

WHO ARE SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural areas and small towns hold some of the nation's closest elections but they are frequently overlooked by major parties. In many of these communities food is scarce, healthcare access is limited, and public transportation is nonexistent. Yet, neighbors, nonprofits, and local leaders work together to build vibrant communities that are vital to our democracy. **Nonprofit voter outreach is creating meaningful change all across the country.**



THERE ARE BETWEEN 2000 - 9000 SMALL TOWNS IN THE UNITED STATES

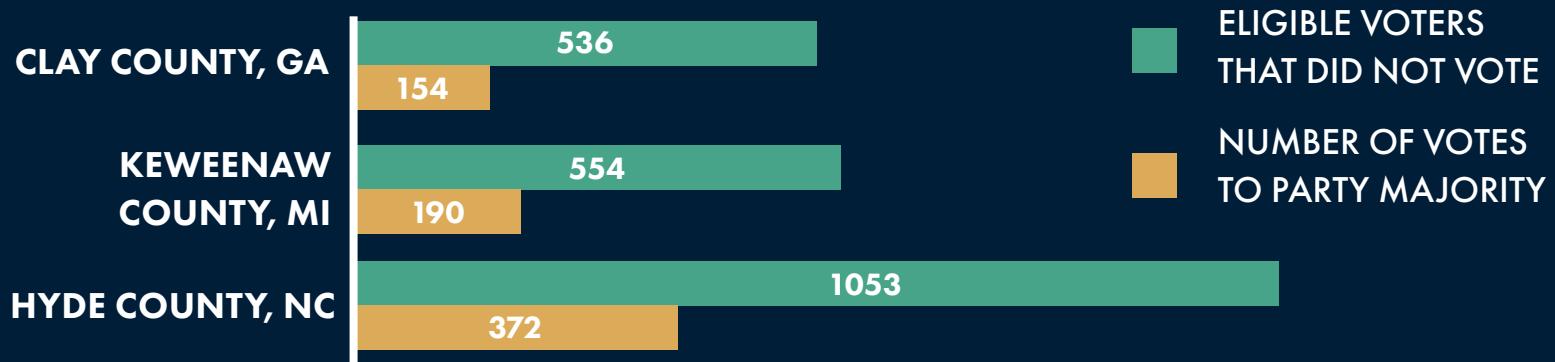


THERE ARE AROUND 2000 RURAL COUNTIES IN THE UNITED STATES

*estimates based on the USDA and OMB definition of small towns and rural

Why should nonprofits in small towns and rural areas bother to engage voters if the populations are so small? Every community, regardless of size, deserves adequate representation. Residents are more likely to know their local elected officials and the individual vote can have more power. In local races, a few votes may be enough to change the outcome of an election. And yet, most small communities continue to have lower participation rates in local elections than in federal elections. In smaller rural counties where the **voter populations are less than 5,000 people, the leads between presidential candidates are also smaller**, and around one hundred votes could change votes for the county. (see chart below)

Some rural counties need only a few hundred votes to change party majority



*data based on 2020 Election Results (source: POLITICO and SOS Eligible Voting Population)

VOTER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

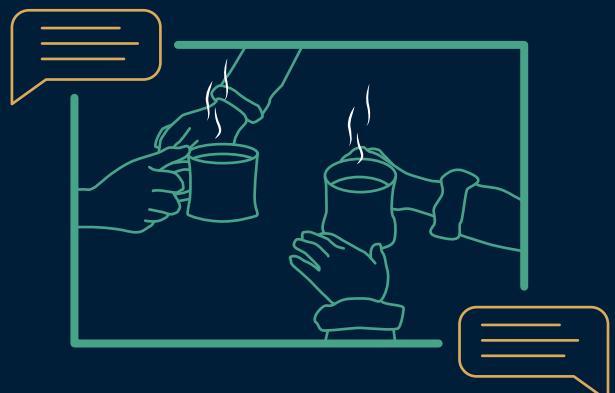
Engaging voters in rural/small town communities may look different to how we engage cities or suburban areas. So, here are a few strategies that our rural/small town nonprofit partners recommend:

Make space for One on One Conversations

In rural/small towns, a one on one conversation is an effective way to engage and educate people. Making space to ask how people are doing can help meet more holistic needs and connect them to other resources.

"It's really just directly talking to people. We get a lot of people who either have no clue how to register or hasn't ever been engaged"

- Duane Gurule, Small Town Project



Use Physical Materials to Distribute Information

Internet access is often harder to access in rural areas. Having printed voter registration forms and flyers that educate voters on the processes and candidates are a reliable way to engage voters.

"In some areas there is no internet service and so everything we do has to be able to be replicated physically on a piece of paper. We also have many people who are hesitant to use technology, so they need to be offered instruction and options for connectivity."

- Marty Dombrowski, CILSCPA



Increase Tech Literacy in Your Community

Many rural/small town communities tend to lack knowledge and skills in technology. Having sessions, hosted by your nonprofit, can be a great way to teach them how to access information on voting.

"We have a computer lab where they have access to resources but also access to knowledge about 'Are you registered vote?' or 'Is your registration up to date?' And show how simple it is to do that."

- Duane Gurule, Small Town Project

Host a Meet and Greet with Local Candidates and Officials

Candidates and local officials in your small town/rural area might be neighbors you already know and work with. If people know their faces, voting becomes personal, like who they're voting for, what they actually do, and how it affects them.

"We make sure that all of the elected officials from the county commissioners to the township supervisors know who we are. We invite them into our meetings and to meet us at the libraries. It also helps them understand people that just happen to live in very rural places."

- Marty Dombrowski, CILSCPA

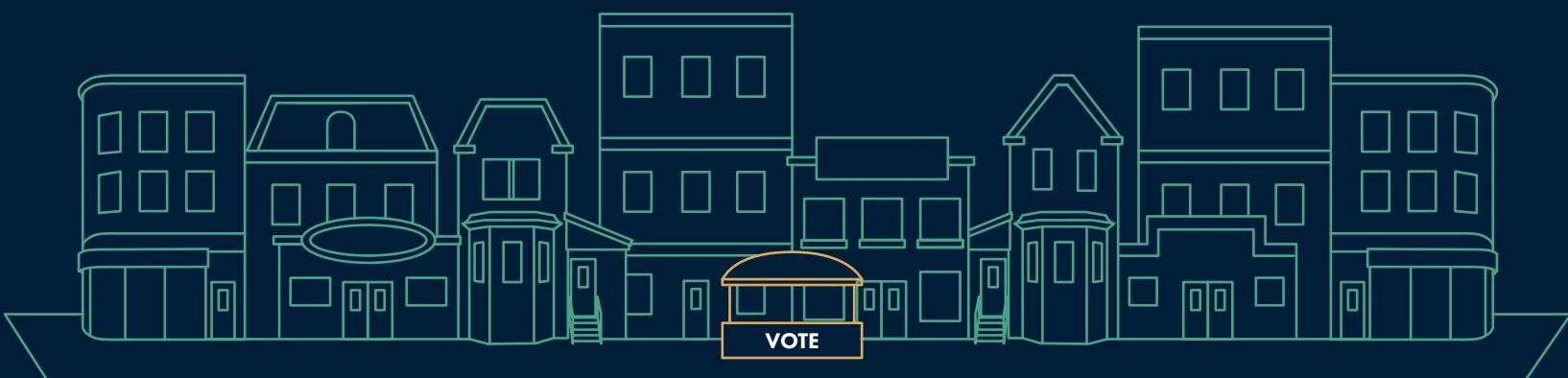


Utilize the Trust in the Community

Organize your voter engagement around local events. Try partnering with local businesses or libraries to help increase awareness because people are already going there, linking voting to something safe and familiar

"If an organization is hosting something and it's downtown and all these other businesses are part of it, it feels safe."

- Kyra Wallace, SWMUL



MEET: SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN URBAN LEAGUE



Southwestern Michigan Urban League
Empowering Communities. Changing Lives.

The Southwest Michigan Urban League provides assistance to African Americans and other disadvantaged Americans in achieving socio-economic equality. Affiliated with the National Urban League, they are based in Battle Creek, Michigan and serve the greater Calhoun County area. We talked to their President/CEO, Kyra Wallace, about Battle Creek and voter engagement in the area.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about Battle Creek?

Our population is about 52,000. We are large enough to have some major issues, but small enough to be able to tackle those issues head on and make some leeway in terms of solving for certain crises. A lot of people know a lot of people because of the small nature of the community. Kellogg's is headquartered here along with a couple other entities, so we have access to decent resources. If politicians or any other person of stature is going to come to Calhoun County, Battle Creek tends to be the stop.

Q: How do the people of Battle Creek feel about local versus national elections?

It was always a big deal about national elections. But I think where we play a major role is getting our constituents to understand that local elections matter right now. Because the policies that they create and what they're doing is affecting your day-to-day. When a community member doesn't understand roles like city commission, school board, things of that nature, they will not vote. The African American population, because I have the data, had a strong voter apathy. And so that's where we felt we had the largest opportunity to be impactful to change that. By educating our constituents on why they need to vote and making it personal in terms of what they could understand.

Q: How have you seen the impact of your work in your small town?

As a result of our work, we have seen an increase of African Americans engaging in community. Specifically, we are showing up at meetings of importance to our lives. We are showing up in solidarity with other People of Color. We are showing up for ourselves in spaces where we were once silent. In short, our work has helped to bring hope to the hopeless that things can and will change.

Q: What makes your community diverse and beautiful?

We have all of the cereal companies here, so when you get up in the morning, guess what? It smells like cereal. Another thing that makes us unique is our diversity in terms of the populace here. And we don't shy from that diversity, we actually use that as a plus. We work together on things and we show up collectively. And so then we put on cultural activities.

MEET: CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING OF SOUTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA



The Center For Independent Living of South Central Pennsylvania provides services that equip people with disabilities to live independently and advocates for the removal of any barriers that prevent them from exercising their rights and participating in their community. They work in seven rural counties in South Central Pennsylvania. We talked to Marty Dombrowski, the assistant director of CILSCPA about the rural communities she works in.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about where you work?

Of our seven, rural Pennsylvania counties, three have limited public transportation, and most counties have one hospital. If I measure population according to McDonalds or other fast food restaurants, we have one county with just one fast food restaurant. When it comes to voting and the population, we have people that are very passionate. There's a good chance that the commissioners and school board representatives are people that we would run into at the supermarket. Everybody knows who they are, so they are a recognized local celebrity.

Q: What are some barriers that make it difficult for your community to vote?

There are people without vehicles and people that might use wheelchairs or have physical limitations. We have people that live without any internet connectivity too because they live so far out. It was really important for us to connect, to talk about absentee ballots and to dispel myths and rumors about, (especially after the last presidential election), how this process works. But I think that what helped people was when staff would call them and asked, "Did you vote?", "Do you need help finding your polling place?", "Do you have any questions?" People really liked the one-on-one engagement and the chance to get questions answered.

Q: How have you seen the impact of your work in your rural area?

Now that our consumers understand how the process works and who represents them at various levels (school board, county, state and federal), many report that they are interacting with the elected representatives and asking questions. Almost all our consumers follow the news more closely now that they "have a face" to associate with a particular office. Some say that they are now able to interact in conversations with peers more easily because they know what is being discussed.

Q: What do you want to uplift about your community?

It came to our attention during COVID that a lot of people couldn't leave their homes to go to the grocery store because of either physical limitations or just fear of getting sick. We partnered with community partners to get produce from Pennsylvania farmers for distribution. With an amazing team of volunteers, we were able to get produce boxes delivered to the doorstep of people who needed it. Thousands of boxes of produce continue to be delivered because the program is so well received and so needed.

MEET: SMALL TOWN PROJECT



Small Town Project is a nonprofit that is providing resources to their community members to help them achieve socio-economic success, remove food insecurity, and revitalize their small town. They work in the small rural town of Rocky Ford, Colorado. We talked to Duane Gurule, the Co-Founder of Small Town Project about Rocky Ford and voter engagement in the community.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about Rocky Ford?

We're in a region that's known as the lower Arkansas Valley in southeast Colorado. It's a very large agricultural area. In the early 1900s, when Rocky Ford was first started, a lot of German Mennonite had come this way. So a lot of farms popped up. And then with that, the migrant farm work began. Mexicans migrated with the farm work. During World War II the Japanese internment camps were located near Lamar, so after the 1940s, we had a larger influx of Japanese Americans. Now some of our largest farms are Japanese American owned. Other organizations, providing different services and connecting people with resources, are spread out across the region.

Q: What difficulties in engaging local elections and local officials?

We don't have a whole lot of local news. We are shown news from Colorado Springs, which is ninety five miles away from us. There's no coverage on mayoral elections or county commissioner elections in our areas. In our 2019 mayoral election, the split was twenty two votes for a second place, and then third place was fifty one away from first place. Those were really slim. Almost every election for the past twelve years here, at least one seat unopposed or seats in one council district that don't even have a candidate. It comes down to people knowing people. Our local candidates and their networks just getting out and meeting people.

Q: How have you seen the impact of your work in your small town?

Voter outreach and true engagement around registering or informing voters about candidates or issues on the ballot has been forgotten in rural Colorado. Those who vote get out and vote, typically along a party line. We're now actively engaging people who have stopped voting, have regained their right to vote, or have never voted before. Through direct engagement we're able to educate them on the process, where to find information, how to understand that information, and how to have conversations that can support them in making their decisions.

Q: What makes your community diverse and beautiful?

Local agriculture, the melons, the watermelons, and the cantaloupes. The other part is that if you talk to anyone who knows wrestling, even in the surrounding states and you mention Rocky Ford, they're gonna know. I think about the Arkansas Valley Fair, which kind of has its origin from the watermelons. Our fair is the longest continuous fair in the state of Colorado.