



POAH VOTES 2024:

How Rental Housing Can Support Meaningful Civic Engagement

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At Preservation of Affordable Housing (POAH), we understand that stable, affordable housing is foundational for a family to achieve long term stability, pursue career and education goals, and achieve economic mobility. We also believe rental housing is an underutilized platform to help families with low and moderate incomes exercise their civic power.

Why focus on renters?

Renters are historically underrepresented in our nation's electoral system: according to a 2022 study from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), just 37% of eligible renters cast their ballots compared to 58% of eligible homeowners. This disparity increases across income levels: 33% of eligible voters with household incomes below \$20,000 voted in the 2022 midterm elections versus 67% of eligible voters with household incomes above \$100,000. This gap has only grown since the 2018 midterm elections.

Through our relationships with residents in our communities, we understand that voter participation is less a result of personal choices but rather a lack of systems and supports to help voters exercise their rights. As a housing provider committed to equity, POAH is dedicated to removing barriers to full participation in our democracy. We do this, in part, by investing in voter registration, education and mobilization.

Leveraging Housing for Voter Registration

As a housing provider, we have several regular points of contact with residents. We leverage these moments to make voter registration easy and accessible. One example of this is when a resident is moving into one of our communities. Their address just changed, and they are already completing paperwork with our property management team. By incorporating a simple voter registration address update form into their move-in paperwork, we're ensuring that the resident has an opportunity to update their registration on the spot, if they choose. This approach is much like how eligible voters can register when they apply for a license at their local Registry of Motor Vehicles. Another key point of contact is when a member of a POAH household turns 18. Our property management team is required to update their status on the lease, presenting a natural opportunity to encourage the newly eligible resident to register to vote by providing the form and/or QR code to online registration. We often do this as a friendly birthday message, adding warmth and celebration to an otherwise administrative task.

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Investing in Voter Education, Confidence and Mobilization

Helping residents register to vote isn't enough on its own. We're also committed to investing in voter education, so that residents can go confidently to the polls knowing exactly what to expect, feeling informed about the candidates and ballot questions and confident to make their own decisions. As a nonprofit housing organization, our civic engagement activities are nonpartisan, ensuring that residents have equal opportunity to engage with the full spectrum of elected officials and issues. One way we practice nonpartisanship is through partnership, by leveraging local organizations such as the League of Women Voters to provide nonpartisan voter education to our communities.

We all live full, busy lives – regardless of our income or housing status, it can be difficult to find the time and space to be civically engaged. That's why we elevate the importance of voting when it is most actionable and urgent. Beyond using existing touchpoints for voter registration, we capitalize on the natural momentum created by an upcoming election or voting-related deadline. That's when you'll see our teams hosting voter registration drives, candidate meet & greets, and circulating draft ballots so people can become familiar with what it will look like on Election Day – or when our staff will be rolling out a door-knocking or phone banking campaign to get out the vote.

The last piece of our voter engagement work – mobilization – is crucial. It is important to ensure that residents are eligible and registered to vote, and that they understand what's on the ballot and feel prepared to make an informed choice. However, despite the momentum and excitement to vote, Election Day can create a host of barriers for many voters, including managing busy work and family schedules, finding reliable transportation to the polls, or still finding the motivation to vote and more. Our Community Impact teams help residents make a voting plan that works for them. Sometimes, that voting plan involves voting early, absentee, or by mail. Other times, we work with residents to create transportation opportunities or transportation motivators – do residents need vehicle transportation, like rideshare vouchers? Are there community partners offering vehicle transportation? Would organizing a walking group enable residents to feel confident and motivated? Is it feasible given the distance to the polling location? These strategies could mean the difference between a resident casting their ballot to have their voice counted, or not.

Voting is inextricably linked to politics, and POAH's commitment to nonpartisanship and trust building within the communities it serves is the most important strategy in our civic engagement efforts. Ultimately, we have the privilege to work where residents live. This is a privilege that requires acknowledging that residents are already civically engaged, whether through community organizing, leading initiatives, or volunteering. Our role as housers is to collaborate with and amplify the inherent talents and passions that residents are contributing to the community and ensure that their input and priorities are accounted for. While it may be surprising to find civic and voter engagement as a priority in the housing context, it really is at the heart of it.

