



SNAP ELECTION SERIES

**Encouraging  
non-partisan voter  
engagement**

One of the ways nonprofits can meaningfully engage in snap elections is by **encouraging non-partisan voter engagement**. Research shows that when nonprofits encourage voting on a non-partisan basis, people vote at significantly higher levels than if nonprofits sat on the sidelines and did nothing. Nonprofits are rooted in communities - they are everywhere, serving diverse populations. Many of the places Ontarians interact with frequently are nonprofits, making them uniquely positioned to encourage voter engagement.

Did you know that the last Ontario election had the **lowest voter turnout** in the province's history? According to [Elections Ontario results](#), approximately 43.5 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot during the election. Many factors can contribute to low voter turnout. Eligible voters may miss information about the election or not completely understand how Ontario and Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system works.

**Low voter turnout is a serious issue during elections, and lack of representation, especially from equity deserving groups, means a diversity of voices often go unheard.** Public benefit nonprofits can help remove barriers and encourage voter engagement. As trusted messengers with deep community roots, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to reach underrepresented voters and build a more inclusive and equitable democracy.

When it comes to voter engagement, it's less about who people vote for, but that **people are empowered to use their right to vote to voice their opinion on policies and issues that matter to them.**

### **About non-partisanship**

What does the law say about being non-partisan? This is one of the most common questions asked by nonprofits and charities.

- For charities - registered charities are required to stay non-partisan. Being non-partisan means not advocating for or advocating against any specific parties.
- For nonprofits - there is no legal requirement for a nonprofit to be non-partisan.

**Nonprofits can encourage voter engagement in big or small ways!**

## Voter education

- **Provide general information** on [how governments work in Canada](#): what are the three levels of government? What is each level of government responsible for? What issues do each level of government focus on? You can create [quizzes like this one](#) to help your communities test out their knowledge!
- **Host webinars or set up booths in your community spaces to talk about voting.** People who are disenfranchised and who face systemic barriers often lose faith in the electoral system. Nonprofits, especially the ones who provide services to local residents, can host webinars or set up a desk in an office, community centres, or religious spaces to talk about the importance of voting. Try to draw connections between successful public policy changes that have come out of elections. It might also be helpful to explain what the provincial government makes decisions about and how those decisions impact Ontarians. Actively encourage your stakeholders, members, employees, and clients to vote.
- **Host candidate forums.** A candidate forum is a public event where candidates from all political parties are invited to express their positions on a wide range of issues. They are an excellent opportunity for local communities to learn more about the candidates running to represent them.

## Voter registration

Holding voter registration drives allows nonprofits to leverage their engagement skills and community connections to encourage voter participation and turnout among staff, volunteers, members, and service users. Voter registration drives can assist members, clients and/or service users, and community members with voter registration.

### **Ottawa Inner City Health + Shepherds of Good Hope soup kitchen**

Ottawa Inner City Health [set up a registration clinic](#) in the soup kitchen for the first time in 2019. Case workers were able to register people coming to the soup kitchen as voters. Inner City Health also put together a primer on party platforms, and the shelter invited candidates to come by the soup kitchen during the election. On election day, peer support workers from the shelter walked groups of people over to the polling stations to help them cast their ballots.

## Providing information on how and where to vote

- **Create an election guide:** Guides like [this one](#) can help explain the election process, including information about “how to vote by mail,” “where to vote,” “how to vote at the polling station,” and more. [The Nonprofit Vote includes a toolkit](#) on voting with the nonprofit sector in mind. Make sure your guide or toolkit includes information about accessible voting. For example, during the 2020 Saskatchewan election, Spinal Cord Injury Saskatchewan had a [page sharing information on accessible voting](#). [Elections Ontario](#) has a guide to accessible voting, and CNIB Foundation has recommendations for [ways to make elections more accessible](#).
- **Set up mock voting stations.** Help people practice the voting process by setting up mock voting stations with voting screens, ballots, and pencils. Instead of ballots with candidates' names, you can ask participants to vote on which issue is most important to them. Never organized a mock voting before? Don't worry! The Democratic Engagement Exchange has a [free Vote Pop-up kit](#) organizations can order, which includes everything needed to create a simulated polling place and a guide describing best practices!
- Provide free transportation to polling stations on voting day.
- Give staff time off to vote, and more.

### Toronto Drop-in Network

Drop-ins provide a welcoming space for people experiencing homelessness, who are marginally housed or who are socially isolated. Drop-in service users often have no fixed address or have limited ID, which creates barriers to registering to vote. During the 2022 provincial election, the Toronto drop-in network created a [toolkit](#) to guide and encourage drop-ins to **register as ‘Authorized Administrators’ and provide participants who lack a permanent address with a temporary residence form called a ‘Certificate of Identity and Residence’**. This certificate allows participants to vote in an election. Shelters and drop-ins in Toronto are also eligible to be a registered address to conduct mail-in voting for their participants.

## Calgary's Drop-In and Rehab Centre mobile polling station

In 2015, the Calgary's Drop-in and Rehab Centre hosted a [federal election mobile polling station for the very first time](#), and in the 90 minutes that the polling station was open, at least 60 people cast their ballots. Some participants voted for the very first time and said they likely wouldn't have bothered if the polling station hadn't been right in the drop-in centre. In 2019, the Calgary Drop-in centre hosted a [provincial election mobile polling station](#) again to remove barriers for people who experience homelessness. In total, 185 people voted at the mobile polling station.

### Additional resources

- [Administrative Resources for Homeless Electors](#) (Elections Ontario)
- [Engaging Voters with Disabilities](#) (Nonprofit Vote)
- [Elections Ontario](#)
- [Election Tools and Engagement Campaigns](#) (Democratic Engagement Exchange)
- [How Nonprofits Can Mobilize Voters](#) (Nonprofit Quarterly)
- [Many Newcomers Have Never Voted in Ontario Elections. These Groups Are Trying to Change That](#) (CBC)
- [Registering Voters in Communities Served by Nonprofits](#) (Independent Sector)
- [Speak Up! Show Up!](#) (The North Grove's Community Action Office)
- [The Ultimate Guide to Canadian Election Buzzwords, Demure Edition](#) (New Majority)
- [Voter Engagement Guide](#) (National Council of Nonprofits)
- [What Makes Someone Vote?](#) (Apathy is Boring)
- [What's Scary About Voting?](#) (Apathy is Boring)

## About ONN

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen the sector as a key pillar of our society and economy. We work to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

## For more information

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