



Institute on Race, Power
and Political Economy

Promoting Nonpartisan Multicultural Youth Get-Out-The-Vote Activities: A Guide for California Nonprofit Organizations

**“Su voto es su voz”
(Your vote is your voice)**

Willie Velásquez, founder, Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project

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Call to Action

This nonpartisan voter promotion guide is intended to inspire and support community-based nonprofit and advocacy groups working closely with voting age youth of color to actively engage such young people in local and statewide electoral processes as active and informed voters. It is the product of a collaborative effort by many leading California racial, gender, and economic justice leaders who seek to promote more inclusive policy making related to economic security and prosperity-sharing in a broad range of fields.

If California is to achieve continuing global leadership as an increasingly multicultural political economy and afford more meaningful opportunities for racial equity and shared prosperity, it is vital to encourage more robust voter engagement by its large and fast-growing population of young people of color. The case for this call to action is real and urgent. In 2020, white voters cast 49 percent of all votes in California, which was 12 points higher than their share of the population.^[1] Only 14 percent of voters in 2020 were aged 18-29, three points lower than their share of the population – a higher rate than in past years, but still significantly lower than it should be.^[2] In fact, according to Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), voter turnout among youth in California declined by 8.2 percentage points from 2018 to 2022.^[3]

Demographic trends make it clear that the future of California is its multicultural youth. But without more robust efforts to activate the state's multicultural youth voice in our democracy, it is unlikely that we can achieve the kinds of policy priorities and reforms required to ensure their interests prevail in our public governance.

To get there, we need to instill an urgency in young multicultural voters to get out and vote. And we need to mobilize youth-serving nonprofits, networks, and organizations that work with multicultural youth populations across the state to help them do so.

This guide is designed to increase the number of young voters of color, currently our state's lowest-propensity voting bloc, so that they become regular voters and more engaged participants in local and state governance. Over the long run, this is the only way for California to retain its status as a global leader in politics, culture, and economy.

Who is this guide intended for?

This guide is designed for California 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporations to assist them in mobilizing young people to vote and engage in civic affairs. It is not intended to provide legal advice. Consult an attorney if you are concerned about any potential activity you plan to engage in.

The audience for this guide is not just those organizations that have a mission to work on voting rights or civic engagement, but also organizations that work with youth across a wide spectrum of issues and services. While designed for increasing voting and civic participation for multicultural youth, much of the advice in this guide can help nonprofits do the same for all of their clients. In the Resources section at the end of this guide you can find a number of important nonprofits that are working on voter engagement issues with youth. We encourage you to connect and partner with them.

Why focus on youth, and especially multicultural youth?

As an age group, youth have historically been our state's lowest propensity voters. However, the future belongs to them! These days, young people are disproportionately affected by the great policy choices of our times. With existential issues defining national and statewide debate on issues like education, voting, gender, immigrants rights, climate justice, and responsible gun and community violence prevention policies, it's increasingly essential for the youth perspective to have a more representative impact on our politics.

There are at least two reasons to focus on multicultural youth. First, non-white persons are increasingly making up a larger share of the youth population which will over time translate into a majority of the California population.^[4] Second, African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American voters have lower turnout rates at any age.^[5] We know low-propensity voters can be activated by trusted sources, like nonprofit organizations that they work with or have a client relationship with.



Why are nonprofits essential portals to expand the youth of color to vote?

Recent research on voter turnout shows that nonprofit clients are particularly receptive to nonpartisan Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaigns supported by trusted nonprofits they have worked with, and that their turnout rates increase significantly when they are encouraged to vote by those nonprofits.^[6] Nonprofit engagement can improve the turnout rates across all categories of voters, and has been shown to make significant improvements in turnout rates for young voters, voters of color, and low-income voters.^[7] Improving turnout rates also attracts the attention of political campaigns that focus on high-propensity voters. This attention in turn engages voters further and encourages even higher turnout.^[8] Given all that is at stake in our contemporary public discourse, it is imperative for youth-serving nonprofits to be more actively engaged in efforts that encourage the young people they serve, especially disproportionately disengaged young people of color, to participate and vote.

“Your voices are being heard and you’re proving to our ancestors that their struggles were not in vain. Now we have one more thing we need to do to walk in our true power, and that is to vote.”

Beyoncé, Grammy Award-winning Singer and Artist

Registering is the first step, but voting is the goal.

We want people to actually vote. Many nonprofits focus on registering voters. One reason – but hardly the only one – that nonprofits stop at registering is because of a mistaken notion that nonprofits cannot legally engage in GOTV activities. There is a misunderstanding that under the IRS rules that govern nonprofit conduct voter registration is not political, but voting is. In fact, they are both political activities – and they are both *permissible* 501(c)(3) activities.^[9]

As long as you keep it nonpartisan, you can engage in a full GOTV campaign at election time.^[10]

Here are some useful general resources for your nonprofit organization or network if you want to run a permissible voter registration drive in California:

- **California Voter Registration Drive Guide:** <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/publications-and-resources/guide-vr-drives>
- **The Fair Elections Center also has a good summary fact sheet here:** <https://www.fairelectionscenter.org/voter-registration-drive-guides>

Voter Engagement and 501(c)(3) Organizations

GOTV is a specific kind of voter engagement. While the voter engagement activities in the Democracy Capacity Project (DCP) guide (see below) focus on assisting voters (registering them, helping with mail ballots, helping with some relief in voting lines with long waits, etc.), GOTV is about organizing and mobilizing voters to vote. Some of the voter assistance items in the DCP guide overlap with this. For instance, a robust GOTV program will incorporate a voter registration component and a way to offer rides to the polls. The DCP guide is a valuable companion piece to this GOTV Guide, but the focus here is to provide assistance to your nonprofit for activities that will promote multicultural youth voting and train young people of color to become regular voters.

“Make a difference in your community’s future, in our country’s future, unmute your voice, and speak up about what you believe in. Register to vote because your vote is your voice.”

Sophia Carson, Actress and Singer

In this connection, the following resource will be especially helpful and instructive:

- **Democracy Capacity Project Nonprofit Voter Assistance Practical Guidance:**
<https://www.democracycapacity.org/ca-voter-assistance>

DO’S AND DON’TS

There is no amount of partisan work that is permissible for a 501(c)(3) to do. Partisan political work is often referred to as “electioneering” by election officials. You cannot engage in electioneering as a 501(c)(3) organization.

Political work is not always partisan work, however! You can engage in a wide range of political activity as long as it remains nonpartisan. That means you cannot support or oppose a political candidate or party. The IRS considers working on ballot question campaigns to be lobbying activities since voters are de facto legislators. Your 501(c)(3) organization can legally do some lobbying, but the state may require you to report money spent on ballot question advocacy.^[1]

Creating a GOTV Program

When advancing a GOTV Program designed to encourage young people of color to move beyond mere voter education and registration activities to actual voting in elections, the following practices are well-advised:

- **Engage experienced young voters of color from the community as mentors and guides to first-time voting aspirants** – peer to peer outreach and support from trusted sources is a particularly potent element of success in this work
- **Explain to prospective new electoral participants their rights and responsibilities** as voters in a consistently nonpartisan way
- **Provide them with basic logistical information intended to ensure their vote is successfully cast**, like pertinent voting locations, hours, and requirements
- **Introduce them to essential documents and forms** required to register and vote
- **Expose them to linguistic alternatives to standard English voting information** that may facilitate their own or their naturalized parents' comfort in voting, if the young people you are working with are first or second generation Americans
- **Encourage them to vote early**
- **Help them to understand alternatives to classic voting booth practices** by informing them that all voting can be done by mail in California, and every voter will get a mail ballot

- **Match new, first-time voters with more longstanding voters**, to ensure they have access to experienced community members that can further support their successful voter experience – relational support of this kind is especially helpful to new voters
- **Organize rides to the polls**, to facilitate new voter turn out
- **Assist new voters in completing and returning their mail ballots**^[12]

DIRECT AND PROACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT

Experience suggests that passively waiting for youth voters of color to come to your agency for assistance is unlikely to be an optimal strategy for successfully engaging them in the voting process. But simply contacting your clients and letting them know that they can make a difference by voting has been shown to increase voter turnout.^[13] That said, to optimize voting opportunities for your multicultural youth service and/or community population, you may want to do more than merely contact them. You may want to reach out to such youth more broadly and more proactively in your community. Owing to issues of lower confidence and familiarity, you will not have the same power to move non-clients to vote as you do young people of color that already know your organization; so a more detailed GOTV plan may be necessary as you cast your net wider. In such instances, peer to peer outreach by youth of the same relative age, cultural and socioeconomic background is most likely to produce positive results.^[14]

COLLABORATE!

Work with other organizations to expand your reach and impact, and pool resources. Collaboration prevents duplication of effort and promotes cross-organizational learning.

Your partners may be doing elements of a youth voter promotion and civic engagement program that you are not doing, and you might have an element others are not doing. Working together, you can create a cross-organization voter education and engagement program that can be an asset to your nonpartisan GOTV work.



Resources for Creating GOTV Programs:

Following are some additional helpful resources that can assist you in advancing successful youth-centered GOTV campaigns:

- **National Association for the Education of Young Children:** <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/gotv-activities-nonprofits>
- **Civic Influencers:** <https://civicinfluencers.org/>
- **Arena:** <https://www.arena.run/toolbox/writing-your-gotv-plan>
- **Chicago Votes:** <https://chicagovotes.com/>

You can supplement these more standard tools by engaging with leading California and national multicultural rights and justice organizations that focus on voting rights and voter promotion work, such as:

- **Asian & Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote):** <https://apiavote.org/>
- **Black Voters Matter (BVM):** <https://blackvotersmatterfund.org/>
- **VotoLatino:** <https://votolatino.org/>
- **Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP):** <https://www.svrep.org/>

SUGGESTIONS FOR INCORPORATING VOTING INTO YOUR PROGRAMMATIC WORK WITH MULTICULTURAL YOUTH

There are also other things your organization can do aside from running a GOTV program to encourage young people of color to vote. For groups that work with young people, incorporating an ethos of civic and political participation into your programming can build the “muscle memory” young folks need to become regular voters. It may even help make your programmatic work more successful!

“Our nation is asking to hear your voice because November is coming and so is your choice. Do not throw away your shot.”

Lin-Manuel Miranda, Composer, Actor, Singer, Playwright, and Creator of Hamilton

Recommendation #1: Use a civic curriculum that educates youth on the importance of voting and participation.

- One element of this curriculum may be a straightforward education on how to vote in California, including explaining such mechanisms as ranked choice voting and the state proposition system.
- Another element should be connecting voting with outcomes that are important to your youth program participants – for instance, prosecutorial discretion and holding bad cops accountable are the responsibility of the District Attorney, an elected position.
- Another element should be a review of the data on youth participation in elections over time, to show how much of an impact youth voters could have if they turned out to vote regularly.

Helpful tools and resources in these connections could include the following:

- **Power California is a resource for training:** <https://powercalifornia.org/leading-with-culture>
- **CalNonprofits has ideas for expanding voter education across your organization and with the public:** <https://calnonprofits.org/programs/voteyourmission/welcome>
- **Californians for Justice has ideas for voter engagement and leadership development for multicultural youth:** <https://caljustice.org/our-work/youth-voice-in-democracy/>

Recommendation #2: Encourage youth program participants to register to vote and make it easy to do within the organization.

- It may be illegal to require your youth program participants to register to vote; and California prohibits the use of incentives to get people to register (consult an attorney if you are unsure); but you can make it easy for them to register if they are interested in doing so.
- Run your own voter registration drive and staff it with your youth program participants. Properly organized, such activities will provide robust opportunities for multicultural youth leadership development and civic engagement.
- There could be prohibitions in your funding agreements to use certain funds to support these kinds of activities, so make sure to do a careful review of your grant agreements in advance in order to avoid unexpected problems.

“I am voting not only to represent myself, but to represent the community as a whole. A community that deserves better. Voting is such a powerful tool to create real change, so that our children can grow up in a better world than we did.”

Lana Condor, Actress and Producer

Recommendation #3: Support allied activities that train multicultural youth to make voting and civic engagement important personal priorities, such as:

- Develop a program where youth program participants volunteer to be election workers.
- Encourage youth program participants to perform jury duty when selected – this is an important way that we govern ourselves. Jurors are important participants in the judicial branch of our government (courts).
- Partner with/recommend groups that specialize in political organizing so that youth engaged in your work can learn essential civic engagement and campaign skills (which, in turn, typically helps to facilitate an interest in voting).
- Have youth make specific voting plans for themselves.

Recommendation #4: Train and enlist youth to participate at local or state agency hearings on matters of concern to your organization or constituency.

There are important ways that youth-serving nonprofits can encourage program participants to offer public comments (written or oral) at local planning commission meetings, city council hearings, or state agency committee gatherings for the purpose of furthering some organizational goal or priority. For example, let’s say there is a large redevelopment project that is seeking public approval with the promise to create a lot of construction jobs, including apprenticeship slots, in your community. Interested youth program participants can appear at

city committee hearings to make the case for setting aside a number of those jobs for young people that live in the neighborhood. A development agreement is a good vehicle for this kind of organizing, because it requires the city to pass an ordinance which can be approved or rejected by the voters in a ballot measure. This allows for all types of participation – committee testimony, submitting written comments, engaging the environmental review process, lobbying city officials (be mindful of the nonprofit limits!), and organizing and moving a ballot measure (which, within the limits of the law, is another opportunity for registering and turning out voters).

“You wouldn’t let your grandparents pick your playlist. Why would you let them pick your representative who’s going to determine your future?”

Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States

Conclusion

There has never been a more important time to engage young people of color in our state and national elections as active and informed voters. California nonprofit leaders have a unique opportunity and a growing civic duty to encourage this outcome, given the rapidly changing nature of our demography and economy, the essential investments that are going to be required to ensure greater racial and economic equity in our public policy and governance, and the growing stakes involved in making decisions that are more inclusive, responsive, and durable during the years to come. This guide is intended to serve as a useful tool for smaller grassroots and larger regional nonprofits alike, that are committed to elevating their public responsiveness and impact on the most important issues affecting our state and its fast-growing multicultural youth population. We urge you to join forces with us in this vital campaign to expand multicultural youth participation in our most important civic duty: the exercise of our vote. ***The need to act is growing and urgent. The time to act is now.***

Additional Resources

In addition to the previously referenced resources, tools, and links, you might find the following references of good use in your efforts to encourage young people of color to become active and informed voters in California elections affecting their lives, their families and their communities.

NATIONAL YOUTH VOTER ORGANIZATIONS

- **Alliance for Youth Organizing:** <https://allianceforyouthorganizing.org/>
Alliance for Youth Organizing is a nationwide network of organizations building political power of young people, and the premier youth vote vehicle in the United States.
- **Black Voters Matter:** <https://blackvotersmatterfund.org/>
Black Voters Matter (BVM) seeks to increase power in marginalized, predominantly Black communities by supporting effective civic engagement and community power through understanding, respecting, and supporting local infrastructure.
- **Black Youth Vote!** <https://www.ncbcp.org/programs/byv/>
A program of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation that focuses on the connection between voting and public policy aimed at Black youth.
- **CIRCLE (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement):** www.civicyouth.org
A nonpartisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement. It is an important source for statistics and trends on youth civic engagement topics.
- **Civics Center:** <https://www.thecivicscenter.org/>
The Civics Center provides free training and easy-to-use resources that enable students, educators, and partners to run twice-yearly voter registration drives in high schools.
- **League of Women Voters:** <https://lwv.org>
The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization working to protect and expand voting rights and ensure that everyone is represented in our democracy. It empowers voters and defends democracy through advocacy, education, and litigation, at the local, state, and national levels.
- **NextGen America:** <https://nextgenamerica.org/>
NextGen America is the nation's largest youth voter organization, mobilizing millions of young people each year to support progressive candidates and causes. It is a multi-issue and multi-racial organization that works year-round to turn out millions of young people to vote and win on the issues that matter to them.

- **Nonprofit VOTE:** <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-power-report/>
Nonprofit VOTE equips nonprofit organizations with nonpartisan tools and resources to help the communities they serve participate in voting and democracy.
- **When We All Vote:** <https://whenweallvote.org/>
Founded by Michelle Obama, When We All Vote is a leading national, nonpartisan initiative on a mission to change the culture around voting and to increase participation in each and every election by helping to close the race and age gap.

CALIFORNIA YOUTH VOTER ORGANIZATIONS

- **California Native Vote Project:** <https://canativevote.org/>
A statewide effort to engage Native American communities across dozens of counties to build political power through an integrated voter engagement strategy.
- **California Students Vote Project:**
<https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/castudentsvote/resources>
The California Secretary of State Students Vote Project is a statewide nonpartisan program that elevates college student voices and promotes civic engagement efforts to build a more inclusive democracy.^[15] Program objectives include increasing college student voter education, voter registration, and outreach. There are valuable resources available at the link.
- **Million Voters Project:** <https://millionvotersproject.org/>
Million Voters Project (MVP) believes that systemic change is won by on-the-ground organizing, connecting directly with communities, and amplifying a vision for a more just California. MVP works with its 95 local affiliates and thousands of grassroots leaders to lead year-round organizing that builds political power in communities most impacted by economic and social inequality.
- **New Voters Project:** <https://calpirgstudents.org/campaigns/new-voters-project/>
The New Voters Project is a project of the California Student PIRGs. It is one of the oldest and largest nonpartisan youth voter mobilization programs in the country. It has run peer-to-peer youth voter mobilization drives to turn out the youth vote on college campuses for more than 25 years.
- **Youth Voice in Democracy:**
<https://caljustice.org/our-work/youth-voice-in-democracy/>
A program of Californians for Justice focusing on voter engagement and leadership development for youth.

Endnotes

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/exit-polls-california.html>

[2] Id.

[3] Youth voter turnout in 2018 was 30.3% and in 2022 it was 22.1%, representing an 8.1 point drop. Data is available in <https://circle.tufts.edu/2022-election-center>

[4] <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/>

[5] <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/large-racial-turnout-gap-persisted-2020-election>

[6] LeRoux, K., Langer, J., and Plotner, S, “Nonprofit Messaging and the 2020 Election: Findings from a Nonpartisan Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) Field Experiment,” Nonprofit Policy Forum (2023) 14(2):157-183. Available in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362809345_Nonprofit_Messaging_and_the_2020_Election_Findings_from_a_Nonpartisan_Get-Out-The-Vote_GOTV_Field_Experiment

[7] “Nonprofit Power: Building an Inclusive Democracy,” Nonprofit VOTE (2024). Available in <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofit-power-report/>

[8] Id. at 16.

[9] See Hackney, P., “U.S. Law Permits Charities to Encourage Voting and Help Voters Register,” The Chronicle of Philanthropy, January 22, 2024. Available in https://www.philanthropy.com/article/u-s-law-permits-charities-to-encourage-voting-and-help-voters-register-making-gop-concerns-about-this-assistance-unfounded?utm_source=Iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_8829683_nl_Philanthropy-Today_date_20240122&cid=pt&source=&sourceid=

[10] Bolder Advocacy, “Keeping Nonpartisan During Election Season,” available in <https://afj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Keeping-Nonpartisan-During-Election-Season-2.pdf>

[11] Before engaging in any ballot question advocacy, consult legal counsel and Democracy Capacity Project’s guide on lobbying for California nonprofits: <https://www.democracypolicy.org/ca-lobbying>

[12] There are strict rules in California for assisting voters with mail ballots. Make sure to consult the DCP guide or an attorney before engaging in this activity. <https://www.democracycapacity.org/ca-voter-assistance>

[13] LeRoux, K., Langer, J., and Plotner, S, “Nonprofit Messaging and the 2020 Election: Findings from a Nonpartisan Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) Field Experiment,” Nonprofit Policy Forum (2023) 14(2):157-183. Available in https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362809345_Nonprofit_Messaging_and_the_2020_Election_Findings_from_a_Nonpartisan_Get-Out-The-Vote_GOTV_Field_Experiment

[14] <https://blog.ucusa.org/michael-latner/how-to-improve-voter-turnout-and-build-power-in-historically-marginalized-communities/>

[15] In 2019, the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act ([California Education Code §66850-66852](#); [California Elections Code §2148.5](#)) was enacted to give California colleges and universities the necessary tools to increase civic engagement and participation among young voters. In 2020, the California Secretary of State Students Vote Project (SVP) was expanded to support and ensure implementation of the landmark law. The law requires the Secretary of State’s office to work directly with the California Community Colleges and California State Universities to increase college student voter registration. Colleges and universities are encouraged to participate in SVP civic learning opportunities to receive and distribute voter education resources. While the University of California and the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities campuses are not required to participate, they continue to be strong partners and supporters of student civic engagement.

While this Guide is designed to give you information about certain laws and rules, it is not legal advice, and does not create an attorney-client relationship. If you need additional advice about your specific situation, you should seek your own legal counsel. We reference and link other organizations and other resources here because we believe they may be helpful to your work. These resources are publicly accessible to all users, and to the best of our knowledge the original host of each featured resource has all rights required to make them publicly accessible and usable by you. Your use of such resources is subject to any terms and conditions noted on those resources or in the terms of use or other policies of the host website. We make no representation or warranty regarding the accuracy or applicability of the substantive content of any such linked resources, their fitness for use in your situation, or the intellectual property rights of the works presented.

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