

Libraries *and* Voter Engagement



Voting is one of the greatest privileges and responsibilities of citizenship in the United States. Yet, turnout in national elections is consistently lower than two-thirds of eligible voters. Participation rates among certain demographic groups and in state or local elections are often lower still. There is frequent talk about the critical role of libraries in our democracy. What does that look like in practice?

Libraries are nonpartisan, but they are not indifferent. As institutions that provide access to information, resources, programs, and public spaces for all members of a community, libraries are a cornerstone for civic engagement.

Across the country, many libraries:

- provide information about voting and voter registration.
- offer services for voters and registrants, such as hosting polling places.
- convene candidate forums and debates.
- deliver resources and educational programs that increase civic and information literacy.

This guide provides information and examples of how libraries of any type, in any community, can meet their communities' needs for information related to voting and encourage full participation in our democratic processes, with a focus on the upcoming 2020 elections.

GET STARTED

State and local voting laws vary considerably across the United States. Can your library host a voter registration event, polling location, or ballot drop-off site? It depends on your local laws.

This guide presents ideas that can be used by many types of libraries, but not every idea may be appropriate for your

community. As best practice before undertaking activities related to voting, we recommend that you:

- check your local voting laws. A good place to start is Nonprofit Vote's state-by-state resource: nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/.
- ensure that all staff and volunteers are aware of local voting laws as they relate to library activities, and keep your board/administration apprised of programs and activities.
- communicate with your local election authorities. They may be able to advise or partner with you. To find your state or local election office, visit usa.gov/election-office.
- coordinate with local nonpartisan civic engagement organizations, such as the League of Women Voters. They may be able to share information about other activities in the community or contribute to the library's efforts.



National Voter Registration Day at Topeka Shawnee Public Library in Kansas

“At a time when we are searching everywhere for community, for connection, for a sense of belonging, for the engines of democracy that will revitalize our civic life, we have . . . the most amazing social infrastructure that designers could ever build and it’s called the library.” —Eric Klinenberg, professor, author

TIMELINE

Nationally, the 2020 United States elections will take place on November 3, 2020. However, in many places, important deadlines and activities take place well prior to November. There are many opportunities for libraries to inform and serve voters throughout the year. For 2020, here are some key deadlines that may apply in your state:

Primary elections: Many states will hold primary elections in early and mid-2020. To vote in these elections, voters must have met applicable registration deadlines and requirements.

Voter registration: Many states have deadlines to register to vote or update a voter registration (e.g. if a previously regis-

tered voter has moved, changed their name, or regained eligibility to vote). To vote in the 2020 general elections, these deadlines are generally in early October.



National Voter Registration Day is an unofficial holiday that takes place the fourth Tuesday of September when many communities and organizations promote voter registration. ALA is pleased to partner with National Voter Registration Day to encourage libraries to support voter registration efforts in states where that is appropriate. Learn more at nationalvoterregistrationday.org.

Absentee voting: In some places, there is a deadline to request an absentee or mail ballot if the voter will need one.

Early and mail-in voting: Many states offer some form of early, absentee, or mail-in voting, which begins in some places more than a month prior to Election Day.

Election Day: November 3, 2020.



Visit vote.org's state-by-state list of deadlines:

vote.org/voter-registration-deadlines/

HOW LIBRARIES CAN SUPPORT VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Publish Virtual Resources



- Link to your local and state election offices from the library's home page and include reminders of key dates on the home page banner.
- Curate an electronic collection of resources on voting, democracy, or key campaign issues.
- Create a LibGuide or website that connects your community to key voter information such as registration information, candidate pages, news outlets, and election dates and locations. Be sure to include early and regular voting sites, as well as documentation requirements for registration and for voting.
- Develop a community resource page that links to local organizations working on voter engagement.
- Use social media to keep your community informed about key dates and events.



Developed by librarians Nate Gass and Haley Samuelson, Be a Voter is an online voter education resource offered by Cook Memorial Public Library District in Illinois.

Visit: cooklib.org/be-a-voter/.

“The Civic & Community Engagement Team hosts Meet & Greet the Candidates nights, which feature all candidates in a space open to all residents. The programs are extremely popular with candidates and voters alike.”

—Jean Canosa Albano, Springfield City Library, MA



Create Displays

Create a voter information area in your library and publicize its availability to the community. Include information from local election agencies and nonpartisan organizations, and post key dates such as voter registration deadlines, primary elections, early voting, and general election.

With the approach of the 100th anniversary of passage of the 19th amendment, granting women the right to vote, create a voting timeline that includes major milestones in U.S. voting history, from the drafting of the Constitution and the passage of the Voting Rights Act to the change in voting age.

Build a display of books by candidates, or books about voting, our democratic system, or major issues in the election.



Host Events

If your state and local laws allow, host voter registration at the library. Have the academic or school library serve as a voter registration site. In schools, offer voter registration during open houses or parent teacher conferences.

Host a candidate forum. Be sure that all candidates on the ballot are invited and a nonpartisan facilitator is selected.

Host a debate or forum about a local or national issue and include speakers on all sides of the issue.

Invite a local expert to give a talk on voting, elections, or local issues. Include a question and answer session after the talk.

Host an event for community members or students to watch a campaign debate. Follow with a facilitated discussion.

Host a movie night featuring a film about U.S. politics and invite a local expert to moderate a discussion after the film.

Sponsor a mock election for youth who are not yet eligible to vote. In school settings, partner with a social studies teacher and precede the vote with a mock debate.



Make sure that voting information is visible and available during other library events.

Live stream events on Facebook or another platform so that they are accessible to an even wider audience.

Spread the Word

Educate library staff and volunteers about issues that will impact libraries and encourage them to ask questions of candidates about those issues.



Have one of your library champions (director, trustee, volunteer) write a letter to the editor about the resources the library offers, and how important libraries are to an informed and engaged electorate.

Create a bookmark or giveaway that includes key dates and highlights the library's election-related programs and resources.

Work with local or student news outlets to publicize events and resources.

Partner with Other Organizations

Many opportunities exist to collaborate with national and local organizations to register voters, educate the community about issues and candidates, host events, and share information.



Reach out to nonpartisan groups such as the League of Women Voters, Rotary, chamber of commerce, student government, Parent Teacher Association, and others. Some have national websites that offer resources and can connect you with local affiliates.

ALA is pleased to partner with organizations that engage voters in all stages of the electoral process, including **Democracy Class**, **National Voter Registration Day, 22x20**, and **Purple Project for Democracy**.

RESOURCES

Community Conversations

ala.org/LTC > ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) website offers a variety of free dialogue and deliberation training and resources to help libraries engage their communities.

lww.org/elections/educating-voters > The League of Women Voters partners with organizations across the country to educate voters via forums, debates, and other programs.

Voter Registration and Information

fvap.gov > For service members and Americans living overseas, the Federal Voting Assistance Program provides critical information for voting absentee.

nationalvoterregistrationday.org > National Voter Registration Day provides training and resources for any organization that wishes to host a voter registration effort. NVRD is celebrated on the fourth Tuesday of September.

nonprofitvote.org > Nonprofit Vote is a consortium of nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations seeking to provide information and resources in order to increase voter participation in elections. It includes state-by-state voting information.

turbovote.org > Turbo Vote offers English and Spanish language resources, including a mobile app, to facilitate greater participation in elections with voter registration, filing for absentee ballots, voting information, and deadline reminders.

vote.gov > This federal website connects visitors to online voter registration and provides additional registration information, including for those voting from overseas.

vote411.org > A project of the League of Women Voters, Vote 411 offers voter registration information, including deadlines, and allows voters to see what will appear on their ballot.

whenweallvote.org > When We All Vote is focused on increasing participation in elections at every level of government, particularly among young voters.



Candidate and Election Information



ballotpedia.org > Ballotpedia is a nonpartisan information source that allows voters to see what will be on their ballots.

campuselect.org > Campus Election Engagement Project is designed for faculty, staff, and students at colleges and universities, and includes both state and national elections.

fec.gov > The Federal Elections Commission includes campaign filing information for candidates as well as a searchable database for voters.

govtrack.us > GovTrack allows users to track federal legislation or see the voting and bill sponsorship records of Representatives and Senators.

votesmart.org > Vote Smart includes search tools that allow you to research candidates and elected officials, voting records, and issues. They also offer a mobile app.

Fact Checking Tools



factcheck.org > Fact Check is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and focuses on national politics.

politifact.com > Founded by the Tampa Bay Times and now operated by the Poynter Institute, PolitiFact is a nonpartisan fact checking organization that focuses on national political figures.

For Children and Youth



20x20.org > A partner of YALSA and ALA, 22x20 builds youth media literacy skills as a path to informed civic engagement.

bensguide.gpo.gov > Sponsored by the Government Printing Office and an official partner of AASL, this resource is dedicated to educating children of different age levels about the workings of federal government.

kidsvotingusa.org > Kids Voting USA offers nonpartisan information for kids and resources for educators.

rockthevote.org > A nonprofit founded by members of the recording industry, Rock the Vote is geared towards younger voters and includes information on issues and voting, as well as **Democracy Class**—lesson plans for teachers and education partners working with high school students.