Planning the Political Intervention: Voter Engagement

8

Table of Contents

Section 1: Overview	228
Section 2: Voting and Social Work	229
APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Social Work Skills and Voter Engagement	232
POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Richard Cloward, MSW and Francis Fox Piven	233
Self-Determination, Power, and Voting	233
Section 3: Voter Participation	234
The Importance of Voting	234
FURTHER REFLECTION: Imagine 100% Voter Turnout	236
Values and Voting	236
EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Social Work Values and Voting	237
A Central Debate Surrounding Voting in the USA	237
APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Debate on Voter Fraud Versus Voter Suppression	237
Section 4: History of Voting in the USA	239
The Jim Crow Era	239
FURTHER REFLECTION: Lived Experience of Jim Crow Laws	240
Twentieth Century Expansion of Voting Rights	241
A Modern Backlash?	242
BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE: Research Proposals About Voting Laws	243
Section 5: Social Workers and Voter Registration	243
The Voter Registration Process	244
FURTHER REFLECTION: Your Voter Registration	246
Voter Registration in Primary Elections	247
APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Voter Registration and Primaries	247
Special Considerations in Registering Voters	247
Individuals with Felony Convictions	248
APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Felony Disenfranchisement	248
Survivors of Domestic Violence	248

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APPLY YOUR SKILLS:/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Survivors of Domestic Violence and Voting	249
Individuals Who Are Homeless	249
APPLY YOUR SKILLS:/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Homelessness and Voting	249
Individuals with Differing Abilities	249
APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Voting with Differing Abilities	250
Military and Overseas Voters	250
APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Voting While Living or Stationed Overseas	250
Section 6: Social Workers and Voter Education	251
POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Tanya Rhodes Smith, MSW	253
Section 7: Social Workers and Voter Outreach/GOTV	254
Engaging in GOTV Efforts	254
APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Voter Outreach Practice	256
Early Voting	257
BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE: Voting Options in Your State	258
Review of Key Terms and Concepts	258
Resources	260
References	262

Section 1: Overview

Community members engage in advocacy and electoral efforts in a number of ways. This chapter focuses on ways in which individuals and communities express their power through voting, and ways that social workers can use voter engagement, including voter registration, education, and mobilization, as a tool in our work. This chapter looks at the values and meanings assigned to the act of voting, the history of voting and the right to vote in the USA, and current knowledge about voter participation and key issues. We acknowledge at the outset that laws and policies that relate to voting are constantly changing, and vary significantly from state to state. It is generally a good idea to check with the local election authority in your area to confirm the current laws before moving forward on projects related to voting.

Developing Social Work Competency
The Council on Social Work Education establishes educational standards for all social work programs in the USA. Content in this chapter supports building competency in the following areas that are considered core to the practice of social work:
COMPETENCY 2: Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice
COMPETENCY 3: Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice
COMPETENCY 5: Engage in Policy Practice
COMPETENCY 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
COMPETENCY 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Domains of Political Social Work	
1. Engaging individuals and communities in political processes	◀
2. Influencing policy agendas and decision-making	◀
3. Holding professional and political positions	◀
4. Engaging with electoral campaigns	◀
5. Seeking and holding elected office	◀

Section 2: Voting and Social Work

> *The right to vote is the core symbol of democratic politics…the feature of the democratic polity that makes all other rights significant.*—Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, MSW.

While some social workers have a history of engaging clients by registering them to vote, not all social workers see this as part of their mission. Many agencies and social workers, in fact, are often reluctant to be seen as "political" and therefore avoid voter engagement work.

Yet, nonpartisan voter engagement is legal for nearly all agencies that employ social workers, including government and nonprofit agencies. It is important for social workers to clearly differentiate between nonpartisan and partisan voter engagement activities. **Nonpartisan** activities are those that engage voters without supporting or opposing any particular candidate or political party, as compared with **partisan** activities that advance a specific candidate or party. To be clear, voter engagement activities can take place in either a nonpartisan or partisan manner. Based on information compiled by Nonprofit VOTE (2017b), Table 8.1 compares nonpartisan and partisan voter engagement activities and the types of organizations in which they are allowed.

The 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) actually *requires* most state agencies that provide public assistance to offer voter registration forms and assistance in completing these forms to service recipients (LeRoux 2014). The passage of this law was influenced heavily by social worker Richard Cloward, along with his colleague Francis Fox Piven. As part of their efforts to expand voter engagement among vulnerable populations, they also founded Human SERVE (Service Employees Registration and Voter Education) in the 1980s, a program that sought to register voters through NASW and schools of social work. Due to the efforts of these social workers and their coalition, seven million new voters were registered to vote (Piven and Cloward 2000).

Nonpartisan voter registration is also legal within nonprofits. In fact, when nonprofits promote nonpartisan registration and voting, they significantly impact voter participation, particularly among underrepresented groups such as persons of color, those who are younger, and those with lower incomes (Nonprofit VOTE 2017a). A great resource for how social workers and other professionals can engage in nonpartisan voter registration within nonprofit agencies is **Nonprofit VOTE**, founded in 2005 by a consortium of state nonprofit associations and national nonprofit networks (See Resources at the end of the chapter). Nonprofit VOTE is the largest

Table 8.1 Voter engagement activities

Voter engagement activities	Nonpartisan	Partisan
Allowable in what types of organizations?	Most public, private, and nonprofit organizations	Some nonprofit organizations and most private organizations
Which voters can be registered, and on whose behalf?	*Any* person or group, regardless of the party with which they choose to affiliate	Any person or group, typically on behalf of a *specific* candidate or party
Educates others about the voter registration process?	Yes	Yes
Educates voters about the dates and times of elections or early voting?	Yes	Yes
Educates voters about the mechanisms of voting?	Yes; for example, through a mock election or sample ballot	Yes
Educates voters about the issues on the ballot?	Through a nonpartisan guide, not endorsing any particular issues.	By endorsing the issue stances of a specific candidate or party, through a variety of educational techniques
Encourages others to vote?	Regardless of candidate or party	For a specific candidate or party
Endorsement of ballot initiatives?	Yes, can take a position on a ballot initiative	Endorsing one side of a ballot initiative
Invites candidate in an election to address voters?	All candidates are invited	Typically invites one candidate or party's candidates to address voters
Offers assistance to voters (i.e., a ride to the polls)?	Yes, regardless of candidate or party preference	Only to those who have committed to vote for a specific candidate or party
Aims to inform all voters about voting rights?	Yes	Possibly—not as a primary goal

provider of resources and trainings to the nonprofit sector on integrating nonpartisan voter participation and election activities into ongoing activities and services. It is a great resource for guiding nonprofits to integrate voter engagement into ongoing activities and services, and can be helpful to you throughout your career as a political social worker—in fact, the authors both refer to this resource regularly.

Within and outside of these organizations, social workers participate in voter engagement in a variety of ways. The voter engagement ladder in Fig. 8.1 offers one framework for thinking about what voter engagement can look like, along a continuum, from minimal commitment to larger commitment. The three primary areas in which social workers are commonly involved in voter engagement are: voter registration, voter education, and voter outreach.

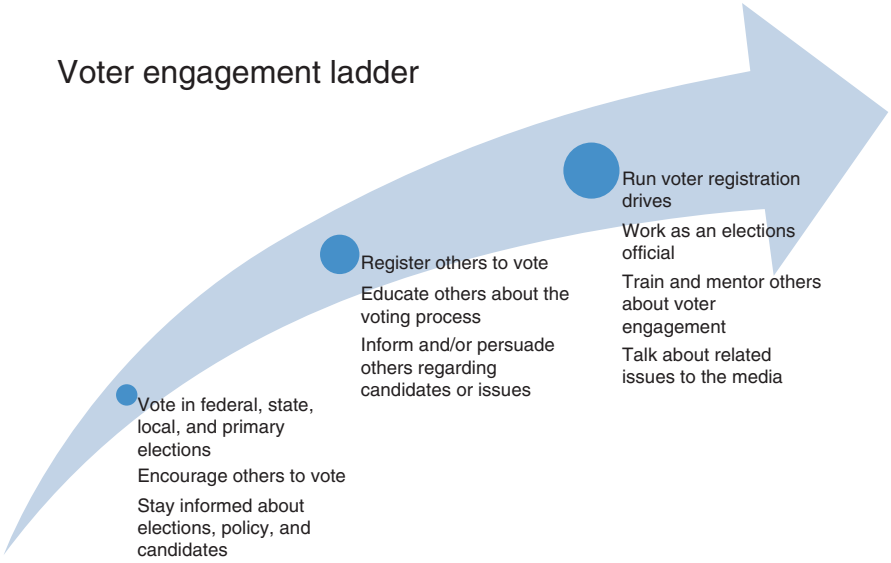

Fig. 8.1 Voter engagement ladder

Little is known currently about the extent to which social workers participate in voter engagement efforts. What little we do know focuses on social work education. Over 30% of accredited BSW and MSW programs in the USA offer no voter registration opportunities to their students. Approximately half of programs expose fewer than half of their students to voter registration efforts (Pritzker 2017). In 2015, the social work *Voter Empowerment Campaign* was launched. This collaboration among social work organizations and educational programs seeks to embed voter engagement into social work education and practice through its website votingissocialwork.org, work with individual schools, and trainings across the country.

As we discuss in more depth throughout this chapter, social work skills are a critical asset to voter engagement work. They can be used in a variety of ways to empower individuals, community groups, and agencies around voting. Some of the social work skills that you might draw on as part of voter engagement (drawn from many sources including Austin et al. 2005) include:

Social Work Skills Used in Voter Engagement

Micro/Mezzo Skills

- Active listening
- Assessing individual needs
- Engaging with individuals and communities
- Establishing empathic, strength-based helping relationships with a diversity of people
- Facilitating groups
- Matching needs with interventions
- Monitoring and evaluating the helping process
- Negotiation
- Persuasion
- Purposeful self-disclosure
- Reflection
- Reframing
- Self-awareness
- Understanding basic psychological processes
- Understanding empowerment
- Understanding the importance of culture

Macro Skills

- Assessing community needs
- Assessing group and community needs and goals
- Assessing the environment
- Build trust with diverse community members
- Building coalitions
- Communicating with policymakers
- Engaging with communities
- Evaluation of effectiveness of interventions or policies
- Framing and reframing issues
- Managing conflict
- Monitoring and evaluating the change process
- Organizing
- Planning
- Research
- Understanding empowerment
- Understanding relevant policies and rules
- Understanding the importance of culture

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Social Work Skills and Voter Engagement

Watch this video of voter engagement in Reno, Nevada. While the individuals in this video are not social workers, they use some key skills we develop as social workers. Which of the social work skills listed above do you see used in this video? https://youtu.be/Paa8goiOW3s?list=UUHEP8VISy0wCuPrHMyk1o2w

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Richard Cloward, MSW and Francis Fox Piven

Groundbreaking professors, authors, and activists

Treating the client as expert, practicing empowerment, and engaging in collaborative efforts are all critical aspects of political social work. Dr. Richard Cloward, a social worker and sociologist, and Dr. Frances Fox Piven, a sociologist and political scientist, lived those ethics. In 1965, they collaborated on a paper called *Mobilizing the poor: How it can be done.* Together, they mobilized theory and activism to found the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), the first in a series of efforts to disrupt the status quo treatment of people who were poor. Cloward and Piven wrote *Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare* which remains a classic study of welfare policies in the USA.

In 1988, Cloward and Piven (who eventually married) turned their attention to increasing political power by people who had been silenced, writing *Why people don't vote: And why politicians want it that way.* This book argued that the USA is an outlier in Western democracies for requiring individuals to seek out voter registration. Cloward captured their view that existing political parties have an interest in creating barriers to voting, stating, "Politicians don't want new voters, they just want the ones who elected them" (Woo 2001).

They co-founded the Human Service Employees Registration and Voter Education Fund (Human SERVE), a national voter registration reform group active from 1982 to 2000. This group played a leading role in winning congressional approval of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, commonly known as the Motor Voter Act. This act allows people to register to vote in motor vehicle offices and at other government agencies, including libraries and welfare offices.

Cloward and Piven's work, collaboratively and separately, brought together academics and activism to try to understand the root causes of issues and to find practical ways to address them. They held to their beliefs that the poor deserve a radical shift in the structure of the US welfare system and the rights they are afforded. They demanded respect and dignity for the poor, even if it involved stepping on middle class toes, or was perceived as divisive or radical (Flanders 2001).

Cloward passed away in 2001 after more than 55 years at the Columbia School of Social Work. Piven continues her teaching, scholarship, and activism at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Self-Determination, Power, and Voting

Before we explore voter engagement in more depth, a few words about self-determination and voting. As you talk with potential voters throughout the process of voter engagement, always keep your power and your role in mind, as well as the rights of individuals to choose not to participate in the political process. Many US

communities have been treated poorly by the political process and do not believe that they want to be a part of this process. Furthermore, some individuals with whom you engage may be ineligible to vote because of felony convictions or citizenship status and may feel uncomfortable sharing that information with you, due to stigma or safety concerns. Whether you are participating in voter engagement as part of an agency where you work, as part of a campaign, or in your individual or volunteer work, be mindful of designing your voter engagement efforts to maximize individual self-determination and to minimize your power over those you are engaging. Whatever your role in this process, your social work values and ethics should guide you in your work and interactions with others.

Section 3: Voter Participation

As we examine communities' political participation, voting is a key aspect of that participation. This section examines what we know about voter participation in the USA today, including ways in which voting is framed and a central modern political debate surrounding voting.

The Importance of Voting

As we discussed earlier in this book, US elections are generally marked by lower participation than in other countries. Voter turnout is generally about 60% in Presidential elections, and lower for elections at all other levels of government. In comparison, turnout is approximately 87% in Belgium, and 82% in Sweden. Even within the USA, the voting rate ranges, from 42% of eligible voters in Hawaii to 74% of Minnesotans, tending higher in states with less restrictive laws or in states hotly contested in significant elections (DeSilver 2017; United States Election Project 2017).

It is not uncommon to hear the refrain, "I don't vote, because my vote doesn't matter." The reality, however, is that elections can be decided by a small number of votes. Slight increases in the low rates of voter participation could make a crucial impact on election results. In 2015, for example, Republican Mark Tullos and Democrat Blaine "Bo" Eaton were tied on election night in their race for a seat in the Mississippi state legislature (District 79), with 4589 votes each. Per Mississippi state law, the race was decided by drawing straws, and Eaton believed he had won because he pulled the long straw. However, the Republican state legislature disqualified five provisional ballots for Eaton, and voted to give the seat to Tullos. A group of voters brought a lawsuit contesting the results under the federal guarantee for equal protection (Wagster Pettus 2016). As of Spring 2017, 16 months after the election, and 1 year into Tullos' 4-year term, the case is still ongoing (Summers 2017).

Low participation can translate into close elections at the federal level as well. We see examples of this in contests for the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2006, Democrat Joe Courtney became a member of Congress from Connecticut's Second District, winning by 83 votes out of 242,413 cast, a difference of less than four hundredths of one percent (Connecticut Secretary of State 2006). The same district

had earlier been decided by just four votes out of 186,000 (a margin of 0.0002%) in 1994, when Democrat Sam Gejdenson kept his seat over Republican Edward Munster. Similar close races have emerged in U.S. Senate elections. In 2002, Democrat Tim Johnson retained his U.S. Senate seat in South Dakota with a margin of 524 votes out of 337,508 cast (two tenths of one percent) over John Thune, who went on to win the other South Dakota Senate seat in 2004 (S.D. candidates may face recount 2004).

We even see extremely close races at the Presidential level. In 2000, the race for U.S. President came down to which candidate would win Florida's electoral votes (State Elections Offices 2001). The official vote count in Florida was 2,912,790 votes for George W. Bush and 2,912,253 for Al Gore, with just 537 out of a total 5,861,785 votes, a difference of 0.00009%, separating the two candidates in the state (see Resources).

Certainly not all election races are close, and many people understandably choose not to vote because they believe their vote does not count. Given this, what are some reasons, other than the possibility of determining an election, for which social workers might want to encourage community members, clients, and other social workers to vote? We argue that voting has benefits for individuals, representation at the polls has benefits for communities, and increasing the diversity of those who participate in the political process has impacts on policy outcomes. While individual voting may not rationally lead to a hoped-for outcome at all times, voting as part of a collective bloc does. In essence, it is the practical act that represents the idea that individuals can make a difference through "tiny contribution to a collective activity…added to many similar contributions that will together produce a highly desirable outcome" (Maskivker 2016).

Individuals who vote tend to have higher levels of civic participation and stronger community connections. Voting has been linked with positive outcomes in health, social connections, mental health, and overall well-being. Links between increased levels of voting and positive markers of community health have been found in the USA (Purtle 2013) and internationally (Kim et al. 2015), and through both systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Gilbert et al. 2013). Individuals may benefit from reframing their personal problems as systemic problems, and coming together as a community to take action (Nickerson 2008).

Groups who feel powerless or disengaged from societal systems, including young people, racial and ethnic minorities, and low-income populations, tend to be underrepresented at the polls (Henderson 2011). While understandable, the consequences to giving up this political power are great. Elected officials pay attention to voters, and evidence suggests that policies don't reflect the interests of those who stay home. For example, states with the highest rates of voting among lower socioeconomic groups are less likely than states with lower voting rates to enact punitive work requirements, time limits or family caps as part of welfare policy implementation. They also make fewer cuts in welfare spending (Hill et al. 1995).

As this body of research shows, engaging our client populations in voting can impact both election outcomes and the policies that result. Political power is one of the clearest and most direct ways for individuals to influence society, particularly if they are able to come together as a voting bloc to use the power of the vote (Piven and Cloward 2000).

FURTHER REFLECTION: Imagine 100% Voter Turnout
A thought exercise: Imagine for a moment that 100% of the people in your city or state of voting age were active voters. How might the balance of power look different? How might your community look different? Why?

Values and Voting

In the past few decades, much of the debate about voting in the USA has centered on the question of whether voting should be framed as a right, a privilege, a responsibility, or some combination of the three (Searcy 2011). Essentially, these are three different value perspectives on how voting interrelates with citizenship in the USA. The perspectives that you hold toward voting affect how you view debates regarding voting and voting rights, as well as proposed legislation and procedures.

If you believe that voting is a **right**, guaranteed to all who qualify (generally, those who are citizens and meet the legal requirements), then you might support proposals that make it as easy as possible for individuals to vote. These include automatic voter registration, elimination of complex processes of voter registration, access to voting through mail-in, early voting, or online voting. President Lyndon Johnson (1965) encapsulated this value perspective when he stated, "This right to vote is the basic right without which all others are meaningless. It gives people, people as individuals, control over their own destinies."

If, on the other hand, you may believe that voting is a **privilege** that only should be available to those who have earned it, and withheld from those who have not. If so, you might support laws that create or strengthen requirements for voter identification, or those that prohibit an individual convicted of a felony from voting. Iowa Governor Terry Branstad captured this perspective in stating, "Voting is a privilege that has been given to us as citizens by hundreds of thousands of men and women who have fought and died for our representative democracy" (Obradovich 2016).

If you conceive of voting as a **responsibility** or a duty for all, you might instead support a compulsory voting system that requires everyone to vote and imposes a penalty on those who do not vote. Jeffrey Howard and Ben Saunders state, "The job of the citizen, I believe, places moral demands on those who hold it. Voting is one of those demands. Citizens have obligations to make their societies more just and, as others have argued, to refrain from being an accomplice—however minor—to injustice" (The Conversation 2015).

EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Social Work Values and Voting
Read the National Association of Social Workers' policy statement on voter participation (found at https://www.socialworkers.org/assets/secured/documents/da/da2010/referred/Voter%20Participation.pdf or in the most recent version of *Social Work Speaks*). As you read this statement, which of the three values discussed above (voting as a right, privilege, and/or responsibility) do you feel is most reflected in the statement? How does NASW's stance align with how you personally conceptualize voting?

A Central Debate Surrounding Voting in the USA

One central way that these different values around voting play out is in the modern debate over voting restrictions. Specifically at issue is whether certain restrictions are needed in order to protect the **franchise**, or right to vote. Those who view voting as a privilege often express concerns about what they perceive as **voter fraud**. Specifically, they fear that those who are not eligible to vote are abusing the electoral process, and that people are taking advantage of the system by voting multiple times. Such concerns have been highlighted by the Presidential Commission on Electoral Integrity established by President Donald Trump (The White House Office of the Press Secretary 2017). They also have been emphasized by the Heritage Foundation and the Public Interest Legal Foundation, who produced the report pictured in Fig. 8.2. These advocates propose tighter restrictions to reduce the possibility of fraud, including measures requiring identification to vote and limited early voting windows.

Others argue that such restrictions are not necessary. They argue that fraud is minimal, and instead perceive restrictions as facilitating **voter suppression**, disrupting the ability of eligible voters to cast their ballots through mechanisms that are discriminatory, intimidating, or otherwise create barriers. Advocates concerned about voter suppression argue that laws designed to stop voter fraud prevent eligible voters from participating in the political process. They further argue that the words used to describe voter fraud trigger biases against those who are "other," particularly non-whites, reinforcing the legitimacy of these biases (Denise Lieberman, personal communication, June 2, 2017). Groups widely known for their efforts to challenge voter suppression include the Advancement Project, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Brennan Center for Justice.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Debate on Voter Fraud Versus Voter Suppression
Engage in a debate with classmates or friends around this central debate. If you are in a classroom setting, separate into two groups. One group will argue that voter fraud is the more significant concern, and the other will argue that voter suppression is most significant. Or, on your own, choose the side of the

(continued)

debate that seems most distant from your own view, and make the case for that point of view for yourself. Ground your debate in data and analysis, not opinion. You may find the following resources to be good places to start researching voter fraud and voter suppression and personal stories of individuals affected by each.

Resources:

Advancement Project: http://www.advancementproject.org/

American Civil Liberties Union: https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights

Brennan Center for Justice: https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/voting-rights-elections

Heritage Foundation http://www.heritage.org/election-integrity

Public Interest Legal Foundation: https://publicinterestlegal.org/reports/

US Election Assistance Commission: https://www.eac.gov/voters/national-voter-registration-act-studies/

Profiles of plaintiffs in related lawsuits:

Bettye Jones: http://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/one-mothers-struggle-for-voting-rights-100842

Rosanell Eaton: https://www.thenation.com/article/the-92-year-old-civil-rights-pioneer-who-is-now-challenging-north-carolinas-voter-id-law/

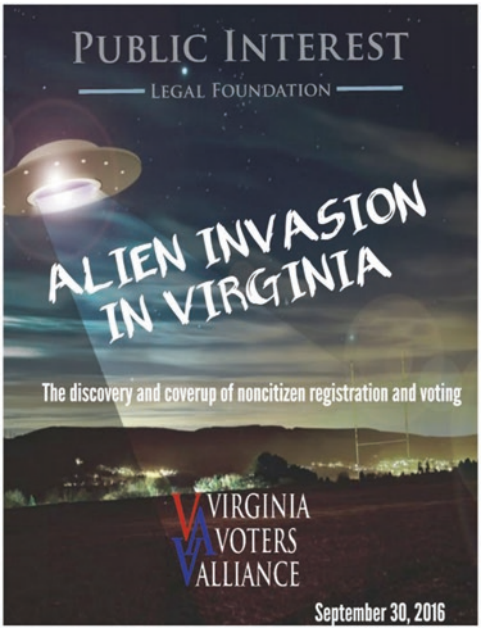

Fig. 8.2 Alien Invasion in Virginia, published by the Public Interest Legal Foundation (2017)

Section 4: History of Voting in the USA

While much of the content of this book deals directly with issues of social justice and with navigating political processes, we have not yet directly engaged with the concept of **political justice**. Political justice refers to the equitable distribution of political rights. Specifically, it is concerned with issues such as access to voting rights and political representation. The USA has had—and continues to have—a challenging history as relates to political justice. As we embark on voter engagement, it is important for social workers to have a sense of how this history has developed.

While the Constitution enumerates a series of rights for US citizens, the original Bill of Rights did not specifically identify voting as a right. Yet, from the earliest days of the USA, voting has been part of citizenship for at least some citizens. White male owners of significant property were allowed to vote. What percentage of the population this constituted is a subject of debate, but has been reported to be as low as 5–6% or as high as 10–20% of the population (Ratcliffe 2013; Lepore 2008; Constitutional Rights Foundation 1991). The lack of voting as an explicit Constitutional right is directly related to the history of race and slavery in our country (Denise Lieberman, personal communication, June 2, 2017). This was not accidental. As John Adams (1776) commented:

> Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State. It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Levell.

In the history of voting in the USA, every step forward in increasing access to voting for more Americans is followed shortly by attempts to reduce the impact of those changes. The franchise was expanded by 1850 to include almost all adult males, but was soon followed in 1855 by the first literacy test (Thornton n.d.). This was created by the state of Connecticut to keep Irish Catholics from voting. Literacy tests continued to be used for more than a century after that to restrict voting by African-Americans, Latinos, and immigrant groups. Literacy tests for federal elections were declared unconstitutional in 1915, but literacy tests remained for nonfederal elections in some states. In Connecticut, for example, literacy tests remained until 1970.

The Jim Crow Era

The 15th amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1870, widely perceived as giving former slaves the right to vote. However, many, like Dr. Darryl Paulson (2013), note that:

> Despite common perception, the 15th Amendment did not guarantee blacks the right to vote. Rather, it is a negative statement. It says the right to vote cannot be denied because of race. The distinction is critical. It allowed the South to develop barriers to voting that would eliminate blacks' votes without coming into conflict with the 15th Amendment (para. 3).

Shortly thereafter (1889), Florida and ten other Southern states instituted a poll tax (Heritage Foundation 2017). Other vote-limiting strategies were introduced to turn African-American voters away from the polls or discount their votes (Paulson 2013; Behring Center n.d.). Literacy tests were instituted, with grandfather clauses for poor whites who couldn't read. Other strategies included elaborate registration systems, whites-only party primaries (not struck down by the Supreme Court until 1944), violence, and threats of violence. In one example, the literacy test in Dallas County, Alabama (home of Selma), required that potential black voters name all 67 county judges in the state (Berman 2015).

During this time, states also enacted laws that prohibited those with criminal records from voting. However, these laws did not apply to all crimes equally; instead, crimes most often committed by African-Americans were the ones that resulted in **disenfranchisement**, having the right to vote taken away. In Mississippi, for example, an individual lost the right to vote for arson, but not for committing murder. In Alabama, wife-beating resulted in disenfranchisement, but wife murder did not (Sentencing Project 2017). To this day, disenfranchisement due to felony convictions persists in many states, with disproportionate impacts on African-American males. See "Section 5" below for more discussion of this.

These Jim Crow laws and related actions throughout the south contributed to substantial disenfranchisement of African-American men, at a time when women were not yet eligible to vote. As the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (n.d.) notes,

> The laws proved very effective. In Mississippi, fewer than 9,000 of the 147,000 voting-age African Americans were registered after 1890. In Louisiana, where more than 130,000 black voters had been registered in 1896, the number had plummeted to 1,342 by 1904 (para. 4).

Likewise, after Alabama passed a new constitution in 1901 that included significant voting restrictions, the number of black registered voters dropped from 182,000 to 4000 (Berman 2015).

Ultimately, these laws were effective in blunting the power of the African-American vote. Soon after the enactment of the 15th amendment, 16 African Americans served in Congress. One hundred years later (before passage of the Civil Rights Act), there were just three (Denise Lieberman, personal communication, June 2, 2017).

FURTHER REFLECTION: Lived Experience of Jim Crow Laws

Listen to one of the following stories of individuals describing their experiences under Jim Crow laws:

https://storycorps.org/animation/a-more-perfect-union/

http://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509495656/what-one-family-sacrificed-to-help-black-people-vote-in-1966

Spend some time thinking about your reactions to these stories. How do you feel when you hear the details of these individual's experiences? Why?

Twentieth Century Expansion of Voting Rights

In the early part of the twentieth century, several shifts expanded voting access to some US populations. Prior to 1913, members of the U.S. Senate had been selected by state legislatures. In 1913, however, the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving the power of electing members of the U.S. Senate directly to the people (Bomboy 2016). In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, giving women the right to vote. A wide array of women's suffrage groups were involved in this effort, including many early social workers. One social worker who played a substantial role in these efforts was Alice Paul, who, alongside other women, engaged in decades of activism and protests to obtain this right (Reiter 2017). Even within the women's suffrage movement, however, there were deep divides over whether to promote expansion of the franchise solely to women or to also support the right to vote for black men. One women's suffrage group, the National Women's Suffrage Association, opposed the ratification of the 15th Amendment, which prohibited denying the right to vote based on race (National Park Service n.d.). In 1924, Native Americans were granted US citizenship, theoretically including the right to vote, although some individual states kept Native Americans from voting until passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1957 (Rios 2016).

The passage of the Civil Rights Act marked the "first occasion since Reconstruction that the federal government undertook significant legislative action to protect civil rights" (Civil Rights Digital Library 2017, para 1). Among other components of the law, it "established the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department, and empowered federal officials to prosecute individuals that conspired to deny or abridge another citizen's right to vote. Moreover, it also created a six-member U.S. Civil Rights Commission charged with investigating allegations of voter infringement" (Civil Rights Digital Library 2017, para 1).

A further step in increasing suffrage came in 1961. The 23rd Amendment was ratified, granting voters in the District of Columbia (D.C.), primarily identifying as African American, the right to participate in presidential elections. However, even today, D.C. voters lack the right to elect voting members to the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate, a point illustrated by the slogan "taxation without representation" that appears on D.C. license plates (Leadership Conference 2017).

The most significant voting legislation of the twentieth century was the **Voting Rights Act** (VRA) in 1965, a law that was intended to end Jim Crow laws and to ensure that voting rights of all eligible voters were protected. The VRA outlawed discriminatory practices such as literacy tests. It required jurisdictions shown to be discriminating to get **preclearance** from the Department of Justice. Preclearance meant that these jurisdictions' laws had to be reviewed by the Justice Department before they could go into effect (Legal Information Institute n.d.). In the short term, the VRA allowed the Justice Department to send examiners to areas where black voter registration was below 50% of the voting age population. Within 10 years, states that were the focus of the law increased their percentages of black voters substantially, and the number of black elected officials representing those areas at the state and local levels increased from 72 to 1000 (Cobb 2015).

Later revisions of the law and a number of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s further removed voting restrictions, although some efforts to reduce voting remained. The 1993 National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), also called the Motor Voter Act, further addressed voting barriers, requiring that voter registration opportunities be available at all agencies that administer public assistance programs (including, at a minimum, Medicaid, Food Stamps, TANF, and/or WIC), as well as programs serving people with disabilities (Piven and Cloward 2000).

Following the turbulent 2000 election, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) passed in 2002. This law encouraged states to update voting machines and systems and to computerize voting lists (yes, in 2002 this was not always the case!). It increased voter identification requirements, and mandated systems for poll worker trainings, addressing complaints, and **provisional ballots** (Williams 2004). Provisional ballots, also referred to as challenge ballots or affidavit ballots, are cast by voters if there is some question about their identification or identity. These ballots are held separately until after the election, when election officials see if the issue can be resolved. If it is resolved favorably, the vote is counted (NCSL 2015).

A Modern Backlash?

After over 50 years of expanding voting rights and increasing access to voter registration, evidence suggests that the tide is shifting. From 2011 to 2015, 395 new restrictions on voting were introduced in 29 states (Berman 2015). The most significant recent change occurred in 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Shelby County [Ala.] v. Holder* that the Voting Rights Act had accomplished its goal in the 48 years since its passage. Accordingly, the Supreme Court ruled that portions of the VRA, specifically Sect. 5 which governed preclearance, were no longer needed (Cobb 2015). Essentially, this reduced Justice Department oversight of jurisdictions that have had a history of enacting barriers to voting for African-American or other citizens. Most recently, President Donald Trump has created a Presidential Commission on Electoral Integrity, led in part by individuals with a long history of introducing strict voting restrictions (Wise and Lowry 2017). At the time of this writing, advocates for voting rights are concerned that efforts to weaken or challenge the Motor Voter Act also are under consideration at the highest levels of government (Fessler 2017).

As discussed in Sect. 3 proponents of these restrictions believe that they are essential to preventing voter fraud and protecting the franchise. Voting rights advocates, on the other hand, argue these efforts to restrict voting and reduce VRA oversight are part of a historical trend of taking steps backward each time the franchise has increased. In one expert's view, the backlash is increasing because voters of color are fast becoming the new majority in the USA (personal communication, Denise Lieberman, June 2, 2017).

BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE: Research Proposals About Voting Laws
The National Council on State Legislatures has a webpage dedicated to state election laws and procedures: (http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-laws-and-procedures-overview.aspx). Visit this page, and choose one of the areas listed. Read the resources provided under your selected area. Have there been any recent proposals in this area in your state? Do the proposals in this area reflect voting as a right, privilege, or responsibility?

Section 5: Social Workers and Voter Registration

For social workers who want to engage potential voters, the first step is to help them gain access through **voter registration**. Voter registration is the process by which voters in 49 states and the District of Columbia add themselves to the voting rolls in advance of an election (Nonprofit VOTE 2017c). Only North Dakota does not have voter registration. Specific laws regarding voter registration differ substantially from state to state. Some states offer ways for voters to register online or on Election Day. Others have in place much more stringent registration requirements, such as completing voter registration on a printed form, witnessed by a deputized registrar, no less than 1 month prior to an election (NCSL 2016). Some states allow 16- or 17-year-olds to "pre-register" before they turn 18; others do not have provisions for registration prior to turning 18. Since 2015, seven states have begun to automatically register voters when they get their driver's license (NCSL 2017b). Significant changes have been made in recent years. In 2016 alone, 422 bills were introduced in 41 states to enhance access to registration and/or voting, and 77 bills were introduced in 28 states to restrict such access (Brennan Center for Justice 2016).

Social workers may get involved with voter registration as part of an electoral campaign, an advocacy campaign, community empowerment work, or regular agency practice. The Voter Empowerment Campaign argues that all social workers should participate in nonpartisan voter engagement, beginning with voter registration. To get you started in this work, we encourage you to watch the Buzzfeed video in the Resources section that offers a humorous look at voter registration.

Some ways that social workers can effectively incorporate voter registration into social work practice (Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work 2016) include:

- Providing registration forms and information in the waiting room of an agency or near a check-in location;
- Including registration forms with other intake or renewal forms;
- Providing tables with information and forms at special events;

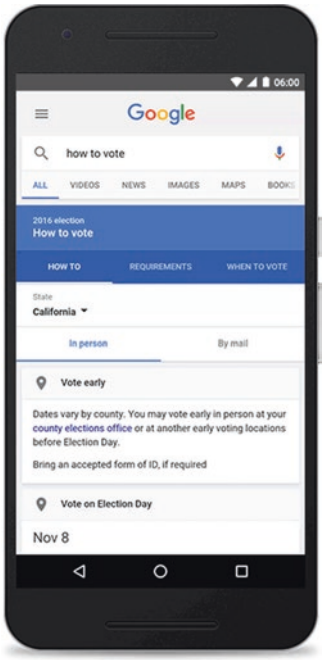

Fig. 8.3 Google search for voter registration in California

- Using social media, posters, and word-of-mouth networking; and
- Offering to check voter registration information for individuals, to see if it is up to date and lists the correct information.

The Voter Registration Process

In order to register others to vote, you need to know the rules in your state, as there are substantial differences between states. Start by typing "voter registration" or "how to vote" and your state's name into your Internet search. Google has introduced a tool that enables people to use their phones to easily search for state-specific voter registration information (Schonberg 2016). For example, if you conduct this search in California, you will see the information shown in Fig. 8.3. Here you can see the information you need to have in order to register and your different options for doing so.

Of course it is not always this simple. When you are working with potential voters, you will want to help them figure out whether they are eligible to vote, and if they are, whether they have already registered. If they are not eligible to vote, this is the end of the voter registration process (but not the end of the advocacy process). If they are eligible and unregistered, you can help them register to vote using one of the options of methods your state offers.

If the potential voters you are working with think they are registered, it is still helpful to check and make sure that their registration is still active and connected to

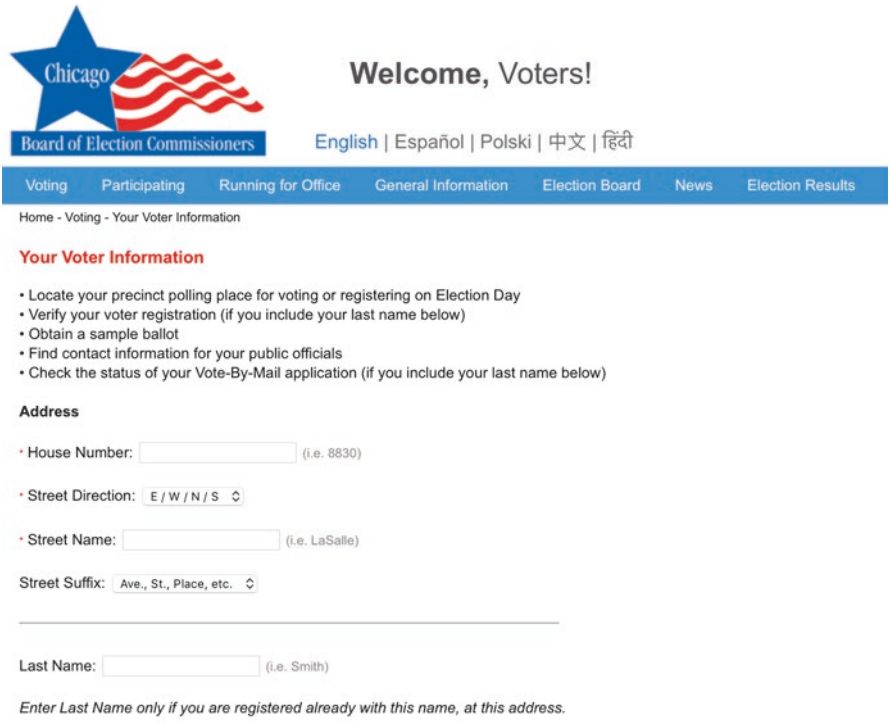

Fig. 8.4 Chicago Board of Elections website

their current address. People who move frequently or who do not vote regularly may find themselves taken off of the voting rolls or registered at the wrong address. These challenges are more common for populations who move frequently or live in low-income areas (Bergin et al. 2016). Often, checking the accuracy of an existing registration can be as important as a first-time registration. Every state and many municipalities have websites that allow individuals to access their status online. For example, the website in Fig. 8.4 from the Chicago Board of Elections allows potential voters to check whether they are registered to vote.

Using a website to confirm registration status also can help identify whether potential voting challenges exist. You can confirm if a potential voter has affiliated with a specific party. This impacts whether a voter may participate in various primary or caucus elections. You also can determine where a voter's polling place is. Using the Chicago site, one of this book's authors entered the last name and address of a family member in Chicago. After discovering that she was registered to vote, with an active registration, the author discovered that her polling place was not accessible for people with disabilities, which could be a problem for someone with a mobility impairment.

TurboVote (see Resources) is a great new resource for tracking voter registrations. This website, part of a project by Democracy Works to make the process of

PENALTIES FOR A 3PVRO NOT PROMPTLY DELIVERING VOTER REGISTRATION APPLICATIONS

- A 3PVRO must promptly deliver applications to the Division of Elections or the Supervisor of Elections—no later than 10 days from date of collection or the deadline for registration for an upcoming election, whichever is sooner.
- The date the applicant signed the voter registration application is presumed to be the date the 3PVRO received or collected the application. The 3PVRO must print the date the applicant completed the application in a conspicuous space on the bottom portion of the back side of the application in a way that does not obscure any other entry.
- The 3PVRO itself is liable for the following fines for untimely delivery or failure to deliver:

Activity	Fine per Application	Willful Act per Application
✓Application not received until more than 10 days from date of collection ✓Application postmarked more than 10 days from date of collection (If the Division of Elections or the Supervisor of Elections' Office is closed at the 10-day deadline, the deadline is extended to the next business day)	$50	$250
✓Application collected *before* book closing for any given election for federal or state office but received *after* the book closing deadline.	$100	$500
✓Application never submitted	$500	$1000
Maximum aggregate fine that can be assessed against a 3PVRO, including affiliate organizations, for violations committed in a calendar year is $1,000.		

Fig. 8.5 Penalties for a 3PVRO not promptly delivering voter registration applications

voting easier, helps voters register to vote, check whether their voter registration is active, change their address, ask for an absentee ballot, and get updates about upcoming elections. Voters also can use this site to request absentee ballots. Another excellent site that helps people check and clarify their voter registration is Vote411 from the League of Women Voters (see Resources).

To register voters, you also need to understand what rules exist regarding registering others to vote. While in some states, any person (registered or not) can register voters (Kasdan 2012), other states have very restrictive rules about who can do this and the processes they can use. In Florida, for example, as shown in Fig. 8.5, groups that wish to register voters must first register with the state as a Third Party Voter Registration Organization (3PVRO). They face significant fines if they do not submit voter registration forms within a specified time or if they break other rules related to registration, as the image below indicates (Florida Division of Elections n.d.):

The Brennan Center for Justice maintains a list of restrictions states place on registering voters as of 2012 (some may have changed since). Please see the Resource section for a link to this list.

FURTHER REFLECTION: Your Voter Registration

Based on the information above, determine whether you are eligible to vote. If so, either register to vote, or check your existing voter registration to verify that it is active and accurate. How difficult was this process for you? Do you feel confident that you could explain it to others?

Voter Registration in Primary Elections

States organize their primary or caucus elections in varied ways. How these are organized have differing implications for voter registration in each state. Registration deadlines and rules for registering with parties can affect individuals' ability to vote during these important elections.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Voter Registration and Primaries
Using your state's election-related website, or contact with election officials, create a fact sheet or infographic that describes the process of registering for a caucus or primary in your state's next election. It should be targeted to voters and should include the following information:

1. What type of primary or caucus is used (closed, partially closed, partially open, open to unaffiliated, open, top-two, or something else)? What does that mean for voters?
2. What is the deadline to register and/or change parties before a primary?
3. When is the next primary election?
4. Where can a voter go to get more information or check their registration status?

Special Considerations in Registering Voters

It is important to keep in mind that not all people that we work with as social workers are eligible to register to vote. If individuals are not eligible to vote, there may be other ways to engage them with civic and political processes. Even among those who are eligible to vote, specific populations that we work with as social workers may face unique circumstances surrounding their access to the vote. These often ultimately keep them from voting. For example, you may find that some individuals who identify as transgender are reluctant to vote, either because they don't feel safe or because their identification doesn't match the gender they identify with. Helping them access absentee voting or supporting them to vote together in groups may be helpful.

In general, social workers work from an assumption that people should have the opportunity to maximize their voting rights, even if that requires special assistance, such as absentee ballots for people with disabilities or the aging population who have difficulty leaving their homes, or translated materials for those who speak languages other than English. Your social work skills can help you engage with individuals around their specific barriers to voting.

Here, we highlight five specific populations that social workers may engage with that face challenges surrounding their access to vote. We identify specific resources to support voter registration with each group. For each population, we also encourage you to educate yourselves on the related policies of your specific state. Talk with

your local elections officials, or reach out to the Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work if you have questions about working with specific populations.

Individuals with Felony Convictions

Approximately 5.85 million Americans are prevented from voting due to felony (and in some states misdemeanor) convictions (American Civil Liberties Union 2017). State laws vary widely, with four states (Iowa, Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia) permanently disenfranchising those who have been convicted of felonies. In contrast, Maine and Vermont do not take away voting rights at any point during the legal process. In some states, the right to vote is denied only while individuals are in prison. In other states, it is denied during prison and parole or during prison, parole, and probation. Because people of color are disproportionately incarcerated, these policies have disproportionately disenfranchised African-American men. Approximately 1 in 40 US adults and 1 in 13 African-American adults are disenfranchised due to their convictions (Uggen et al. 2016); in Iowa and Florida, this is one in four African American men (Turner-Lee 2017).

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Felony Disenfranchisement
Read more about voting and felony convictions at https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/criminal-re-enfranchisement or another resource of your choice. Use your state's election-related website, or reach out to election officials to identify the rules about felon disenfranchisement in your state. Do you feel that those rules reflect social work values? Why or why not?

Survivors of Domestic Violence

Maintaining the privacy of voters is a significant issue for many groups, including those who work in law enforcement, survivors of crime, or those who work for the courts. Here, we specifically highlight the barriers that this poses to survivors of domestic violence. Survivors may be hesitant to vote because of the public nature of voting, including the need to go to the polls in person and the public availability of information about individuals who are registered to vote. Voter registration may involve individuals being asked their date of birth, home address, phone number, or social security or driver's license numbers (California Voter Foundation 2012). It is not always clear to potential voters which information is required and what will be publicly available.

To address these privacy concerns, 40 states have established some sort of address or voter confidentiality program to protect the privacy of survivors of domestic violence. Rules vary from state to state about who is included and what the procedures are for qualifying, enrolling, and participating. The other ten states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, have no such program in statute.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Survivors of Domestic Violence and Voting
Read more about voter registration for survivors of domestic violence at http://nnedv.org/ by searching "Survivor Privacy," or using another resource of your choice. Use your state's election-related website, or reach out to election officials to identify the rules about privacy for survivors of domestic violence in your state. Do you feel that those rules reflect social work values? Why or why not?

Individuals Who Are Homeless

Being homeless does not automatically disqualify someone from voting, but many individuals who are homeless face significant barriers when attempting to vote. Homeless individuals may find that their lack of permanent residency, not having proof of identification, limited access to resources to educate themselves about election-related issues, and limited ability to access transportation to polls prevents them from voting. Efforts to improve access to voting for those who are homeless have been ongoing. In 2016, a group of national homelessness advocacy organizations created a nationwide campaign called "You don't need a home to vote," designed to help homeless and low-income individuals participate in the political process.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Homelessness and Voting
Read more about voter registration for people who are homeless at the toolkit at http://nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/voting/ or another resource of your choice. Use your state's election-related website, or reach out to election officials to identify the rules for homeless individuals in your state who wish to vote. Do you feel that those rules reflect social work values? Why or why not?

Individuals with Differing Abilities

People who have physical, cognitive, or other disabilities often vote at significantly lower rates than other Americans. Some may assume that a disability disqualifies them from voting. Others may be socially isolated, which can result in not receiving communications from candidates, parties, or community groups. The process of voting itself can include many barriers that leave some individuals with disabilities unable to participate. Individuals with disabilities make up approximately 17% of voters overall, and have voting rates nearly 6% lower than those without disabilities, a difference of approximately three million voters. Nearly one-third of voters with disabilities reported experiencing problems with voting, compared to approximately 8% of those without disabilities (American Association of People with Disabilities 2016).

Some state laws address the voting rights of people with cognitive disabilities or mental illness in a negative manner, including states that deny the right to vote to "idiots or insane persons" (e.g., Kentucky, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Ohio), those of "unsound mind" (e.g., Alaska, Montana, and West Virginia), or guardianship (Tennessee) (Disability Justice 2017). In contrast, other states have affirmative language that states that all people should be given the right to vote whenever possible. For example, Rhode Island specifically states that "Patients admitted to a facility [for treatment of mental illness] shall not be deprived of the right to vote and participate in political activity" and that a "[c]ommunity residence resident will not be deprived of right to vote just because of admission and has right to reasonable assistance in registration and voting if desired" (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law n.d.).

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Voting with Differing Abilities
Read more about voting with disabilities at http://disabilityjustice.org/right-to-vote/, http://www.aapd.com/our-focus/voting/, or http://www.yourvotey-ourvoicemn.org/present/communities/people-disabilities-present, or another resource of your choice. Use your state's election-related website, or reach out to election officials to identify the rules about disability voting in your state. Do you feel that those rules reflect social work values? Why or why not?

Military and Overseas Voters

Citizens who live away from the USA or who serve on active duty in the military retain their right to vote in US elections. These rights are protected by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) of 1986 and were expanded significantly by the 2009 Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (called the MOVE Act). Unlike many of the populations described above, federal law specifically protects voting by these two groups; therefore, requirements are not dependent on the laws of individual states. Among other things, these laws require that states send absentee ballots to these qualified voters upon request at least 45 days before an election (U.S. Department of Justice 2010). The Federal Voting Assistance Program, which ensures that the requirements of the law are met, is run through the Department of Defense.

APPLY YOUR SKILLS/EXPLORE YOUR VALUES: Voting While Living or Stationed Overseas
Read more about voting while overseas or in the military at https://www.fvap.gov/ or another resource of your choice. Do you feel that those rules reflect social work values? Why or why not? What are your thoughts about why laws for these groups are handled through a federal program, rather than on a state-by-state level like the other types of laws discussed above?

Section 6: Social Workers and Voter Education

Registering voters is only the first step in voter engagement. The next step in engaging voters is **voter education**. Voter education teaches voters the mechanics of voting (where to vote, what the deadlines are, the process of voting), information about the issues that are on the ballot or are being considered by candidates, and why their vote matters (Nonprofit VOTE 2017b). Voter education can be conducted in a nonpartisan manner if you are affiliated with a nonprofit or public agency, or in a partisan manner if you are affiliated with a campaign or political party.

Voter education can be thought of in two main categories: education about the voting process and education about candidates. Education about the voting process includes:

- Providing days, times, and locations of upcoming elections;
- Sharing information about options for early or absentee voting;
- Showing voters a sample ballot;
- Walking them through the process of using the voting equipment in their area; and/or
- Putting together a document with frequently asked questions about voting.

Education about the voting process also includes reminding people that there is an election! In years where there is a big campaign underway, this might not seem necessary. It is, however. Even when people are aware of the contests on the top of the ticket, like Presidential races, people may not know about, or do not see the importance of, other races on the ballot. Local elections, in particular, have a huge influence on town services, local school districts, and many decisions that affect people intimately. Yet these elections tend to have extremely low participation. In Longmeadow, Massachusetts, for example, the June 2016 election included candidates for Select Board (similar to a town council), School Committee (school board), Planning Board, and Housing Authority. A total of 551 people voted, just 4.87% of the registered voters in town (Ingram 2016). And to his surprise, although he had not campaigned or expressed interest in the post, a resident named Phil Hallahan found after the election that he had won a seat on the Housing Authority with just nine votes as a write-in candidate (Goudreau 2016).

In a nonpartisan organization, it is important to avoid endorsing a specific candidate or party, to be neutral when discussing candidates, and to not share your personal opinion (Humphreys Institute 2016). This does not prevent social workers from encouraging voting and providing thoughtful, nonpartisan information. Sources like TurboVote and the League of Women Voters mentioned earlier in this chapter, as well as Ballot Ready (see Resources), can help in this work. Education about candidates includes:

- Creating and distributing questionnaires to candidates, allowing all candidates the opportunity to answer questions, and then sharing the results.
- Passing out sample ballots and voter guides produced by your organization or other organizations.

- Explaining the responsibilities of offices at issue in the election, e.g., What does a Board of Finance member do? What is the difference between the duties of the City Council and the County Commission? What does the Board of Zoning Appeals do? What does the State Board of Education handle as opposed to the town's Board of Education?
- Describing the kinds of issues that are handled at each level of government, to help voters understand the issues likely to arise at the local, state, and federal level.

If you are engaging in voter education as part of a partisan effort, through a campaign or party, you are allowed to educate voters about the ways in which your candidate or party best serves their needs or aligns with their values. Generally done in conjunction with other electoral activities, this type of voter education is usually referred to as **Voter Identification (ID) or Persuasion**. This involves reaching out to potential voters to assess whether they currently support your candidate or party (Wellstone Action n.d.). Current supporters are included in a list of people to follow up with through the voter outreach process (described in the section below). If they are unsure of their support, take the opportunity to try to persuade them that your candidate or party is the right choice for them. If they are not supporters, thank them for their time and move on; these individuals are not included in voter outreach. An example is provided for a sample Voter ID script from a social worker's campaign for State Representative in Connecticut.

Sample Voter ID Script

HQ phone number/for rides: XXX-XXX-XXXX

Hello, I'm a volunteer with the Laura Bartok for State Representative campaign. May I speak with _____?

There is a Democratic primary on Tuesday, August 9th and we're letting people know about why Laura is the best candidate to represent this district. With ten years of experience working at the state capitol and with nonprofits, she knows how to get the job done on day one. She is also the endorsed Democrat in the race.

Can we count on your support for Laura Bartok in the upcoming primary on Tuesday, August 9th?

YES:

Okay, thank you!

1. Will you need an absentee ballot?
2. Would you like a lawn sign?

Then: Thank you for the time. Have a nice day.

UNDECIDED: If you want more information, you can call XXX-XXX-XXXX or visit LauraBartok.com to learn more about her and why she's running.

NO: Alright, well thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

POLITICAL SOCIAL WORKER PROFILE: Tanya Rhodes Smith, MSW
Director, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, University of Connecticut School of Social Work (Fig. 8.6).

Fig. 8.6 Tanya Rhodes Smith, MSW

At the Humphreys Institute, we work to increase the political participation of social workers and the communities they serve. While we want all social workers to be more politically active, not all political action is equal. True political power comes from voting, so we believe that every social worker should help the people and communities they serve to vote. We have been training students and social workers for the past several years on why voting matters to social work's mission and impact, and I have been stunned by the energy and enthusiasm for this work. Voting is about relationships, and there is real power in asking someone to vote.

Nonvoters are generally ignored by candidates and political parties. As a BSW student at the University of Nevada-Reno described after participating in a voter engagement project:

> Another resident was blind in one eye and explained that he couldn't see the paperwork so there was no sense in voting. I told him that I could be his eyes, and that he had a right like everyone else to participate. By the end of our discussion, he had tears in his eyes, and said 'Thank you for making me matter.'

This experience isn't uncommon. We often see it with individuals with a felony record. There are 20 million people with a felony record in our country, 6 million of whom can't vote. Perhaps the other 14 million will one day choose to speak together as a powerful voting bloc! Because states determine who can vote with a felony conviction, however, there is misinformation leading most people (including social workers) to assume that people with a felony conviction can't vote.

(continued)

Recently, the Humphreys Institute launched a campaign in a local city to create a new culture of voting. Voting is about relationships, so we are training social service providers why voting matters to their mission and impact and how to integrate nonpartisan voter registration, education and outreach into their service delivery. We also have a task force in the city addressing the barriers to voting, including those that could be fixed easily with better policy and election management by registrars of voters.

After learning that felons could vote after their parole ends, one of our volunteers went to a local career fair for formerly incarcerated people in order to register voters. She quickly connected with five men who had no idea they could vote. They walked together next door to City Hall and each one registered. The woman said that each man left that building "a foot taller." No one had ever asked them to vote.

Section 7: Social Workers and Voter Outreach/GOTV

Registering voters and providing them with election-related information is important, but it often is not enough. Being asked to vote is an incredibly powerful motivator—consistent with the Civic Voluntarism Model, mobilization, or asking someone to vote, is a critical predictor of political participation (Verba et al. 1995; Bedolla and Michelson 2012). While we talk in this section specifically about outreach to those who have already expressed an interest in voting, asking for participation from those who rarely or never vote is also an important role that social workers can, and should, play. **Voter outreach** or **"Get Out The Vote (GOTV)"** activities are a crucial step in voter engagement, specifically reaching out to community members and asking them to vote. In these outreach efforts, potential voters are reminded about upcoming elections and directly encouraged to vote, excitement is created about these elections, and potential voters are helped to break through barriers to casting their ballots and having their voices heard.

Social workers who focus on voter registration drives may miss this step if they do not reach back out to registered individuals to help them get to the polls. Parties, campaigns, community groups, and schools of social work are all potential venues for voter outreach activities. GOTV can be done via phone calls, mailings, or in-person (Humphreys Institute 2016).

Engaging in GOTV Efforts

While the GOTV schedule may vary from state to state, in general, the last 2 weeks before an election are the best time to get people energized and planning to vote on Election Day. This time is used in different ways depending on the election. If you are engaging voters around a primary, special election, or municipal election, potential voters may not know an election is coming, or why it is important. GOTV efforts can

be used to make sure they are aware and ready for the election. In big elections, where there has been a lot of press about a particular office or issue, we don't have to worry that people will forget to vote. However, we may have to worry that they are so turned off by TV ads or negative campaigning that they will choose not to vote. The first electoral campaign for one of this book's authors was a hotly contested U.S. Senate campaign in South Dakota, where media is very cheap to buy, so every TV and radio advertising break was completely filled with political ads. By Election Day, voters were so sick of the election that they were choosing not to vote out of frustration. While a fairly rare occurrence, this is something to think about if a campaign has been particularly negative, or if a lot of campaign money has been spent in your area.

GOTV also may focus on making sure that people not only go to the polls, but that they know that they can vote for races other than the top of the ticket races. We have discussed previously that downballot or downticket races generally get fewer votes than the top of the ticket races. We call this **dropoff**, when voters come to the polls and vote for a few races but stop voting as they move down the ballot. Voter outreach can encourage voters to vote for candidates or races that they might otherwise skip. For example, while most of the public's attention during the 2016 election focused on the presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, one of this book's authors helped make GOTV calls that focused voters' attention on the many close races for elected offices in metropolitan Harris County, Texas.

Critical to voter outreach/GOTV efforts is identifying barriers to voting for potential supporters of your campaign, and identifying solutions to address these barriers. It is not enough to remind people of an election if they don't have a car, cannot get off work to vote, or are not registered to vote. Common barriers and voter outreach solutions are listed in Table 8.2. In a nonpartisan voter outreach effort, be sure that your solutions don't include endorsement of any specific candidate or party.

Table 8.2 Voter outreach barriers and solutions

Barrier	Solution
I forgot about the election	Provide education about the election
I don't have a car or a way to get to the polls	Offer them a ride or connect them with a service that provides rides
I have to work or I won't be in town on Election Day	Let them know what protections are in state law for employees to vote (if any), offer them options such as early voting (if applicable), absentee ballots, or mail in ballots (if applicable)
I don't know enough about the candidates, or they are all alike	Provide education about the candidates
I'm not registered to vote	Explain Election Day Registration (if applicable) or the process for registering for the next election
This election doesn't affect me	Provide education about the candidates
I have a disability and can't access the polls	Provide assistance in accessing services to allow them to vote or absentee ballots

APPLY YOUR SKILLS: Voter Outreach Practice
Role play a voter outreach call with a friend or classmate. Each of you should take a turn being the voter and the caller. The voter should provide at least one reason they are not going to vote, and the caller should be prepared to respond.

Campaigns typically use a standard script for GOTV phone calls, incorporating the concepts identified here. We provide one example of a GOTV script, used by the same social worker as in the campaign discussed in the previous section.

Behavioral psychology research suggests a few ways to increase the effectiveness of GOTV calls and visits to people's doors. Dr. Todd Rogers (2012; see his video in the resource section) suggests several ways to do this work well, including asking potential voters about making a plan for voting. Questions might include: What time are you planning to vote? How will you get to the polls? Where will you be coming from? These types of questions may be useful in helping someone planning to vote realize barriers that might keep them from voting on Election Day. Identifying and working through such barriers in advance helps to increase individuals' likelihood of voting.

Rogers (2012) also suggests increasing people's personal accountability, perhaps by indicating that voting records are public (not who you voted for, but whether you vote) or that the caller might follow up after the election. This increases voting for most people—and, in fact, is one reason that pledge cards can be very effective (Humphreys Institute 2016). It is important though to be aware that some people may react negatively to efforts to increase accountability. Rogers (2012) argues that when some campaigns engage in voter outreach by telling people that voter turnout

Sample GOTV Script
Hello, I'm a volunteer with the Laura Bartok for State Representative campaign. May I speak with _____?

The Democratic Primary is on Tuesday, August 9th and we're asking people to come out and support Laura. She is the best candidate to represent this district and has lived here all her life. Laura has a BSW and a MSW (Master of Social Work) in policy with a focus on aging. She has the right budget priorities and will fight for families and business.

Can we count on you to vote in the Democratic Primary on Tuesday, August 9th and will you support for Laura Bartok?

YES:

Okay, thank you!

Will you need a ride to the poll?

YES: Note it.

Then: Thank you for the time. Have a nice day.

UNDECIDED: If you want more information, I can have Laura contact you. (If yes: when is a good time to call?)

NO: All right, well thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

HQ phone number/for rides: XXX-XXX-XXXX

will be low, this is not effective, because people like to do what others do. Highlighting low turnout may make people feel like they do not need to participate in this election. Instead, Rogers suggests emphasizing that the person to whom you are speaking is "the kind of person who votes" or "a voter." This simple framing change can help to make voting part of a person's identity.

Early Voting

Traditionally in the USA, we think of voter outreach as helping people get to the polls on Election Day. However, depending on the rules in your state, you may need to engage in voter outreach during earlier time periods. How do you know if you should be encouraging voters to vote on Election Day or earlier? How do you know if GOTV efforts are needed earlier in the election season?

Voting before Election Day typically comes in one of three forms: early voting, absentee voting, and mail voting. **Early voting** means that voters can show up at a designated site (such as the local town hall) in advance of an election and vote early, with no reason or justification needed. Early voting laws are designed to ensure that people have access to voting if their situation does not allow them to come to the polls during the designated time on Election Day. Currently, 37 states and the District of Columbia offer some form of early voting. The early voting time window varies from state to state and in some states have been decreased or eliminated in recent years. It is important to be up-to-date on what is available in your state during each election.

Early voting has both benefits and drawbacks. It can facilitate voting by those who are not able to vote in person on Election Day because of work or other commitments. It has the potential to reduce the wait time for voting and thereby increase accessibility, since the same number of people are voting over a longer period of time. However, in states with a significant amount of early voting, voters may not be able to respond to events that happen right before Election Day if they have already cast their ballot. For example, a well-publicized altercation took place between a Congressional candidate in Montana and a reporter days before a special election in 2017. Individuals who might have chosen to change their vote because of that altercation (either toward or away from that candidate) were unable to do so if they were part of the more than 60% of voters who had already voted through early voting (Enten 2017).

In states with early voting, GOTV efforts are targeted at a variety of dates, not just Election Day. For example, in many states, "Souls to the Polls" campaigns bring voters directly from Sunday church services to polling stations open on Sundays (Reid 2016).

In **absentee voting**, a voter can request that elections officials mail a ballot to them prior to Election Day. The ballot has to be mailed back or returned in person by the time the polls close. All states have this as an option. In 20 states, you have to provide a justification for why you need to vote absentee. In 27 states and the District of Columbia, you just need to ask for the ballot—you don't need to have a

reason. In eight states (Arizona, California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Montana, New Jersey, Utah) and the District of Columbia, voters may ask to be on a permanent absentee ballot list, and can receive an absentee ballot for every election after they sign up.

As with early voting, absentee voting has the potential to provide voters increased access to voting. However, it generally requires voters to either present themselves to an elections official during business hours or locate an absentee ballot form, fill it out, sign it, send it in, and then fill out and sign a ballot when it comes. Any time multiple steps are introduced into the voting process, there is the potential for people to not complete them. Absentee voting can have the same drawbacks as early voting, in that people who have already voted may be unable to react to changes in campaigns that happen on or near Election Day.

In contrast to these other models, in three states—Colorado, Oregon, and Washington—a ballot is automatically mailed to every eligible voter (NCSL 2017a). This is known as **mail voting**. Some in-person options are available for those who prefer it or require special services. Other states may offer some mail-in election options. In states that utilize mail voting, voter outreach efforts are centered on making sure people fill out and mail the ballot back, and that can happen over a longer period of time.

Know the early voting rules in your state and consider how they should affect your voter outreach efforts. For example, Massachusetts has early voting only during even-year November elections. Elections at other times and in odd years, including primaries, municipal elections, and special elections, do not provide voters an early voting option. As a political social worker, knowing the rules is key to being able to provide correct information to potential voters and giving them the best chance of participating in elections.

BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE: Voting Options in Your State
Go to http://www.canivote.org/ or http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx or your local elections website to find out the voting rules for your state. What are the rules for early voting, absentee voting, and/or mail voting in your state?

Review of Key Terms and Concepts

Absentee voting: a method of voting in which a voter can request that the elections officials mail them a ballot prior to Election Day. The ballot has to be mailed back or returned in person by the time the polls closed. All states have this as an option.

Disenfranchisement: having the right to vote taken away.

Dropoff: when voters come to the polls and vote for a few races but stop voting as they move down the ballot.

Early voting: a method of voting in which voters show up at a designated site (such as their local town hall) in advance of the election and vote early. No reason or justification is needed.

Franchise: the right to vote.

Get Out The Vote (GOTV): please refer to "voter outreach."

Mail voting: a method of voting in Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, in which a ballot is automatically mailed to every eligible voter.

Nonpartisan voter engagement: activities that are not biased toward a particular candidate or political party and do not support or oppose any particular candidate or party. This may include voter education, voter outreach, and voter registration.

Nonprofit VOTE: the largest provider of nonpartisan resources and trainings to the nonprofit sector on integrating nonpartisan voter participation and election activities into ongoing activities and services. www.nonprofitvote.org

Partisan voter engagement: activities that advance a specific candidate or political party when assisting citizens with voter registration and voting. May include voter education, voter outreach, and voter registration.

Political justice: refers to the equitable distribution of political rights. Specifically, it is concerned with issues such as access to voting rights and political representation.

Preclearance: seeking approval from the Department of Justice for voting-related changes.

Privilege: in the context of political justice, a right earned by or granted to a specific person or group of people.

Provisional ballots: ballots cast by voters if there is some question about their identification or identity, and held separately until after the election to see if the issue is resolved. If resolved favorably, the vote is counted. Provisional ballots also may be called challenge ballots or affidavit ballots.

Responsibility: a duty for all.

Right: an entitlement guaranteed to all who qualify.

Voter education: teaches voters the mechanics of voting (where to vote, what the deadlines are, and the process of voting) and information about the issues on the ballot or considered by candidates.

Voter fraud: abuse of the electoral process by those who are not eligible to vote, or by those who are eligible to vote who use the system to vote multiple times.

Voter Identification (ID) or Persuasion: reaching out to potential voters to assess whether they are current supporters of your candidate or party.

Voter outreach or **"Get out the Vote (GOTV)"**: activities that remind people about the election, create excitement about elections, encourage people to vote, and help them get to the polls.

Voter registration: the process by which voters in 49 states and the District of Columbia add themselves to the voting rolls in advance of an election. North Dakota does not have voter registration. Laws regarding voter registration differ drastically from state to state.

Voter suppression: the disruption of the ability of eligible voters to cast their ballots through mechanisms that are discriminatory, intimidating, or otherwise create barriers to the act of voting.

Voting Rights Act: passed in 1965, the most significant voting legislation of the twentieth century. Intended to put an end to Jim Crow laws.

Resources

Books:

Abigail Thernstrom: *Whose votes count?* (conservative counterpoint to the voting rights argument) http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674951969

Ari Berman: *Give us the ballot: The modern struggle for voting rights in America* https://www.amazon.com/Give-Us-Ballot-Struggle-America/dp/1250094720

Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven:

https://www.amazon.com/Frances-Fox-Piven/e/B001ITTHW4/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1

Mobilizing the poor: How it can be done.

Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare.

Why people don't vote: And why politicians want it that way.

Podcasts & Videos:

Adam Ruins Everything—an excellent resource on voting: http://www.trutv.com/full-episodes/adam-ruins-everything/2065341/index.html. You may need a login from your cable company for the full episode, but clips are available on You Tube.

Freakonomics podcast which includes a section on the value of an individual vote: http://freakonomics.com/podcast/freakonomics-radio-your-freak-quently-asked-questions-answered/ and the related New York Times magazine article: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/magazine/why-vote.html

Interview about voter fraud: http://www.cc.com/video-clips/37udj7/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-jesse-williams---stepping-into-the-spotlight-on--grey-s-anatomy----extended-interview

On Point podcast on Voter ID laws: http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2016/08/03/voting-rights-voter-id-ballot-access

Rock the Vote video about history of voting: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar7r5aG_B0Y

Stanford professor Todd Rogers discusses research about ways to make GOTV more effective: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=TkWQSsw93CU

Story Corps animation about Jim Crow and voting (3 min): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AA87JWa0bEw

TED Talks:

E-voting: http://www.ted.com/talks/david_bismark_e_voting_without_fraud

Getting young people to vote: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlYpMGI6iNQ

Research on racism and voting: https://www.ted.com/talks/nate_silver_on_race_and_politics

Voter engagement: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYIpDmuMFpw

Websites—Organizations:

Advancement Project: http://www.advancementproject.org/

Alliance for Justice: https://www.afj.org/

American Civil Liberties Union: https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights

Ballot Ready https://www.ballotready.org/

Brennan Center for Justice: https://www.brennancenter.org/

https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/voting-rights-elections

https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/state-restrictions-voter-registration-drives

Election Project: http://www.electproject.org/

Fair Vote: http://www.fairvote.org/.

Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work: http://politicalinstitute.uconn.edu

National Coalition for the Homeless: https://www.nationalhomeless.org/

National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty: https://www.nlchp.org/

Nonprofit VOTE: http://www.nonprofitvote.org

http://www.nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/

http://www.nonprofitvote.org/resource-library/voting-in-your-state-2/

Project Vote: http://www.projectvote.org

Public Interest Legal Foundation: https://publicinterestlegal.org/reports/

Sentencing Project: http://sentencingproject.org/.

TurboVote: http://democracy.works/turbovote/

U.S. Election Assistance Commission: https://www.eac.gov/voters/national-voter-registration-act-studies/

Vote411 from the League of Women Voters: http://www.vote411.org/.

Vote Smart: http://votesmart.org/.

Voting is Social Work: http://www.votingissocialwork.org

Websites—Resources:

Absentee & Early Voting:

http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx

Buzzfeed humorous video on voter registration:

https://www.buzzfeed.com/briggles/registering-to-vote-with-president-obama

Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws: https://www.justice.gov/crt/introduction-federal-voting-rights-laws-0 or go to https://www.justice.gov/ and in the menu under "Agencies" click "Alphabetical Listing," then on the landing page click "Civil Rights Division." In the sidebar on the left hand side of the page under "Voting" click "History of Voting Rights Laws" then on the landing page click "Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws" at the top.

Profiles of plaintiffs in voting rights lawsuits:

https://www.thenation.com/article/the-92-year-old-civil-rights-pioneer-who-is-now-challenging-north-carolinas-voter-id-law/

http://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/one-mothers-struggle-for-voting-rights-100842

Tips for Effective Voter Contact Scripts: http://www.wellstone.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Effective-Phone-and-Door-Scripts_0.pdf

Voter Privacy: http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votprivacy/index.html or go to http://www.calvoter.org/ and in the sidebar menu under "Issues & Publications" click "Voter Privacy".

Voting Rights: http://www.civilrights.org/votingrights

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