.

About NLC's Center for City Solutions and Local Democracy Initiative

NLC's Center for City Solutions provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues, and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

Its Local Democracy Initiative provides technical assistance to local leaders around voting and elections, census, and civic engagement with the overall goal of helping local leaders ensure that every member of their community is fully engaged in the democratic process. Learn more about the Local Democracy Initiative at www.nlc.org/initiative/local-democracy-initiative

About Cities Vote

Cities Vote is a network of mayors, municipal leaders, and their staff who are keenly aware that there is a deepening demand from residents to feel included and empowered in the democratic process at every level. They are committed to working with community-based organizations and trusted leaders who have been laying the groundwork to grow voter turnout for years. As the most trusted level of government, local leaders are powerful local conveners who can increase participation rates nationwide— starting locally. Learn more about Cities Vote at www.nlc.org/initiative/cities-vote

About the National Nonpartisan Conversation on Voter Rights

In October 2021, Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot served as co-chairs of the [National Nonpartisan Conversation on Voter Rights](#) (NNCVR). At this convening, attendees of the NNCVR helped to develop a list of 63 actions that municipal leaders can implement, which were incorporated into the following guide.

Acknowledgements

Cities Vote would like to thank **Clarence E. Anthony**, **Brooks Rainwater**, **Jenn Steinfeld**, **Dana Watters**, **Jewel Constance**, and **Mike Gleeson** (National League of Cities); Denver Mayor **Michael B. Hancock**, **Kristin M. Bronson**, CAO City Attorney, and the City of Denver team; and The National Nonpartisan Conversation on Voter Rights participants for their thought leadership and contributions.

About Mayor Hancock

Mayor Michael B. Hancock has dedicated his career to promoting social justice and civil rights. In 2021, Mayor Hancock convened the first National Nonpartisan Conversation on Voting Rights following the alarming rise in bills introduced across the country to restrict people's foundational democratic right and curtail access to the ballot box. Recognizing this alarming trend, and knowing the role local officials can play in challenging it, he brought together mayors, county commissioners and elections officials from across the country to address the challenge and begin to implement strategies to protect voting rights and push back against these laws.

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Foreword

IN RECENT YEARS, the terms “voting access,” “voting rights” and “election integrity” have become highly politicized, rather than reflecting the American values our predecessors have fought for. The flood of legislation seeking to restrict access to the ballot box – especially for Americans from marginalized communities – has been tough to witness, and we face an uphill battle in the struggle for voting rights.

There has been a concerted effort to pass state laws that prevent local election officials from carrying out their responsibilities to voters. Several states have enacted or proposed legislation that binds the hands of local officials and, in some cases, threatens them with felony prosecution for actions as simple as changing election-related deadlines.

Even as new laws make their jobs more difficult, city and county clerks, registrars, commissioners and other local elected officials and their staff have been the targets of harassment and threats, ranging from violent social media posts to protests on their front lawns. Volunteer poll workers have also been targeted for simply doing their civic duty and helping members of their community exercise their fundamental right to vote.

In October 2021, the National League of Cities (NLC) joined a group of passionate local leaders convened by Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to discuss how city governments can ensure all residents can be more informed and engaged in the democratic process. We discussed the challenges that make it harder for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, young and disabled voters to cast a ballot and the steps local leaders can take to implement changes in their communities to make it easier for their residents to vote.

This voter engagement playbook reflects the knowledge, innovative thinking and collaborative spirit of this group of dedicated leaders who are already doing the work to ensure all of their residents have a voice in their communities. In sharing it, we hope to give local leaders across the country a starting point for becoming champions of democracy.



Clarence E. Anthony

CEO AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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Introduction

THE RIGHT TO vote is the foundational principle of American democracy. Protecting the vote is more important now than ever as hundreds of bills threaten to make voting more difficult in dozens of states nationwide. A [2016 study from Massachusetts Institute of Technology \(MIT\)](#) found that more than 1 million Americans weren't able to vote in the federal election that year as a result of issues including long lines at the polls, mail ballots not arriving on time, and registration problems. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 19 states enacted laws in 2021 that made it harder to vote, such as making mail-in and early voting more difficult or even illegal, imposing strict voter ID laws, and allowing the closure of poll sites. Similarly restrictive bills have already been pre-filed, carried over, or introduced [in 27 states](#) during the 2022 legislative session.

“Who Votes For Mayors”, a project from Portland State University, examined voting trends in 50 U.S. cities by analyzing 23 million voting records. They found that fewer than 15% of eligible voters turn out for local races, such as mayor and city council. Additionally, it identified voting “deserts” as a common trend across the country, localities in which a small number of residents end up influencing critical issues such as schools, parks, housing, police, and transportation. The threat to the core principle of “one person, one vote” limits the opportunity for fair and transparent representation in our cities and towns.

Democracy is not fully realized when lawmakers impose barriers that result in disenfranchisement. This is why city leaders are fighting to protect the democratic rights of their residents. At the beginning of 2022, 144 local officials [signed a letter](#) to Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell urging passage of new voting rights legislation aimed at protecting access to the ballot.

About the Democracies Thrive When Cities Vote Playbook

In October 2021, the National League of Cities facilitated sessions as part of the National Nonpartisan Conversation on Voter Rights (NNCVR) to set goals that would help leaders move their cities from conversation to action. Based on recommendations from the convening, the Local Democracy Initiative and the National League of Cities developed this high-impact playbook for local leaders looking to move their cities and towns towards 100% democratic participation. It offers a menu of plays that can be scaled to the individual capacity of a given municipality and the needs of its community.

The playbook is divided into three key sections: voter education, voter engagement, and voter access. These are areas in which residents, particularly those from marginalized communities, have historically faced barriers to voting. While these plays are not a solution for all forms of voter suppression and disenfranchisement, they are effective actions for reaching communities that have been historically denied access to the polls. These actions serve to inspire and present examples of how to address critical voting issues.

A Statement on Racial Equity and Inclusion

Voting and election administration have a long-standing relationship to racial and economic justice. From the outset of the American experiment, states have been responsible for determining who is eligible to vote.

Throughout history, that responsibility has often been used to disenfranchise those without power and to uphold a racial hierarchy and other undemocratic systems of power. Overcoming existing inequities—represented by lower registration rates, lack of engagement with Black, Indigenous, Latinx/Hispanic, other communities of color, and individuals with disabilities, legal restrictions that disproportionately impact those same voters, and voter intimidation—takes tremendous investment and requires the combined work of community engagement, local governments, and national advocacy and policy reform.





Voter Education

IN EVERY ELECTION, voter education is necessary to ensure that all constituents understand their rights, the offices and ballot questions for which they are voting, and how and where to vote. For an election to be successful and democratic, voters must be encouraged to take responsibility for and pride in their civic engagement and duty.

THE PLAY:

Build Partnerships With Trusted Messengers

Community institutions such as libraries, service organizations, religious congregations, and nursing homes serve a diverse range of community members across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines. By building on the established trust relationships between these institutions and members of the community, local leaders can ensure that residents feel confident that information is coming from a reliable source and that they are reaching a broad cross-section of the community.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Identify three to five core community institutions with a track record of engaging with underserved communities. Work with institutions to determine what obstacles their members face when it comes to voting, such as uncertainty about filling out absentee ballots or language barriers. Develop and distribute informational materials and plan an outreach event specific to those needs.

WIN

Every year, dozens of state, county, and municipal governments, as well as nonprofits and community groups, partner with the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) for their annual [National Disability Voter Registration Week](#). AAPD provides trainings, toolkits, sample [proclamations](#), and translated materials for events nationwide, such as those held in partnership with the [City of Milwaukee](#) in 2019 and the [Orange County Supervisor of Elections](#) in 2021.

“A recent survey conducted by the EAC and the Program for Disability Research at Rutgers University reported a three percent voter registration gap in the 2020 elections between disabled and nondisabled voters.”¹

THE PLAY: Combat Disinformation and Misinformation

Intentionally misleading messages and outright lies threaten our democracy. These messages discourage potential voters by questioning the validity of mail-in ballots, deeming the voting process too complicated, spreading manipulated videos of candidates, and perpetuating unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud. State and local election officials play a crucial role in defending U.S. elections against these threats and in protecting American voters from disenfranchisement due to disinformation.



HOW TO GET STARTED

Create and promote a [#TrustedInfo2022 nonpartisan public education microsite](#) on your city's webpage that includes links to state and local election administrators. Share logistical information, such as local polling locations and hours, COVID-19 safety precautions, and what to expect while waiting in line to vote, as well as answers to common questions or myths. Incorporate resources and recommendations from the [Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency's Mis, Dis, and Malinformation library](#) and share an e-mail address and phone number for residents to use to contact your office to report circulating disinformation and misinformation.



WIN

In November 2019, The National Association of Secretaries of State launched an initiative called #TrustedInfo2020. There are 40 Secretaries of State that act as their state's top election official. This initiative encourages Americans to trust their state and local election officials as sources of information by driving voters to election officials' websites for accurate information.

“Voting is the defining act for a democracy. However, this action is only meaningful if public deliberation and decision-making are grounded in veritable and equitable information.”²



Voter Engagement

FOR MANY COMMUNITY members, participation in the democratic process goes beyond voting to include activities such as joining neighborhood commissions and boards, participating in council meetings and participatory budgeting processes, and serving as local election officials. By creating opportunities for residents to get and stay engaged, cities can increase voter turnout in local and federal elections and build a greater sense of community satisfaction.

THE PLAY: Engage Young People

Young people under the age of 25 are often underrepresented in political decision-making. The effects of COVID-19 further removed young leaders from participating in civil society, and those who were already at an economic disadvantage face greater barriers to digital engagement because of low-quality or high-cost Internet access and hardware. City leaders can support youth engagement by creating avenues that give them a greater voice in their communities.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Create a youth commission, hosted by a city or town councilor or other local leader and facilitated by a community partner - such as a high school, university, or nonprofit organization. Offer both online and paper applications to high school and/or college-aged young people in your community. Be mindful that not all youth may attend universities or colleges, so reach out to community centers and libraries to aid in recruitment. Ensure that youth from all parts of your community are represented on the council and that their ideas and priorities are centered in determining goals. Plan events around [National Voter Registration Day](#) and National Voter Education Week and amplify the voices of first-time voters and the issues they care about.

WIN

The City of Philadelphia launched [First Vote 2020](#) ahead of the 2020 election to center Gen-Z in voter registration and outreach efforts. Members of the Philadelphia Youth Commission served as ambassadors and supported voter registration drives held by the Mayor's Office of Youth Engagement. The city equipped volunteers with "VRTees," t-shirts bearing QR codes that took individuals to the city's voter registration and absentee ballot request forms. The hashtag #FirstVote2020PHL allowed first-time voters to document and share their experiences.

“When more—and more diverse—young people are politically engaged earlier in life, they are more likely to remain engaged in the future and to be part of an electorate that is more representative of the country, which should be a key goal of our democracy.”³

THE PLAY: Build a Community Narrative

Building an inclusive democracy is a big task. One way to do this is to get residents involved in shaping the narrative about voting as a matter of civic pride. Key to this is ensuring that residents feel they are taken seriously and respected by their local officials. When a resident casts their ballot, they should feel as though they are part of a broader movement, not a one-off transaction.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Partner with a hyperlocal institution, such as a sports team, a local business, or a local news anchor, to get the word out about election day and to serve as a focal point for hometown pride. Create a social media hashtag that's specific to your community and ask residents to share why they voted or post pictures of their "I Voted" stickers to feature on the town's social media page.

WIN

Spurred in part by the pandemic and the need for large spaces to accommodate social distancing, local election administrators teamed up with professional athletes [across the country](#) during the 2020 election, repurposing arenas as voting sites, secure ballot storage facilities, and ballot drop-off locations. Fans of their home teams got the chance to visit stadiums and receive specially-designed "I Voted" stickers in home team colors, and some teams gave their staff the day off to serve as poll workers.

“ Making people feel good by reinforcing the notion that society is grateful for their participation in the political process reminds people that they have a role to play and reinforces their willingness to be responsive.”⁴



Voter Access

THE PROCESS OF registering to vote, getting to a poll site, and waiting to cast a ballot can be a challenge to many voters, and racial, economic, and health disparities make for further obstacles. When voters do cast a ballot, the process should be as efficient as possible. Local leaders have limited control over when and how residents can vote but can use their positions to minimize barriers that can discourage people from casting a ballot.

THE PLAY:

Equip Election Workers with the Tools They Need

Voters should feel safe when voting and election officials and poll workers should feel safe when doing their jobs. Most poll workers receive only a few hours of training, focused almost entirely on procedures, not on deescalating hostile situations, the machinations of the electoral process, or state laws about provisional ballots. Poll workers who feel ill-equipped to handle real-world situations and voters who feel that they can't trust that their ballot will be properly handled leave everyone feeling less than confident in the democratic process.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Poll workers may face questions around election procedures that voters have a right to know. Work with election administrators, attorneys, and nonprofit groups like the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law to provide nonpartisan fact sheets on state election procedures, voters' rights, and poll workers' rights in order to respond to questions to help ensure that both voters and poll workers are confident in the process. The Justice Department has launched a task force dedicated to addressing the rise in threats to election officials and the nonpartisan, nonprofit Center for Election Innovation & Research has created The Election Official Legal Defense Network to provide no-cost legal assistance to election officials. Make contact information available to poll workers and consider incorporating de-escalation and anti-bias training into poll worker trainings.

WIN

Boards of Elections in [Ohio](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Texas](#), and [Arizona](#) were part of an increasing trend of providing poll workers with de-escalation training ahead of the 2020 election. Poll workers received guidance on how to not only handle potential conflict, but empathize with frustrated voters. At the same time, [some states](#) issued new guidance around permissible behavior by poll watchers while groups like [The Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection](#) and the [Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law](#) provided guidance to voters about their rights and how to report potential violations.

“The right to vote is the cornerstone of our democracy, the right from which all other rights ultimately flow.”⁵

THE PLAY: Make Voting Sites User-Friendly

Officials continue to close poll sites in many areas, leaving those sites that remain overcrowded and more difficult to access. Voters are often not aware that their poll site has changed either due to closures or to redistricting, only to show up to cast a ballot and be redirected. For voters with limited time available to vote or those with disabilities, this may discourage them from ultimately casting a ballot. Local leaders have a responsibility to ensure that residents have more than an easily-missed postcard informing them of the change and that getting to and from the correct site takes minimal time and effort. When possible, they should also aim to locate poll sites at venues with an eye to cultural sensitivity, avoiding police station community rooms and religious establishments.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Conduct an assessment of poll sites in advance of elections, ensuring that there is sufficient access by public transportation and parking availability. Consider waiving parking fees or transit fares for voters, asking local businesses to allow public use of lots for the day, and working with local rideshare and transportation companies to offer deals. Ensure that sites offer accommodation to voters who may have difficulty standing in long lines. Use different types of media, including social and print media, flyers, and posters in high-traffic areas, to remind voters to check whether their poll site has changed and provide both a URL and phone number where voters can go to find out.

WIN

[Tulsa, OK](#), [Wichita, KS](#), and [Los Angeles, CA](#) were among cities that made public transit free to voters during the 2020 election, ensuring that the cost of a bus or train ride would not be a barrier to voting. For shorter distances, voters could use a free [Citi Bike](#) in New York City, while [Lime](#) offered promotional codes good for two free scooter or bike rides.

“While the experience of casting a vote can be a ritual involving a close feeling of community and self-expression, it can also be one of frustration with long queues, or fear and intimidation as party activists threaten would-be voters. The consequences of these experiences at the polls can have wide-ranging impacts, from a voter’s confidence in electoral democracy to their willingness to return to the polls.”⁶



Conclusion

We are asking cities to commit to between one and three of the plays listed above and to share this playbook with other local leaders. 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.

Democratic participation has historically been viewed as a national challenge, but cities, towns, and villages have the unique opportunity to be their residents' strongest advocates in increasing civic participation. City leaders are uniquely positioned to understand and address local challenges. The Cities Vote peer-to-peer learning network will serve as a forum for meaningful peer-to-peer service and problem-solving dialogue.

Endnotes

- ¹ United States Election Assistance Commission (2021). The EAC Celebrates National Disability Voter Registration Week and Reaffirms Commitment to Helping Election Officials Serve Voters with Disabilities. [The EAC Celebrates National Disability Voter Registration Week and Reaffirms Commitment to Helping Election Officials Serve Voters with Disabilities | U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#)
- ² Chen, E. Chen, E., Chang, H., Rao, A., Lerman, K., Cowan, G., & Ferrara, E. (2021). COVID-19 misinformation and the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-57>
- ³ Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2019). [Growing Voters: Engaging Youth Before they Reach Voting Age to Strengthen Democracy | CIRCLE \(tufts.edu\)](#)
- ⁴ Panagopoulos, C. as quoted in Suttie, J. (2018). The Emotions That Make You Decide to Vote, Greater Good Magazine. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_emotions_that_make_you_decide_to_vote
- ⁵ Monaco, L. (2021, June 25). Guidance Regarding Threats Against Election Workers [Memorandum]. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Deputy Attorney General. <https://www.justice.gov/dag/page/file/1406286/download>
- ⁶ James, T. S., Garnet, H. A., and Luis, C (2022). The Voter Experience Around the World, Electoral Integrity Project. <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/the-voter-experience>

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