America's Nonprofits Get Out the Vote

New survey analysis on the prevalence of nonprofit voter engagement and its intersection with race, leadership, and community served

NonprofitVOTE

Who

are the nonprofits that do voter engagement?

What characteristics set them apart from the others?

Nonprofit VOTE

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Executive Summary

Seven in 10 voters say they think it is a good idea for nonprofits to offer voter support services, like voter registration, election reminders, and election day transportation.[1]

Additionally, nonprofits effectively reach communities underrepresented at the polls, including low-income, young, and voters of color. Finally, nonprofit voter engagement significantly boosts voter turnout, especially among those otherwise underrepresented in our democracy.[2]

The evidence is clear – nonprofit voter engagement is broadly supported, reaches underrepresented communities, and boosts voter turnout to foster a more inclusive democracy.

- *But how many nonprofits across the nation actually do voter engagement with the communities they serve?*
- *And equally important, who are the nonprofits that do voter engagement?*
- *What characteristics set them apart from the others?*

This report sheds light on those questions using data from an Urban Institute survey of nonprofits nationwide conducted in 2021.

1 Fall 2021 survey commissioned by Independent Sector, avail. at https://independentsector.org/resource/new-poll-voters-want-nonprofits-to-be-engaged-and-resourced/
2 Findings on demographics reached and positive impact on turnout repeated across multiple reports, including the "Nonprofit Power: Engaging Voters for a More Inclusive Democracy" report using 2020 data available at https://www.nonprofitvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/6-Nonprofit-Power-report-PDF-version-compressed.pdf and the "Engaging New Voters: If Nonprofits Don't, Who Will?" report using 2018 data, available at https://www.nonprofitvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/engaging-new-voters-2018.pdf

Key Findings

A fifth (20%) of all nonprofits surveyed said they did voter engagement "occasionally," "frequently," to "almost all the time." However, the share of nonprofits doing voter engagement varies significantly depending on the community served, programs offered, nonprofit leadership, and other factors.

A third (29 to 37%) of nonprofits that serve historically underrepresented communities did voter engagement, including:

- *Nonprofits that primarily serve Black communities, Hispanic communities, or low-income communities.*
- *Nonprofits that provide services such as job training and employment, food and nutrition, community improvement and capacity building, or youth development.*

Nearly half (38 to 50%) of surveyed nonprofits led by People of Color did voter engagement, including:

- *Nonprofits with majority People of Color boards.*
- *Nonprofits with CEOs of color, especially nonprofits with Black or Hispanic CEOs.*
- *Nonprofits with majority People of Color staff.*

Based on our experience, these nonprofits may recognize the consequences of underrepresentation and seek to increase voter participation in the communities they serve as a route to positive change. They could also be a result of leadership more fully understanding and identifying with the needs of the community.

Other factors are also related to whether a nonprofit does voter engagement,

including whether the nonprofit is urban vs. rural-based, its budget size, including if they are contracting or expanding, and if it also does lobbying or advocacy work. These and other nuances are explored in this report.

There are just over 1.8 million nonprofits registered with the IRS. However, this includes many groups that Americans don't normally think of as a "nonprofit," like foundations, business associations, labor unions, veterans organizations, churches, educational institutions, and others. After excluding those, we still have about 850,000 public charities remaining, including human service nonprofits, food pantries, arts organizations, youth programs, and more.[3]

If 20% of these remaining nonprofits do voter engagement, that translates into 170,000 voterized nonprofits. But churches and educational institutions also do voter engagement, so a broader definition of "nonprofits" would generate a much higher estimate. Regardless of the base we use, the number of nonprofits integrating voter engagement into their client and community work is substantial.

3 Candid, June 2021 fact sheet at https://www.issuelab.org/resources/38265/38265.pdf (accessed Jan. 2022). 72% of 1.8M are "public charities," after excluding foundations and other 501(c)s. Of these remaining 1.3M, 34% are churches and educational institutions, leaving over 850K public charities.

A Call to Action

For nonprofits serving or led by communities underrepresented in our democracy, this report should serve as validation. Nonprofits serving similar communities across the nation are recognizing the unique position they are in to make positive change – and they are taking action to do so. Nonprofits serving the general public also have a vital role in democracy building. Whatever community you serve, your nonprofit can host a National Voter Registration Day event or provide educational information about upcoming elections.

For foundations and donors, you can take steps to create space for your grantees to do voter engagement. Ask nonprofits you support what they are doing to engage the communities they serve in voting. Consider providing direct funding for such targeted work.

See the Resources section at the end of this report for more information, trainings, and resources your nonprofit or foundation can use to scale up your current voter engagement, or begin engaging the communities you serve for the first time.

Report and Findings

The Urban Institute survey, conducted in the spring of 2021, surveyed 2,306 nonprofits nationwide. The survey was largely focused on collecting data about recent trends in donations and how organizations were affected by the events of 2020. However, a subset of that survey, including 266 nonprofits, received the voter engagement question that forms the basis of this report. The survey excluded large nonprofit hospitals and universities, focusing as a result on what most Americans think of as a nonprofit, including food pantries, job training centers, arts organizations, and more.

This report represents the first analysis of that voter engagement question and how it relates to other data collected in the survey using public use data files provided by the Urban Institute. Overall, 20% of surveyed nonprofits reported doing voter engagement, including Get Out the Vote and voter registration work, "occasionally," "frequently," to "almost all the time" in 2020.

If one looks more narrowly at nonprofits that only did it "frequently" or "almost all the time," the share is 9%. This analysis is focused on the 20% share that is inclusive of those who did voter engagement occasionally, in part to ensure a large enough group size to do comparative analysis. Additionally, elections are by definition occasional, as is the organizing work around them such as a short registration drive in the weeks up to an election.

While the 2020 election saw historically high voter turnout and engagement, the share of nonprofits doing voter engagement changed very little from 2019 to 2020. In fact, 19% of surveyed nonprofits reported doing voter engagement in 2019. This suggests the 20% share is not a one-year anomaly, but part of a long-term pattern.

How Often Nonprofits Report Doing Voter Engagement By Year

	2019	2020
Never	71%	69%
Rarely to Almost all of the Time	29%	31%
Occasionally, Frequently, Almost all the Time	19%	20%
Frequently to Almost all the Time	8%	9%

In future research, we hope to explore what the voter engagement these nonprofit do actually looks like. To what extent are nonprofits doing voter registration at point of service or client intake? Are they doing voter registration work in their waiting rooms or for the broader community outside of the nonprofit's facilities? Are they partnering with others to organize candidate events? Are they educating their community about options for voting by mail, in person, or on Election Day? Are they doing phone banks or text message campaigns to remind the communities they serve to vote as part of Get-Out-the-Vote efforts?

These questions will have to wait. For now, the Urban Institute data provides a wealth of valuable insight into how many nonprofits are actually doing voter engagement, and equally important, which nonprofits are driving the trends.

Nonprofits Serving Underrepresented Communities More Likely to Engage

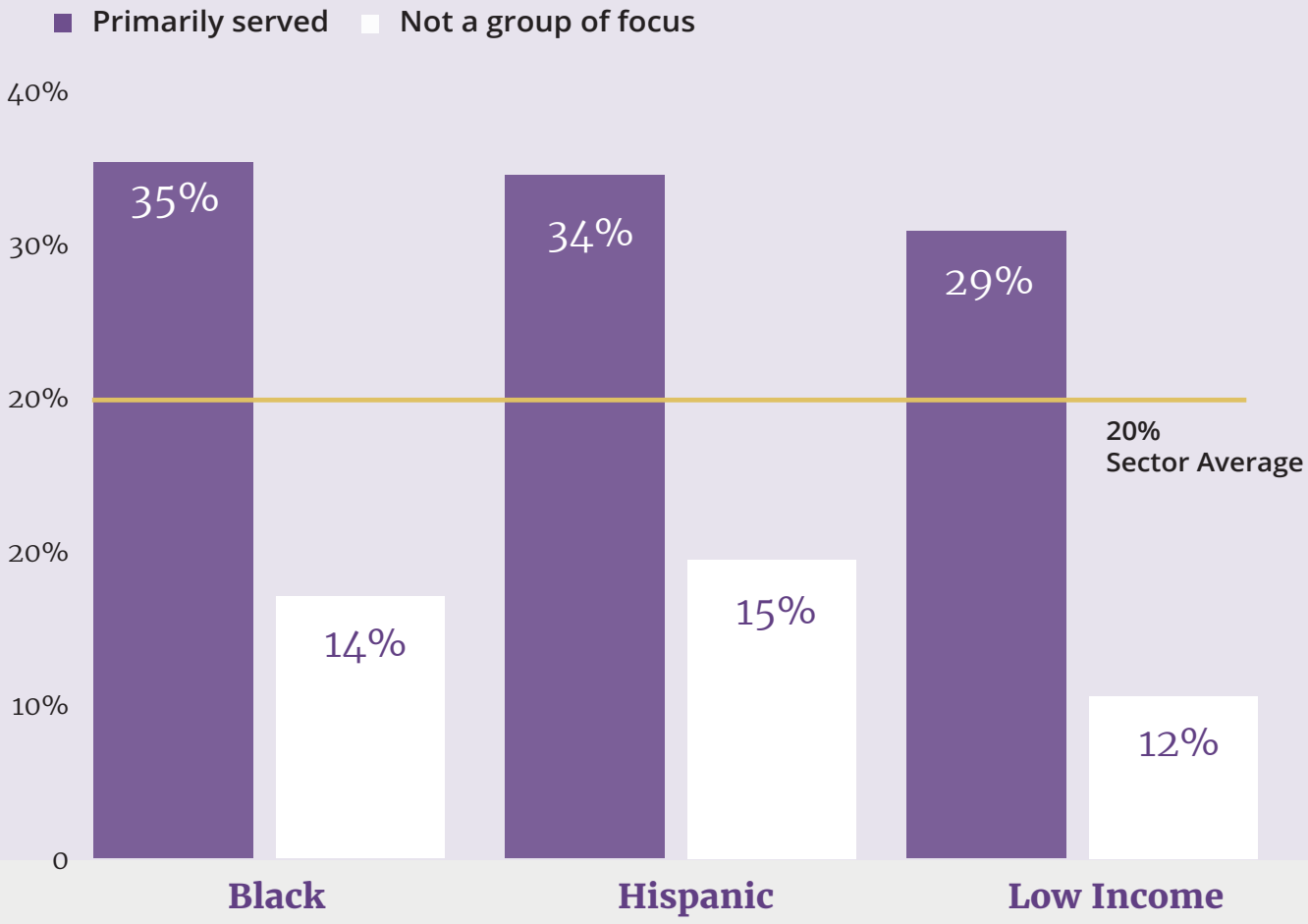
At Nonprofit VOTE, we see nonprofits begin doing voter engagement because they see low voter participation rates in the communities they serve as a significant barrier to positive change. Others view the empowerment of the communities they serve as part of their nonprofit's work. As such, it makes sense that nonprofits that primarily serve underrepresented communities are more likely to do voter engagement.

The Urban Institute survey contained a question about the community served. Respondents were asked if this was a "primary" community they served, a "secondary" community they served, or a community that was "not a specific audience" their programs sought to serve.

Among nonprofits primarily serving low-income communities[4], 29% did voter engagement compared to 12% of surveyed nonprofits that did not focus programs on low-income communities. We see even stronger trends for surveyed nonprofits primarily serving Black and Hispanic communities, of which 35% and 34% respectively did voter engagement.

Nonprofits that Primarily Focus Services on Underrepresented Communities Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by community served doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time



By contrast, 15% of nonprofits that primarily serve the "general public" did voter engagement, but the sheer number of groups in this category still translates into a big overall impact. Over half of the survey respondents said they primarily served the "general public."[5]

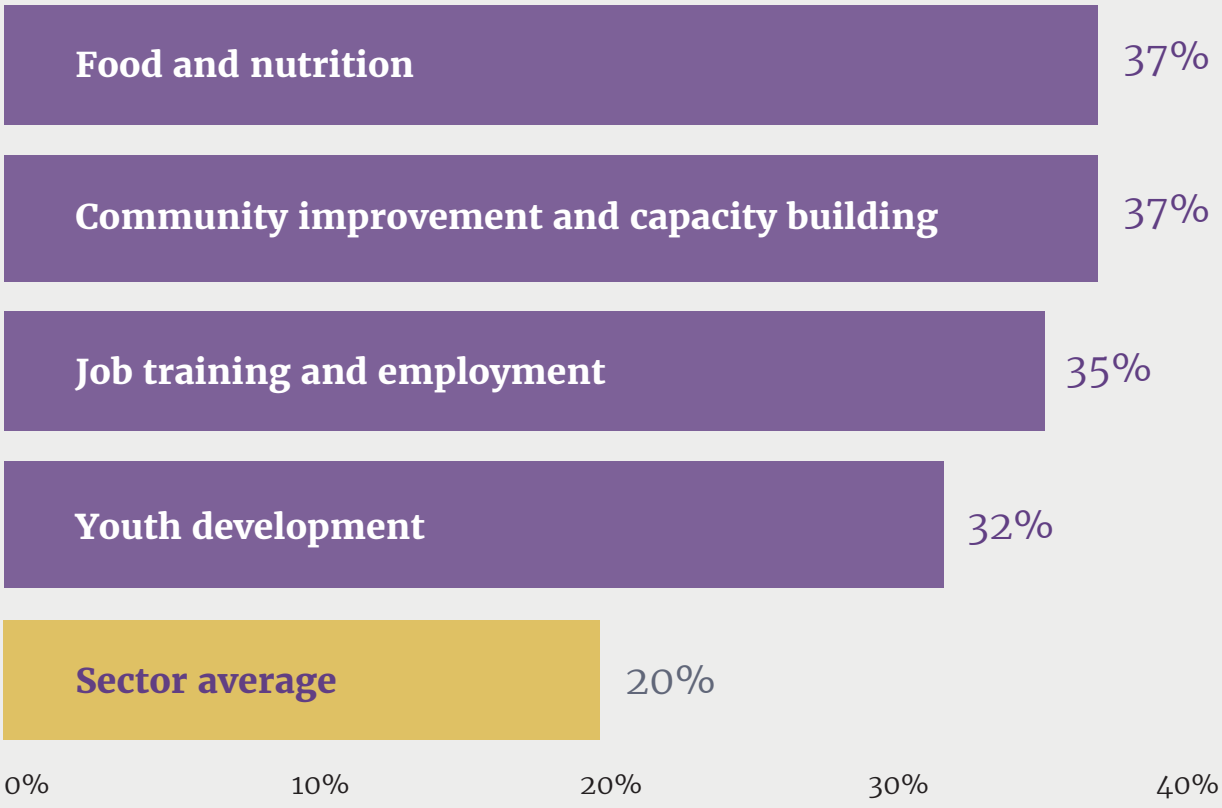
4 Low-income defined here as below 200% of the poverty line.

5 From Public Use dataset. 56% of all survey respondents said they primarily served the "general public." That climbs to roughly 70% (69.6%) when secondary is included.

The Urban Institute survey also included a question about their nonprofit's core activities. Nonprofits providing services like community improvement, food and nutrition support, job training, and youth services were far more likely to do voter engagement with rates in the 32% to 37% range.

Nonprofits Providing Key Support Services to Communities Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by services doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time



Not included in the graph are two significant outliers. One is groups that do civil rights, social action, and advocacy work, of which 59% did voter engagement. This is to be expected considering the strong mission tie-in. Additionally, these groups are more likely to get funding specifically for voter engagement.

On the other end, 11% of surveyed nonprofits focused on the arts did voter engagement. Despite the lower rate, with 127,000 arts-related nonprofits in the nation[6], that translates into nearly 14,000 arts-related nonprofits doing voter engagement.

6 127,000 arts-related nonprofits count from CauseIQ at https://www.causeiq.com/insights/how-many-nonprofits-in-the-us/ (accessed Dec. 29, 2021)

Nonprofits Led By Impacted Communities More Likely to Engage

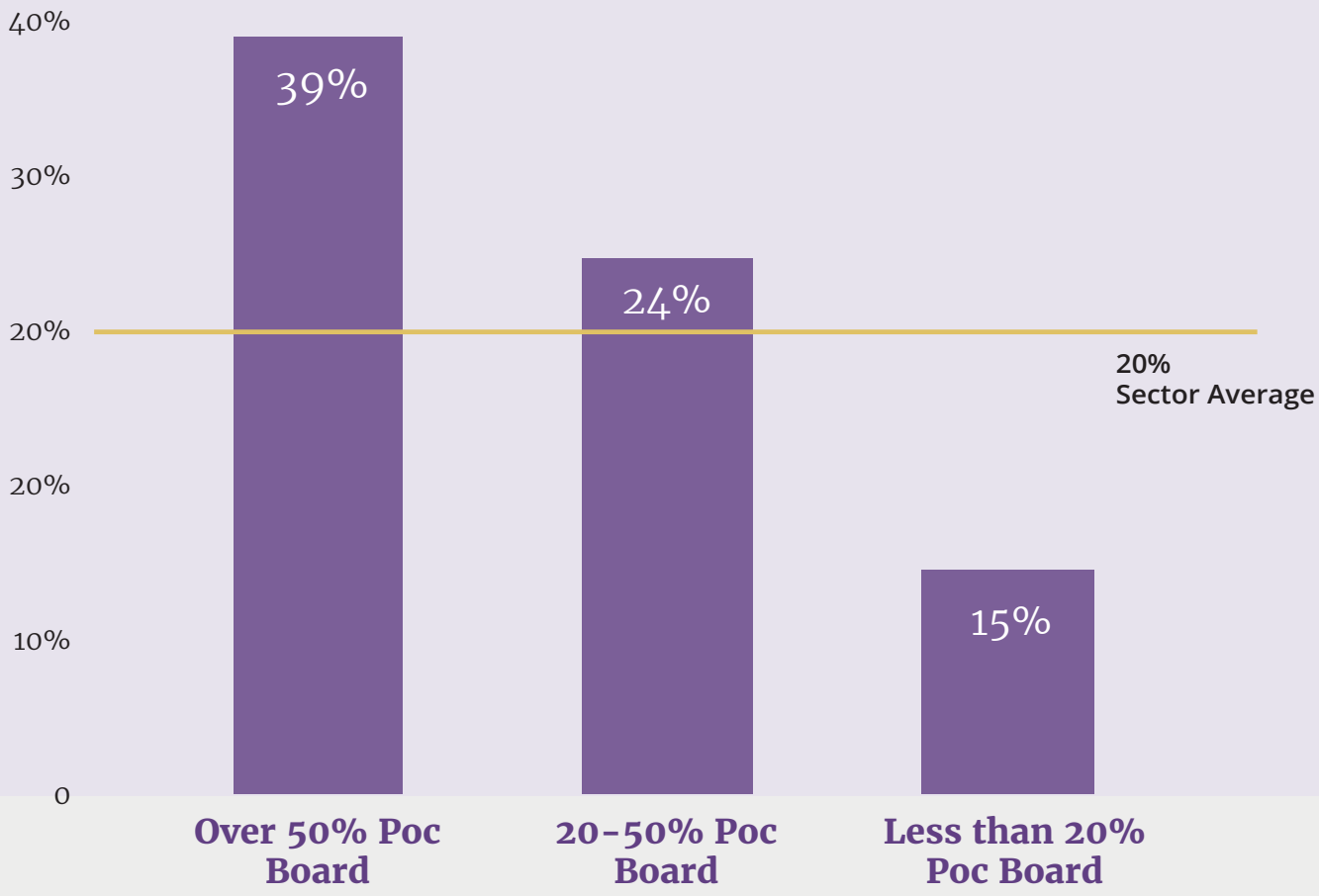
The demographics of who is leading and staffing the nonprofit's work is another contributing factor that is evident in the data. Specifically, nonprofits with majority People of Color boards, a CEO of Color, or majority People of Color staff were significantly more likely to do voter engagement. Similar trends can be seen for nonprofits with large shares of low-income representation on their boards.

"We just felt like, who could better gain the trust of the community other than those who come from the same community?" said Melaak Rashid from Smart Development Inc., a nonprofit providing housing and financial stability services to the Arabic-speaking, immigrant, and Muslim community in Cleveland, Ohio.

Looking at board composition, 39% of nonprofits with a majority People of Color board did voter engagement, compared to 15% of surveyed nonprofits whose boards are less than one-fifth People of Color.

Nonprofits with a Higher Percentage of People of Color on Boards Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by PoC board composition doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time



Similar trends can be seen with the low-income composition of the board. 35% of nonprofits with a significant share of low-income members on their boards did voter engagement as compared to 17% of nonprofits with fewer low-income members on their board.[7] However, this variable did not test statistically significant. Future iterations of this survey may yield different results.

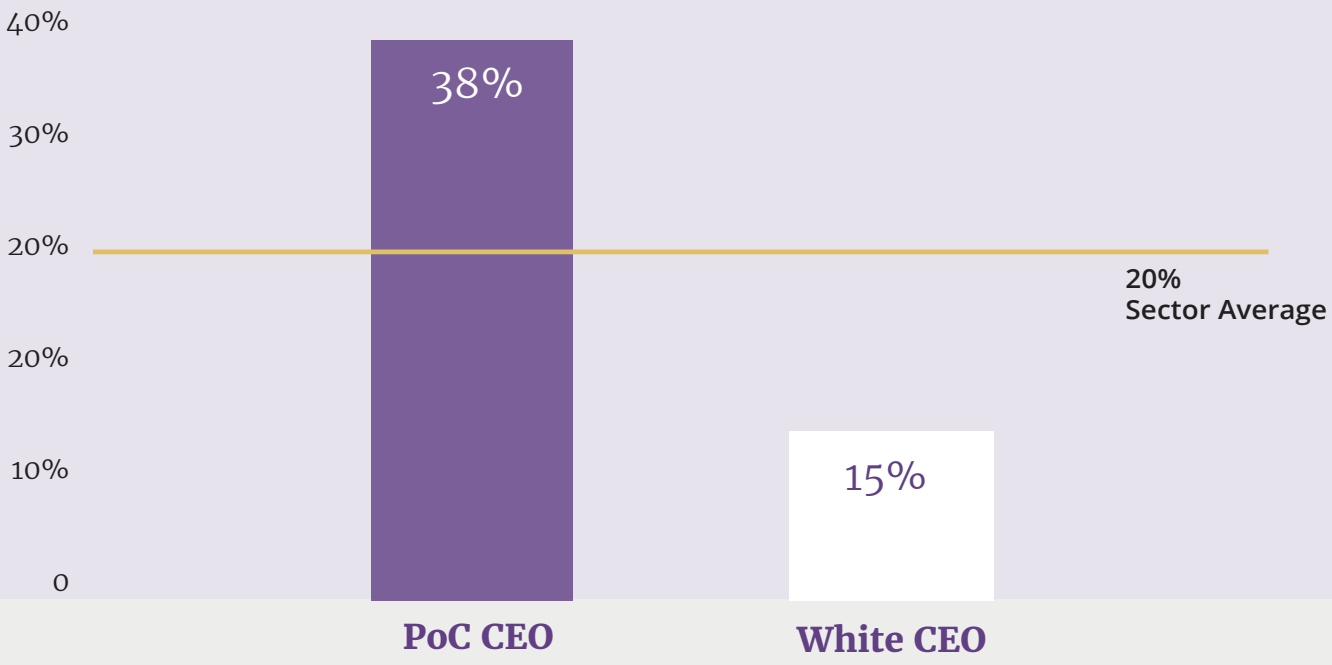
7 "Significant share" is defined here as 40% or more low-income members (with household income below $40,000/ year) on the board.

The race of the nonprofit's CEO is also related to the likelihood of a nonprofit doing voter engagement. 38% of nonprofits with a Person of Color as its CEO did voter engagement as compared to 15% of nonprofits with a white CEO.

Nonprofits with a CEO of Color Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by CEO race doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time

PoC includes Black Hispanic, AAPI, Native American, Multi-Racial, and Other



Disaggregating the Person of Color CEO data further, the highest rates were 50% and 48% for nonprofits led by Hispanic CEOs and Black CEOs respectively. Similarly, 42% of nonprofits with majority people of color staff did voter engagement.

50%
of nonprofits with
Hispanic CEOs
did voter engagement

48%
of nonprofits with
Black CEOs
did voter engagement

We also looked at both CEO gender and gender composition of the board, but neither showed a statistically significant difference.

Partisan Considerations Show Little or No Impact

We grouped states into Democratic, Battleground, and Republican states using 2020 Electoral College Ratings from Cook Political Report[8] to see if these factors had an impact on the likelihood of a nonprofit in that state doing voter engagement, but any differences we found were not statistically significant. We similarly examined data between hard-to-vote vs. easy-to-vote states using the "Cost of Voting Index" developed by the Election Law Journal.[9] The data once again showed no statistically significant impact on the likelihood of nonprofits doing voter engagement.

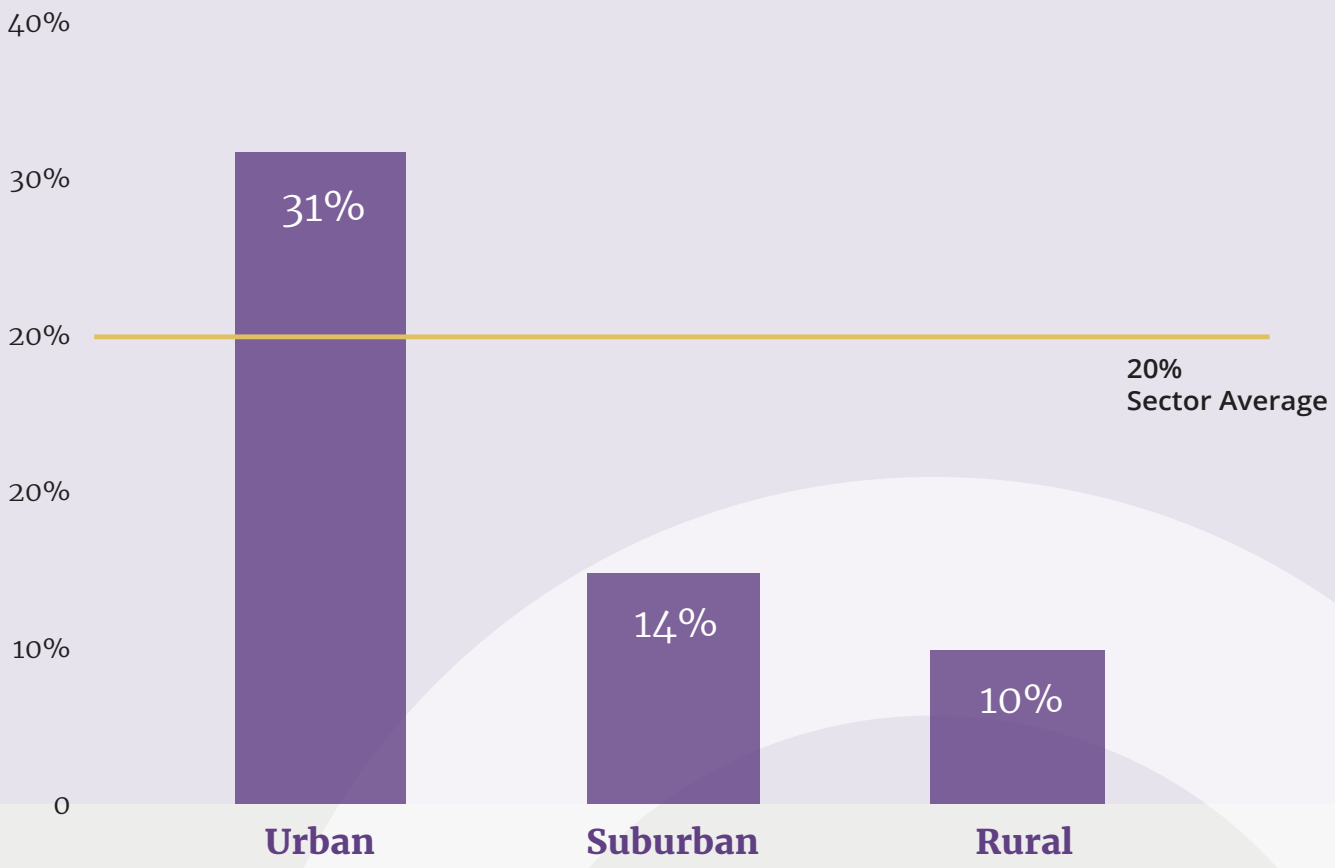
The lack of significant relationships with political maps or state policies, as well as the fact that nonprofit voter engagement rates changed little from 2019 to 2020, reinforces the core takeaway **that the community a nonprofit is serving – or being led by – is a more important driver of a nonprofit's likelihood of doing voter engagement than any political and legal implications of the state they are in.**

8 Cook Political Report, 2020 Electoral College Ratings avail. at https://www.cookpolitical.com/sites/default/files/2020-10/EC%20Ratings.102820.pdf (accessed Dec. 15, 2021)
9 Election Law Journal paper avail at https://www.democracydocket.com/news/the-cost-of-voting/ or https://www.democracydocket.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/elj.2020.0666.pdf (accessed Dec. 15, 2021)

The geographic factor that did impact the likelihood of a nonprofit doing voter engagement was whether it was located in an urban or rural area. 31% of surveyed nonprofits based in urban areas did voter engagement, significantly higher than the 10% of surveyed nonprofits based in rural areas that did voter engagement. Suburban communities ("non-urban core, non-rural" in the data file) fell in the middle.

Nonprofits Located in Urban Areas Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by urban-rural location doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time

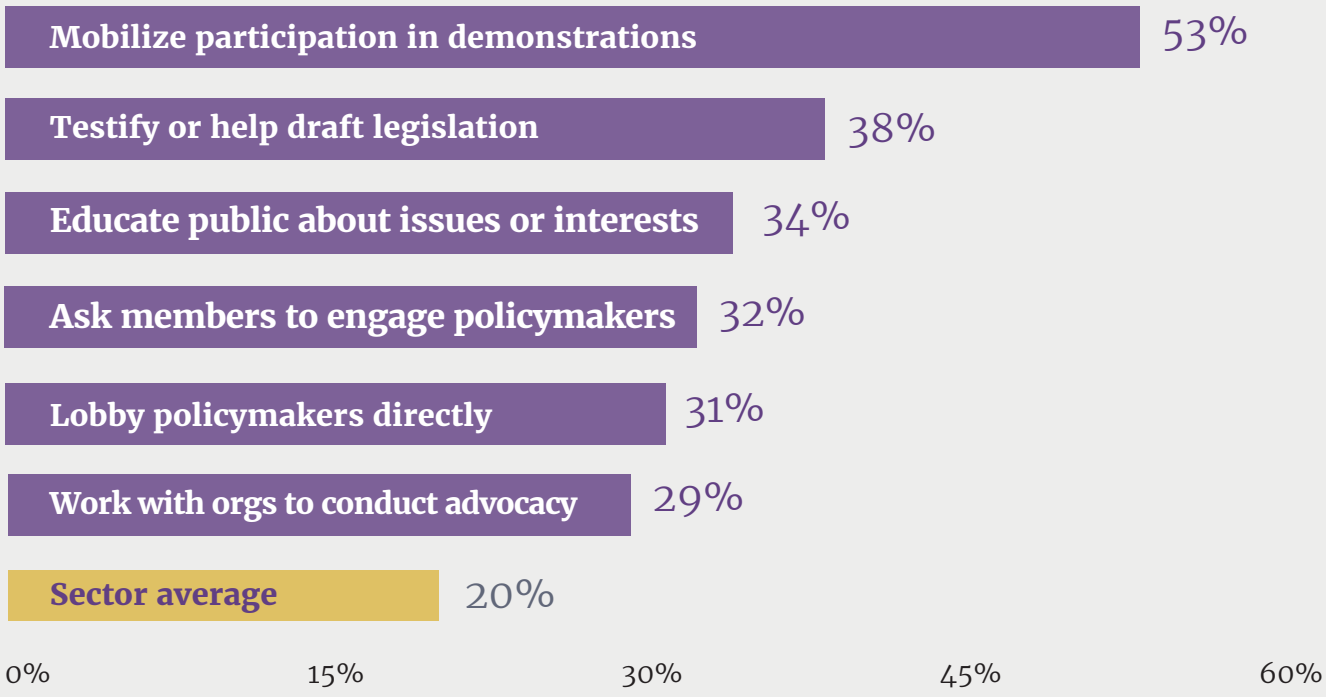


Relationships to Nonprofits That Lobby or Advocate

Nonprofits that do nearly any form of advocacy were more likely to also do voter engagement, including nonprofits that educate the public about policy issues, testify at hearings, lobby public officials, or encourage members to contact decision-makers.

Nonprofits Involved in Lobbying or Advocacy Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by advocacy activity doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time



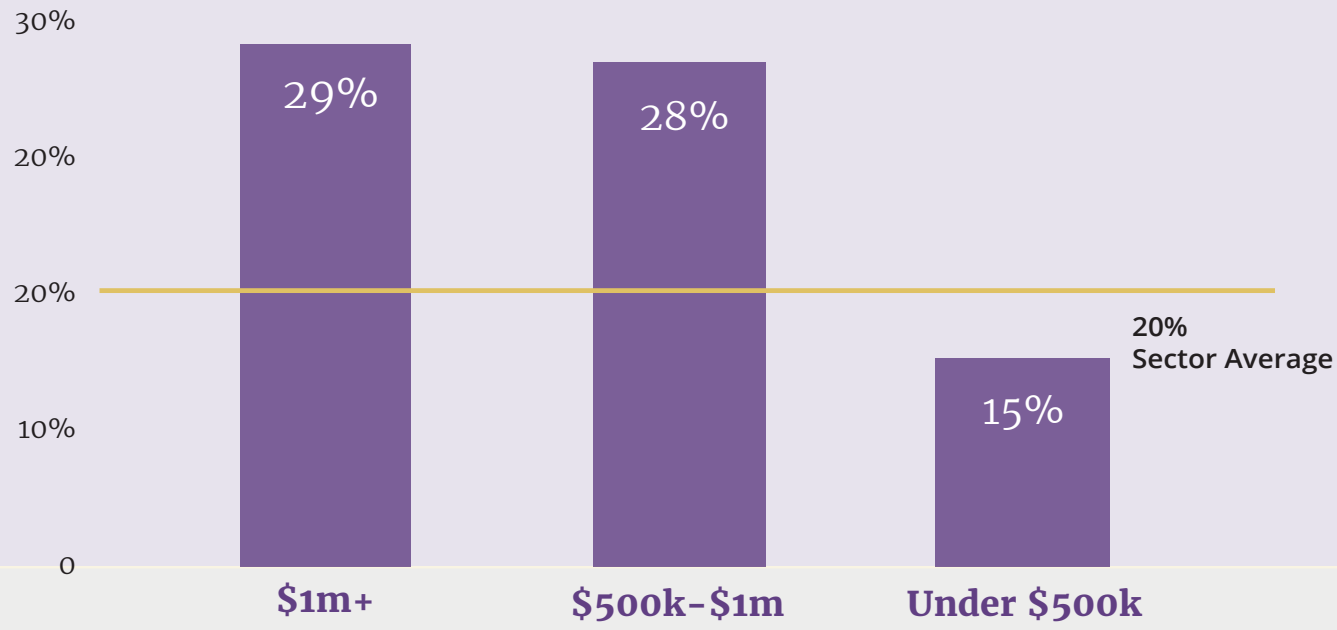
While there was clear overlap between nonprofits that do voter engagement and nonprofits that do advocacy, the data suggests that lobbying and advocacy are more universal across the sector. Nonprofits that lobbied public officials or encouraged others to lobby public officials did not have the same strong relationship to demographic factors that voter engagement does.

The Role of Financial Health

Nonprofits with budgets of $500,000 or more were more likely to do voter engagement. Nonprofits with smaller budgets were less likely to do voter engagement.

Nonprofits with Budgets of $500k or More Are More Likely to Do Voter Engagement

Percent of nonprofits by budget size doing voter engagement occasionally to all the time



Similarly, nonprofits that showed signs of "expanding" their programs, an indication of financial health, were more likely to do voter engagement. This includes nonprofits that increased the number of people served, programs or services offered, or hours of operation, as well as nonprofits that added new remote, online services or cross-trained employees to take on new roles.

By contrast, nonprofits that showed signs of "contracting," were less likely to do voter engagement, including those that said they were slowing their hiring or losing staff from voluntary turnover or retirement.

Resources for Nonprofits and Foundations

Free Resources for Nonprofits: Since 2005, Nonprofit VOTE has helped nonprofits across the nation engage the communities they serve in voting and elections. Our resources, fact sheets, webinars, and research help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services, from client intake to community outreach. Visit our resource library and sign up for our newsletter to receive updates.

Get Started: Three easy actions your nonprofit can take to get started:

- ***Host a National Voter Registration Day event*** *- Learn more and sign up online to join other nonprofits, businesses, and institutions in helping Americans register to vote, including voters in your community. Partners receive free event materials, resources, and other support. Held next on Tuesday, September 20, 2022.*
- ***Provide your staff time off to vote*** *- The Nonprofit Staff Vote initiative encourages nonprofits to provide paid time off to their staff to allow them to vote or volunteer as poll workers. In addition to the direct impact, this helps foster a culture of voting in the organization.*
- ***Send election reminders*** *- Your organization can remind the community you serve about voter registration, early voting, and vote-by-mail deadlines, as well as polling hours and locations. In the leadup to elections, we make Countdown-to-the-Elections resources available with ready-made assets each week groups can repackage for their own communications.*

Support for Foundations: You don't have to be a democracy funder to support voter engagement among your grantees and broader networks. Whether your foundation supports health access, housing, food security, arts, or democracy work directly, you can find practical strategies in our foundation toolkits for both public and private foundations. These resources were developed and distributed in partnership with key networks like the Council on Foundations, Independent Sector, United Philanthropy Forum, and others.

Custom Resources Tailored to Your Needs: Our staff can help your organization create a voter engagement strategy and provide customized toolkits, webinars, and in-person workshops to build your capacity. To learn more about partnership and technical assistance opportunities, email info@nonprofitvote.org.

Methodology

Data used for this analysis is from the Urban Institute's "National Survey of Nonprofit Trends and Impacts Public Use Files," 2021. Accessible from https://datacatalog.urban.org/dataset/national-survey-nonprofit-trends-and-impacts-public-use-files. Data originally collected and developed at the Urban Institute, and made available under the ODC-BY 1.0 Attribution License.

The original Urban Institute survey was conducted in the spring of 2021 with an audience of 2,309 nationwide. For purposes of this analysis, we focus on a subgroup of 266 who received the "long form" survey which included the key question about voter engagement – "Ext Affairs _2_12" in the public use data file – which asks, "During the last two years, how often did your organization conduct Get-out-the-vote activities (e.g., help people register to vote, voter education, voting access)?" Throughout this report, the voter engagement question was cross-tabbed with other survey variables on staff and board demographics, community served, programs offered, urban-rural, and more to better understand the types of nonprofits that are more or less likely to do voter engagement. In addition to descriptive summary statistics, Pearson's Chi-square tests and Fisher's Exact Test using Odds Ratios were used to evaluate statistical significance between relevant variables. In all tests, significance was evaluated on a 95% confidence interval. Each variable presented in this report, unless otherwise noted, indicated a statistically significant correlation with p values below 0.05.

Because the public use dataset did not include state identifiers, additional steps were needed to do analysis for nonprofits based in Democratic-leaning, battleground, and Republican-leaning states. The Urban Institute provided at our request survey data coded by state groupings we provided. A similar breakdown was provided for the Cost-of-Voting index. For all state-based analysis, respondents who served a multi-state or national community were excluded.

To ensure sufficiently large datasets for analysis, some variable categories were consolidated. As an example, ExtAffairs_2_12 (GOTV/voter engagement) which originally had five answer possibilities, was regrouped into two: Never / Rarely and Occasionally / Frequently / Almost all the Time. Similarly, BoardStaffDem_1_1 (PoC composition of board) which originally had 12 answer possibilities (0, 1-10%, etc.), was re-coded into three groups (0-20%, 21-50%, and 51%+). Other variables like BoardStaffDem_1_5 (low-income board) were regrouped into 0-40% and 41-100% to ensure sufficiently large groups for analysis. All subgrouped categories included at least five data points per cell, in most cases significantly more. See sample table below.

PoC Composition of Board	Zero to 20%	21-50%	51-100%
Total Respondents by Board Composition	140	46	33
Never, Rarely do VE count	119	35	20
Occasionally, Freq, All of the Time count	21	11	13
Never, Rarely do VE - share of total	85%	76%	61%
Occasionally, Freq, All of the Time - share of total	15%	24%	39%

About Nonprofit VOTE

We help nonprofits engage the people they serve in voting and elections. We are the leading source of nonpartisan resources to help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services.

Nonprofit VOTE can provide your organization with the technical assistance and training your staff and affiliates need. We also work with membership-based organizations, coalitions, and foundations to build civic engagement programs to engage their respective networks.

Learn more about the benefits of voter engagement, sign up for our newsletter, and download free resources at **nonprofitvote.org.**

- **Facebook: @NpVote**
- **Twitter: @NpVote**
- **Instagram: @NonprofitVote**
- **LinkedIn: nonprofit-vote**

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Report Author: Brian Miller, Nonprofit VOTE

Research and Charts: Brian Miller and Caroline Mak of Nonprofit VOTE, with support from research consultant Chris Curran

Writing Assistance and Internal Reviews: Caroline Mak, Danny Navarro, James Hill, and Caitlin Donnelly

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