

# **civic storylines toolkit**

**a guide for media companies  
and content creators**

**civic  
alliance**

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We know that storytelling has the infinite power to shed light on current events, to inspire viewers to take action, and to help shift culture over time.

We know that when a storyteller connects deeply with their audience, they can help that audience make sense of the world around them, and their places in it.

At the Civic Alliance, we firmly believe there is an opportunity to use our diverse places in media to talk about voting and civic engagement in a way that is relevant, entertaining, and engaging for our respective audiences.

We believe that a storyteller - whether they're a character on a television show, a host of a popular podcast, or an artist with a platform - has an opportunity to organically address urgent and crucial civic topics of our time and help encourage new social norms and voting behaviors.

This toolkit is designed to help companies and content creators integrate civic themes into their stories in tangible ways. It is meant for everyone - for those who already cover these topics in their day to day content, and for those completely new to it who are looking for guidance on how to introduce it to their platforms. It is by no means exhaustive, but with the help of our non-profit partners, civic experts, and fellow Civic Alliance members, it provides a framework and set of resources that can be used as a reference point, and tailored for individual projects as necessary.

The first section of the **INDUSTRY GUIDE** provides a snapshot on the current **STATE OF VOTING** followed by **TIP SHEETS** with **MESSAGING GUIDELINES** to come back to throughout your work. Next, **VOTING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT STORYLINES** provides creative jumpoints for your project, and dives into the creative application of civic storylines organized by medium and genre: **SCRIPTED, UNSCRIPTED, PODCAST, SHORT-FORM, and COMEDY**. The **WORKSHOP AGENDA** and **DECK TEMPLATE** helps you explore these concepts with writers, producers, and other creatives. The **ONE-SHEET** can be passed along to showrunners and creative teams for recruiting purposes. Lastly, the **APPENDIX** includes a **GLOSSARY OF TERMS** and **RESOURCES** that outline the incredible non-profits and experts across the civic landscape that can help you take it to the next level.

Thank you for using your voice to help strengthen America's democracy.

Now let's get to it!

# state of voting

### **Where we're at:**

Source: *The Ad Council and Democracy Works "Driving Voter Turnout in 2020: Research on Effective Messaging Strategies for Each Generation"*

- Voting is one of the most important civic activities, but voting rates in the U.S. are extremely low, trailing most developed countries.
- In 2016, nearly 100 million eligible Americans did not cast a vote for president, representing 43% of the eligible voting-age population.
- In the last century, the highest reported voter turnout rate in a presidential election year – in 1960 – was still only 63%.
- And typical voter turnout in a midterm election is even worse: since 2002, an average of just 40% of the voting-eligible population has participated.

### **What's the deal with people who were registered, but didn't turn out to vote in 2016?**

Source: *Survey of Performance of American Elections*

- 40% didn't like the issues
- 20% had a conflict
- 14% cited transportation issues
- 9% had registration problems at the polls
- 8% felt their polling place was in an inconvenient location
- 7% didn't have an absentee ballot
- 6% forgot to vote
- 5% cited bad weather

### **And how about "chronic non-voters", those who are not registered to vote or voted only once in the last six national elections?**

Source: *The Knight Foundation 100 Million Project Report*

- They have less faith in the electoral system than voters. They don't vote because they don't like the candidates and feel their vote doesn't matter.
- They don't feel they have enough information and are less likely to think increased participation in elections is good for the country.
- They are less engaged with news and information. 38% of non-voters aren't confident that elections represent the will of the people, and they are more likely to accidentally "bump into" news, rather than seeking it out actively.
- They are less partisan than voters. They were more likely than voters to be undecided or have no opinion on issues. 28% percent of non- voters identify as independent.

### **But wait, it could get better:**

Source: *The Ad Council and Democracy Works "Driving Voter Turnout in 2020: Research on Effective Messaging Strategies for Each Generation"*

- If the 2018 midterm elections were any indication, we could be at a turning point.
- In 2018, voter turnout was 53.4% – the highest midterm turnout in a century, and an increase of 12% since the 2014 midterms.
- And looking at 2020 elections, generational shifts are taking place in the electorate.
- Baby boomers (born 1946-1964) and older generations accounted for 7 in 10 eligible voters in 2000; in 2020, they will account for fewer than 3 in 10.
- Gen Z voters (born after 1996) will now make up 1 in 10 of eligible voters.
- And millennials (born 1981-1996) recently became the largest generation in the country – and will soon be the largest group of potential eligible voters in the United States.

## **Let's break it down.**

Source: *Pew Research Center*

### **By Demographic:**

#### **Youth Vote:**

- Historically, young voters have turned out to vote at a lower rate than older voters.
- However, in 2018, youth turnout was the highest ever for a midterm election and young people's participation increased (compared to 2014) more than that of older voters.
- Together, Gen Z and Millennials (ages 24 to 39) are projected to make up 37% of the 2020 electorate.

#### **Latina/o/x Vote:**

- Latina/o/x populations will make up 13.3% of the 2020 electorate, making them the nation's community of color in a U.S. presidential election.

#### **Immigrant Vote:**

- More than 23 million U.S. immigrants will be eligible to vote in the 2020 presidential election, making up roughly 10% of the nation's overall electorate.

#### **Women Vote:**

- Women have turned out to vote at slightly higher rates than men since 1998.
- Women's turnout increased 12% in the 2018 midterms.
- Unmarried women account for 26% of the 2020 electorate.

### **By Historically Low Voter Turnout:**

Those who do participate in elections aren't representative of the U.S. population, and their voting power influences policy-making in their favor. Persistently, underrepresented groups include communities of color; young people; people with lower incomes and less education; military service members; people with disabilities; people with language access needs; and Americans living overseas.

- Communities of color (specifically Asian American and Latina/o/x)
- Young people
- People with low income and/or lower education levels
- People with disabilities
- People with language access needs
- Military service members
- Americans living overseas

# looking ahead at The Civic Moonshot: 80% voter turnout

The Civic Moonshot is a non-partisan blueprint to achieve an American democracy where a representative 80% of eligible voters are voting in the United States by 2028.

It represents a shared vision amongst a growing coalition of civic organizations, businesses, community leaders and everyday Americans committed to a stronger, more engaged democracy by: (1) creating a culture of empowerment; (2) activating social relationships to solve everyday problems; (3) leveraging technology for scale; and, (4) making sure elections systems work for everyone.

## Voting Early

- Given the current public health environment and concerns about the spread of COVID-19, the focus in elections is largely shifting to early voting options such as vote by mail and voting early to avoid crowds. Voting rules are changing in many states.
- Even before the changes in election laws, voters have expressed uncertainty about their voting options. With all the changes, it is likely that education on these options will be more welcome and helpful than ever.
- Storytellers are uniquely positioned to help audiences navigate and demystify the voting process and ensure that every voter has the information they need to cast their ballot on or before Election Day.
- Over 200 million Americans have options to vote before Election Day with no excuse needed.
- Voting early can ensure that school, work, long lines, a bad commute, or even health concerns won't stop your ballot from being counted.
- A number of models exist to vote early, and the rules vary by state, county, or in some cases individual circumstances. For example:
  - In some states, all registered voters receive ballots by mail at least two weeks before Election Day.
  - In many states, any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day.
  - All states currently offer some eligible voters the option to receive a ballot by mail, although some states require an excuse to request the ballot, such as work or travel.
- Experts predict record-breaking voter participation in 2020. In the last presidential election, 40% of eligible voters cast their ballots early in 2016.



## **2020 Census**

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

- The 2020 Decennial Census is a constitutionally mandated once-a-decade count of our nation.
- It is critical that we achieve a complete and accurate count of everyone in the United States because the results determine how many representatives in Congress each state has -- and how almost 700 billion federal dollars are distributed each year for the next decade.
- Fast facts:
  - For the first time, people can respond online from any device.
  - The census counts every person living in the United States.
  - There is NOT a citizenship question on the 2020 Census.
  - Your data is confidential. Federal law protects your responses, which cannot be shared with law enforcement, immigration agencies or housing authorities.

# **key dates**

**August 17-20  
Democratic National Convention**

**August 24-27  
Republican National Convention**

**September 22  
National Voter Registration Day**

**October 24  
Vote Early Day**

**November 3  
Election Day**



# messaging guidelines

## **Issues: Illustrate the connection between voting and the issues that people care about**

- Show how different issues intersect with one another and ladder into some of the high-profile issues that candidates are talking about
- Connect voting and political participation to personal stories and everyday experiences that inspire individuals to turn out to the polls
- Demonstrate how local elections can affect change at a community level
- Show how your vote can directly impact the issues you care about, or if your specific issue doesn't have a relevant "vote" coming up, demonstrate civic participation through issue-based community building and gathering
- *Example: when cast members, characters, or podcast guests bring up issues they care about, express why they're voting to create change on that issue*

## **Empowerment: Emphasize voting as one of the ways people can create the future they want to see**

- Emphasize that your vote (and who you vote for) matters
- Show tangible examples of how voting makes a difference (like a new law or ballot measure being passed)
- Show how people are exerting political power outside of voting by volunteering for a candidate they support, attending local school board or city council meetings, or even running for local office or city council themselves
- *Example: Show characters or cast members getting involved in civic action like canvassing or phone banking — and show how their participation makes a difference*

## **Identity: Celebrate being "a voter" the same way people celebrate other aspects of their identity**

- Use language such as "be a voter" rather than "go vote", and show that it's okay to "become" a voter even if you've never voted before
- Show that anyone can be a first-time voter (not just college students who have just turned 18)
- Frame voting as a choice, alongside other choices we make in our day-to-day lives
- *Example: Leverage intergenerational relationships to show how voting can become an important part of someone's identity from a young age*

### **Social Voting: Show voting as a social activity**

- Demonstrate that voting can be fun, exciting, and social
- Give a sense that everyone is voting and you don't want to miss out
- Show that encouraging your friends to vote is a positive form of peer pressure
- *Example: Incorporate voter registration into milestones and events like birthday parties or proms*

### **Access: Show the steps involved in registering/voting, and help viewers prepare**

- Tell the stories of people who are making it easier to vote
- Don't dismiss that in some places and for some communities, voting can be a challenge — but focus on solutions rather than the problem
- Use the term "voting access" — the terms "voter suppression" or "voter fraud" can perpetuate a negative narrative around voting
- *Encourage cast members or characters to share their own voting plans — what they are wearing to the polls, their Election Day playlist, who they're voting with, etc.*

### **Representation:**

- **Do** depict intergenerational voting
- **Do** show lower-propensity voters participating (i.e. young people, people of color)
- **Do** lift up stories of everyday people participating — not just "exceptional people"
- **Don't** blame marginalized communities for not voting

### **Tone:**

- **Do** have a clear intention
- **Do** communicate with joy; use humor and heart; be authentic, not preachy
- **Don't** limit visuals to traditional American iconography (e.g. red, white and blue, the flag)

# voting and civic engagement storylines: creative jumpoints

	AT HOME	AT WORK	AT SCHOOL
THEMES	<p>Intergenerational voting</p> <p>Voting for your community</p> <p>Early voting</p>	<p>CEO encouraged civic participation</p> <p>Employees take time off to vote</p>	<p>Civic education</p> <p>Student voter engagement</p>
BEHAVIORS	<p>Registering to vote using <a href="#">TurboVote</a> platform, texting VOTER to 26797, or using paper forms</p> <p>Families making a plan to vote using <a href="#">BallotReady</a></p> <p>Families early voting or going to the polls together</p> <p>Encouraging civic dialogue at the dinner table re: local elections, school board, county supervisors, judgeships, ballot initiatives that affect everyday life like rent control, property taxes or school funding</p> <p>Volunteering as poll workers or as translators for non-English speaking voters</p> <p>Volunteering for local community organizing group or non-partisan voting organization like <a href="#">League of Women Voters</a></p> <p>Attending local city council meetings</p>	<p>Registering to vote using <a href="#">TurboVote</a> platform, texting VOTER to 26797, or using paper forms</p> <p>Employees receiving company emails or text messages from TurboVote about important voting information (dates, deadlines, etc.)</p> <p>Employees leading voter registration drives in office lobbies or other places of work (restaurants, retail, etc.)</p> <p>Coworkers talking about the election and making a plan to go vote either early, in person on Election Day, or by mail</p> <p>CEO giving employees paid time off on Election Day</p> <p>Bosses encouraging their teams to go vote</p> <p>Stores and restaurants opening later or closing earlier so staff can vote on Election Day</p>	<p>Elementary students learning about civics in class</p> <p>High-school students pre-registering to vote</p> <p>College students checking their registration/confirming which state they are registered in</p> <p>Students discussing their plans to vote ie: have teenagers in the same district make a plan to bike to the polls together after school, vote early together on the weekend, or fill out absentee ballots at a friend's house</p> <p>Teachers helping students form their own opinions about socio-political issues</p> <p>Teachers encouraging students to learn about the history of voting</p> <p>Students participating in civic education in the form of service learning projects in their communities, like with <a href="#">Generation Citizen</a></p>

	AT HOME	AT WORK	AT SCHOOL
<b>BEHAVIORS</b>	Neighbors discussing over coffee how to solve a neighborhood challenge together	<p>Boss giving announcement during staff meeting re: company policy on Paid Time Off to vote</p> <p>Company holding a <a href="#">#VoteTogether</a> party at the office to celebrate voting</p> <p>Employees discussing their plans to vote in company messaging boards and on their breaks</p>	Feature identity-based student groups (Hillel, Muslim Students Association, ROTC, LGBTQ) registering voters
<b>SET DESIGN</b>	<p>Feature polling place at a local school or community center</p> <p>Show someone mailing in their ballot</p> <p>Place "Go Vote", "I am a voter.", "Family of Voters" lawn signs</p> <p>Feature "I am a voter." stickers on laptops and water bottles</p>	<p>Feature "I am a voter." stickers on laptops and water bottles</p> <p>Show office having an Election Day party for employees</p> <p>Feature a company "intranet" that promotes voting information</p> <p>Feature a bulletin message board of important dates and deadlines in employee area</p>	<p>Feature "I am a voter." stickers on laptops and water bottles</p> <p>Show posters, signs and bumper stickers that promote voting on classroom and hallway halls, lockers, backpacks, bikes and cars</p> <p>Feature early voting stations on college campuses</p> <p>Feature "Voter Friendly Campuses"</p>
<b>PHRASES</b>	<p><i>I am a voter</i></p> <p><i>Are you a voter?</i></p> <p><i>Be Counted *applies for elections and Census</i></p> <p><i>You matter</i></p>	<p><i>Election Day Paid Time Off</i></p> <p><i>We are voters</i></p>	<p><i>Make a voting plan</i></p> <p><i>I am a voter</i></p>

# scripted

*produced in partnership with  
ViacomCBS and Walt Disney Television*

## Opportunities

In scripted, the possibilities for civic engagement integrations are endless - integrations can be in the background, the basis of an episode, or extend to a season long story arc. Leverage the control that screenwriters and producers have to think through the range of possibilities that fit the content that is being produced.

Consider utilizing:

- **Diversity of Cast:** Leverage the breadth of your characters to reinforce that all citizens can participate in several ways — whether it's voting, organizing, or even running for office.
- **Plot:** Use concepts like voting and the census as plot devices to heighten the drama or comedy of the scene or relationships between the characters. For younger audiences, this could look like school/class elections or engaging in healthy debate over issues with friends.
- **Visuals:** Integrations don't always need to be major plot points; they can be business on screen that can implicitly remind audiences how important civic engagement issues are - for example:
  - **Clothes:** Can characters wear an "I voted" sticker on their t-shirt during a scene?
  - **Signs:** Can there be a "Remember to Register to Vote" sign in the background of an office or school?"
  - **Mail:** When characters check their mail, can there be an absentee voting or census form waiting for them?
  - **Locations:** Can characters pass by a polling station on their way to lunch?

## Pitfalls

- Regardless of whether your content is entirely based in reality, avoid the spread of misinformation in fictional worlds.
- Be cautious of whether your depiction of voting and civic engagement makes these structures seem inaccessible and discourages people from participating.

## Medium-specific creative jumpoints

- **Writers Room:** Depending on interest, bring civic engagement experts into your writers' room for a workshop to inspire creativity and allow opportunities for Q&A.



# scripted relevant case studies

## **The Bold Type: Season 3**

### **Background:**

In season three of *The Bold Type*, fed up after realizing that her councilman doesn't have his city's best interests at heart, Kat decides to channel her passion by volunteering for his opposition. Eventually, Kat decides to run for City Council herself. Throughout her campaign she faces hurdles such as racial profiling while canvassing for office and dealing with the opposition digging into her past. As the season comes to a close, Kat's campaign ends when she loses the race to the incumbent.

### **Impact:**

Both [fans](#) and [critics](#) loved Kat's campaign storyline which gave fans a look into the campaign process.

### **Sample Clips:**

[Clip #1](#)

[Clip #2](#)

## **One Day at a Time: Season 4**

### **Background:**

In the season four premiere of *One Day at a Time* on PopTV, a Census taker visits the Alvarez family's home and inspires them to reflect on their relationships. The episode demystified the Census process and pushed back against misconceptions that viewers might have — especially around the inclusion of a citizenship question. The network's social impact team collaborated with the creative team to include an in-episode call-to-action encouraging viewers to participate in the census. This messaging was also pushed out on the show's social platforms when the episode aired.

To complement the in-show integration, showrunners and executive producers Gloria Calderon Kellet and Mike Royce held a [Facebook Live](#) panel with Congressman Joaquin Castro (TX-20), as well as leaders from [UnidosUS](#), [NALEO Educational Fund](#), and [United We Dream](#) in a conversation around the 2020 Census and Latinx communities.

### **Impact:**

The storyline was well received both by fans and [by critics](#), and exposed a large and diverse audience to accurate information about the Census.

### **Sample Clips:**

[Clip #1](#)

[Clip #2](#)

# scripted relevant case studies

## Sample brainstorm questions that someone working on this format might include in a workshop for creatives

- Have shows in your network engaged with social issues before? Is there a way to tie those social issues into civic engagement?
- How might we incorporate civic engagement messages into "coming of age" shows focused on identity? (i.e. *One Day at a Time*, *The Diary of a Future President*, *The Bold Type*)
- How might we incorporate civic engagement into the world of the show in subtle ways?

# unscripted

produced in partnership with  
MTV

## Opportunities

- Tap into the real experiences and interests of cast members, particularly those who are not already known for being involved in politics or social issues
- Leverage the diversity of reality television talent to acknowledge the structural barriers people might experience in accessing the polls (i.e. previously incarcerated folks getting their voting rights back)
- Utilize the direct relationship that cast members have with their fans by extending integrations to cast or show social accounts
- When capturing cast interviews, encourage producers to include 2-3 questions about voting as a standard part of their interview process; responses can be integrated into a relevant storyline, used as in-show bumpers, or cut into ancillary content
- Make the most of opportunities to register people to vote – if there is a live show with an audience, can there be a booth to register to vote while in line/waiting to get in? If looking for an opportunity to get talent/contestants out of their typical environment (i.e. an outing for a dating show), can the activity be registering people to vote in a public space?

## Pitfalls

Cast members and talent should avoid endorsing specific parties or candidates; rather, focus on issues they're passionate about or their own personal stories and how those experiences connect to voting

**Note:** If talent wants to endorse a candidate or is working for one, there are laws that can dictate creative that vary [per state](#).

## Medium-specific creative jumpoints

- Cast members compete to register the largest number of voters
- Turn sets into polling locations
- Leverage format-driven or competition series — perhaps a civic engagement themed food competition or runway looks for the polls?

# unscripted relevant case study

## ***Black Ink Crew: New York (Season 8)***

### **Background:**

The series included an episode-long civic engagement storyline with cast members meeting their local city council member and hosting a voter registration event at their tattoo shop Black Ink Brooklyn. The storyline emerged as a result of a civic engagement content creator workshop that the ViacomCBS Social Impact team hosted in October 2019, during which the show's development team came up with the idea and subsequently pitched it to the production company.

### **Impact:**

The episode not only highlighted the importance of making your voice heard by voting, but also touched on specific issues that resonate deeply with potential voters such as local elections, voting access for people who were formerly incarcerated, and showing low-propensity voters getting involved.

### **Sample Clips:**

[Clip #1](#)

[Clip #2](#)

### **Sample brainstorm questions that someone working on this format might include in a workshop for creatives**

- How might we incorporate civic engagement messages into episodic content (i.e. a show where the same concept or formula is applied to different scenarios – like Punk'd, Wife Swap, Ink Master)
- How have cast members engaged with social issues before and how might we leverage that engagement to create momentum around registration and voting?
- Beyond people who have previously been outspoken about social issues, are there new and unlikely voices we can bring into this conversation?

# podcast

*produced in partnership with*  
*Spotify*

## **Opportunities**

- In interview podcasts, leverage conversations around social issues to talk about the importance of voting
- Find opportunities to integrate voting and registering into characters' lives in scripted podcasts: for example, when a character turns eighteen or is talking about social issues
- Identify podcasters who may not already focus on politics or social issues, especially those who have greater influence with low propensity voters, and encourage them to work messaging about registration and voting into their existing content, in a way that feels natural and organic
- Encourage podcasters to make civic engagement a part of their brand, by talking about registration and voting on social and in interviews as well as within their shows

## **Pitfalls**

- Podcasters should avoid endorsing specific parties or candidates; rather, focus on issues they're passionate about or their own personal stories and how those experiences connect to voting

## **Medium-specific creative jumpoints**

- Podcasters find creative ways to share resources about registration and voting in "ad breaks" without making it seem like a PSA
- Podcasters across a variety of topics create an episode specifically about civic engagement from their lens: e.g. [Dope Labs](#) talking about the science behind voting, etc.

# podcast relevant case studies

- [Clarify](#): Spotify and Mic's 2016 election podcast that explored the issues most important to our audience during the election and empowered them to go out and vote. Artists were joined by journalists and experts to provide explanation, commentary, and personal stories to bring each issue to life.
- United States of Music: Spotify's 2017 podcast, hosted by Sasheer Zamata, used Spotify listening data to uncover stories about people who make music, people who love music and the stories that connect them, one city at a time. The podcast used music to bridge gaps between different sides in America.

## **Sample brainstorm questions that someone working on this format might include in a workshop for creatives**

- How might we incorporate civic engagement messages into shows that traditionally don't talk about "the issues" or have a more comedic feel?
- How have podcasters engaged with social issues before and how might we leverage that engagement to create momentum around registration and voting?

# short-form

*produced in partnership with*  
**ATTN:**

## Opportunities

- Get right to the point: short-form forces you to cut out the fat and immediately dive into the purpose of the content.
- Try different messaging strategies: short-form on digital provides the ability to instantly see what's working and what's not. Feel free to tinker and play with your GOTV messaging as you see how certain content performs.
- Digital is already the most natural environment for political conversations. Social Media is where political conversations are already happening. Creating short-form digital content meant for social is a way of organically integrating your brand into an environment where the conversations are already happening.
- Connect directly with your fans/viewers. Short-form content also functions as conversation starters. If your fans begin to engage and ask questions, engage with them back, and continue the dialogue. It's a great way to both inform and build brand awareness and loyalty.

## Pitfalls

- Regardless of if you are a corporation, non-profit, NGO, or startup, always have editorial guidelines for your political content. What does your company agree on? What does it not?
  - Even the company that doesn't want to touch politics with a 10-foot pole likely still has an opinion on something. Raising the minimum wage? Equal Pay? Sustainability? Even having just one single issue that you can get behind can help guide your entire GOTV campaign while remaining completely non-partisan.

## Medium-specific creative jumpoints

- When it comes to political content on social, **avoid platitudes and generalizations!!!** Get right to the point. Be specific. Use anecdotes.
  - Short-form content on social media has one job - stopping thumbs. Users will keep scrolling on right past you the second a platitudinal statement enters the content.
- Any single issue can be tied to voting. Equal Pay? Sustainability? Free speech? Public Transportation? Any topic can be talked about and discussed in a way that ultimately ties it to voting. It's a good strategy of camouflaging your ultimate CTA.
  - "Do you care about eating organically grown produce? Then vote."

# short-form relevant case studies

## Relevant case studies

[President Obama Doesn't Have Time for These 7 Excuses Not to Vote](#)

[By the time Snoop Dogg rolls this blunt, you could register to vote.](#)

## Sample brainstorm questions that someone working on this format might include in a workshop for creatives

- Once you get into scripting or even rough cuts, think to yourself, "Where do I get bored?"
- When it comes to GOTV content, think of all of the different PSAs you've ever seen, and try to think about the messaging they used to get viewers to vote. Then think about the fact that every single of those PSAs failed. How can your voice be different?
- What issues does your audience care about? Again, this doesn't have to be inherently political issues. What are they dealing with in their everyday lives? Use those issues and everyday experiences as the core reason for getting to the polls.
- Would your 19-year-old cousin like this? If not, it's probably not that shareable. Try something else.



# comedy

*produced in partnership with  
Comedy Central*

## **Opportunities**

- Use humor to highlight funny truths about the way Americans do--or do not--choose to vote.
- Use humor to teach Americans how to vote by mail or how to vote early since that is still a novel thing for many Americans and it will be more necessary this election cycle than ever before!
- Use humor as a way to playfully apply social pressure on (aka shame) non-voters. Studies have shown how social pressure is very effective to get people to vote and comedy, more so than earnest approaches, is a great medium to make people feel bad for not doing the right thing.
- Tap an already civically engaged group of talent and comedians to use their voice (and social media platforms!) to encourage fans and viewers to vote and give them resources to do so.
- Utilize wardrobe (especially in stand-up) and set dressing to promote voting and civic engagement, both serving to normalize the concept and making it feel "cool".
- Create storylines in scripts that show characters experiencing positive, empowering feelings from voting.

## **Pitfalls**

- Remaining non-partisan in comedic storytelling is difficult, particularly in stand-up, as comedians are generally liberal leaning and want to express their authentic views
- Endorsing a candidate, party or cause can be divisive and could alienate some of your audience so you have to have the stomach to do it

## **Medium-specific creative jump-points**

- Stand-up (potentially virtual or drive-in) shows where the price of admission is pledging to vote
- Use humor to breakdown or demystify the "Vote by Mail" process for the general public

# comedy relevant case studies

## Relevant case studies

- In March 2016 (in the midst of Democratic Primaries), Broad City aired an episode in which [Hillary Clinton guest starred](#). Even though co creators Abbi Jacobson & Ilana Glazer went on record stating that they were not trying to make a political statement, but rather just good entertainment, they still managed to do the former by normalizing not only the act of civic engagement, but also showing a Presidential candidate as relatable and with a sense of humor. <https://www.vogue.com/article/broad-city-hillary-clinton-recap>
- Watching political comedy and satire make young people more likely to be civically engaged. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/04/03/political-satire-makes-young-people-more-likely-to-participate-in-politics-trevor-noahs-the-daily-show-is-likely-to-continue-that-trend/>

## Sample brainstorm questions that someone working on this format might include in a workshop for creatives

- What are the misunderstood aspects of civic engagement or the voting process that comedy can be used to demystify and bring levity to?
- How can comedians use humor to help dispel political misinformation while maintaining credibility as information sources

# workshop agenda

## Introductions and Overview

The workshop leader shares the goal of the session and explains how this project fits into the organization's larger strategy and/or mission.

### Potential Talking Points

- Why your organization is committed to supporting civic engagement
- What you hope attendees get out of the workshop

### Opportunity

The workshop leader helps participants understand why storytelling can play such an important role in changing the culture around voting in the United States, utilizing relevant data and information from this toolkit. Depending on the organization's target audience, this section may focus on broader attitudes and behaviors or share information about specific demographics.

### Potential Talking Points

- **Entertainment** and storytelling can play a critical role in changing attitudes and behaviors among viewers, and in the longer term, changing culture
- **Authentic** and entertaining integrations can normalize voting and get viewers excited to make a difference by showing up at polls in November
- **While** it's important to do as much of this work as possible before the next election, this is also part of a longer-term cultural strategy and we should aim to incorporate civic engagement messages even beyond November 2020
- **Highlight** data and statistics from this guide that speak to your audience's attitudes and behaviors around voting, and how your content might make a difference among that audience
- **Reference** examples of how this has worked within content. Consider incorporating the following clips into your workshop:
  - Black Ink Crew (VH1)*
  - Broad City (Comedy Central)*
  - Life after Quince (Awesomeness TV)*
  - The Bold Type (Freeform)*

### Messaging Guidelines

Share the messaging tactics that are proven to resonate with voters and motivate turnout, which can be used as entry-points for storytelling across a variety of formats.

### Potential Talking Points:

There are five message frames that are proven to be effective in motivating voters to register and turn out to the polls:

- **Issues:** the connection between the issues that people are passionate about and how voting can make a difference on those issues
- **Empowerment:** voting is one of the ways that people can create the future they want to see
- **Identity:** being a voter is part of who you are as a person
- **Social Voting:** voting can be fun, social, and exciting
- **Access:** understanding how to vote

When incorporating these messages into your content, it's important to think about both representation (who you're depicting and how) and tone (does it feel authentic to your content?)

## Brainstorm

Depending on your audience, there are a variety of ways to structure an effective brainstorm. It can be helpful to create space for individual ideation around specific focus areas (e.g. particular shows or content verticals), and then reconvene as a larger group to share ideas and build off of each other's concepts.

### Potential Brainstorm Activities:

- **One-Word Story:** As an ice breaker, ask attendees to build a story about civic engagement by each contributing one word, starting with the phrase "what if".
- **Empty Your Brain:** For 2-3 minutes at a time, ask each attendee to come up with as many different ideas as they can in response to a single focus question, working independently in silence. Focus questions may reflect specific shows, content verticals, or other relevant areas that you want to ideate around.
- **Change One Thing:** Once some initial ideas have been generated, each attendee records their favorite idea on a post-it. The post-it is then passed to another attendee who must build on or expand that idea.
- **Create a Headline:** Each attendee selects one idea and creates a headline distilling the idea into a brief phrase or sentence. Alongside the headline, attendees should illustrate what the idea looks like and write a summary of the concept, including its impact.

### Wrap Up / Next Steps

Before ending the workshop, make sure that attendees are aware of the process for moving forward with the concepts that were generated within the brainstorm.

### Deck Template

Available in Google Slides [here](#).



## What is the Civic Alliance?

Founded by [Democracy Works](#) and the [CAA Foundation](#), the Civic Alliance is America's premier nonpartisan coalition of businesses working together to build a future where everyone can vote, volunteer and take action to shape our country.

As America's leading companies, the [Civic Alliance](#) is putting its influence to work and strengthening our country's democracy, giving its employees and audiences the support they need to take action: whether they are voting, participating in the Census, or attending a town hall. Each company is committed to taking concrete action to encourage civic participation among their internal and external audiences.

## What is the Civic Alliance Storylines Toolkit?

We believe the creative community has an unprecedented opportunity to help elevate civic participation and normalize voter identity in our communities this election year, and beyond.

Civic Alliance member companies ATTN:, Creative Artists Agency, Comedy Central, MTV, Spotify, and Viacom CBS with the help of leading nonprofit, nonpartisan voter organizations and civic experts, have come together to create a go to civic guide for creators.

This guide provides creators with the tangible framework they need to incorporate accurate and timely civic themes across diverse media formats from scripted, unscripted, podcast, to short-form, and across genres from comedy to drama.

It is meant to be used as a reference point and tailored for individual projects as necessary.

If you are a company interested in getting involved with the Civic Alliance, or if you are a creator interested in diving deeper into a specific civic issue referenced in this guide, please email [manuel@civicalliance.com](mailto:manuel@civicalliance.com).

# appendix a:

## glossary of terms

**Automatic Voter Registration:** Under an automatic voter registration system, eligible voters are automatically registered to vote whenever they interact with government agencies (like the DMV). Eligible voters are registered by default, although they may request not to be registered. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have already approved automatic voter registration with more states expected to pass the reform soon. Automatic Voter Registration has increased the average registration rates in every state where it's been implemented.

**Absentee Voting:** All states will mail an absentee ballot to eligible voters who request one. The voter may return the ballot by mail or in person. In 19 states, an excuse is required, while 28 states and the District of Columbia permit any qualified voter to vote absentee without offering an excuse. Some states offer a permanent absentee ballot list: once a voter asks to be added to the list, they will automatically receive an absentee ballot for all future elections. Many states are now encouraging vote-by-mail, making it easier for voters by allowing the COVID-19 pandemic to be used as an excuse for requesting an absentee ballot in states where an excuse is required, and allowing voters to request an absentee ballot online.

**Ballot:** A list of candidates and proposed laws that voters mark to make choices. A ballot may be made of paper and marked with a pen or hole punch. Or it may be electronic and voters mark their choices with the push of a button or by touch screen.

**Ballot Initiative:** A proposed law drafted by citizens and placed on the ballot. Citizens will vote to approve or reject it. Ballot initiatives are usually drafted by groups who are passionate about an issue.

**Caucus:** A meeting held by members of a party to decide an issue. Most often, caucuses are statewide meetings held in presidential election years. Members of a party choose a candidate to support or they elect members to a state nominating committee.

**Constituent:** A person who lives, works, or pays taxes in an area that a politician represents.

**Delegate, Convention (Unpledged, Pledged, and Super):** Someone chosen to represent their town or state at a national political convention. A pledged delegate must support the candidate chosen by the voters they represent. An unpledged delegate is not bound to support a specific candidate. A superdelegate is often a party official or veteran politician. Superdelegates are not required to be chosen or elected to the position. They can support any candidate they choose.

**District (also Ward):** A geographical area that an elected official serves or represents.

**Early Voting:** In 39 states (including 3 that mail ballots to all voters) and the District of Columbia, any qualified voter may cast a ballot in person during a designated period prior to Election Day. No excuse or justification is required.

**Election Official (also Poll Worker, Election Clerk, Election Judge):** A person appointed to monitor the voting process at a polling place, make sure voters follow state requirements, certify an election was conducted legally, give the official vote count.

**Elector:** A person who is certified to represent their state's vote in the Electoral College.

**Electoral College, Electoral Vote:** The process Americans use to elect the president and vice president. The number of electors a state receives is equal to that state's number of U.S. senators and representatives. Those electors then gather to cast the state's votes in the Electoral College. They vote for the candidate who won in their state during a presidential election.

**General Election:** A final election for a political office with a limited list of candidates. The candidates in the general election are the people who won their party's primary election. General elections happen at a local, state, and national level.

**Incumbent:** The person currently in a particular job or political office.

**Mail Voting:** A ballot is automatically mailed to every eligible voter (no request or application is necessary). In-person voting sites may also be available for voters who would like to vote in-person and to provide additional services to voters. Three states mail ballots to all eligible voters for every election, with one more (Hawaii) moving to all-mail ballots in 2020. Other states may provide this option for some types of elections.

**Midterm Election:** The federal election for members of Congress held between presidential elections.

**Nominee:** The final candidate chosen by a party to represent them in an election.

**Platform:** A collection of beliefs, legislative goals, morals, and ideals. A political party's platform outlines its principles and plans to govern.

**Political Action Committee (PAC):** A group organized to raise money or support for a politician or cause.

**Polling Place (Polling Station):** The location in which you cast your vote. Your area may hold voting in schools, churches, community centers, or other central public places. Your polling place is assigned based on your legal address.

**Popular Vote:** The votes cast during an election for a candidate or about an issue. Whichever candidate or decision about an issue gets the most votes has won the popular vote. (U.S. president and vice president are determined by an Electoral College vote.)

**Precinct (Election District, Voting District):** Each city, county, or geographic area is divided by address into precincts to assign polling places and gather votes. A precinct can sometimes be called an election district or voting district.



**Primary Election (Open and Closed):** An election held to choose which of a party's candidates will be nominated for the general election. In an open primary, all voters can vote for any candidate they prefer, regardless of the voter's or candidate's party affiliation. In a closed primary, voters can only vote for a candidate from the party that the voter belongs to.

**Provisional Ballot:** Type of ballot used to collect a vote when there are questions about the voter's identity or ability to vote at that precinct. A provisional ballot is counted when the voter's information is confirmed.

**Recall Election:** An election for voters to choose whether to remove an elected official from office before the end of the official's term. A recall election can generally take place if enough voters sign a petition asking for one. Rules on the number of voters needed and the officials who can be recalled are different from state to state. Federal officials cannot be recalled, only impeached (see Impeachment.) These officials include President, Vice President, Representatives, Senators, Federal judges.

**Recount:** Counting the votes again because of a suspected error in totaling them the first time.

**Referendum:** A proposed new law or a proposal to repeal an existing law, passed to the voters to approve or reject. Some states require the following to be approved by a referendum before they can be adopted: spending bills, bond issues, Constitutional amendments.

**Rising American Electorate:** The Rising American Electorate includes unmarried women, people of color, and young people.

**Special Election:** An election to fill a vacant position if an officeholder dies, resigns, or is impeached. It is not part of the regular election schedule.

**Super Tuesday:** The day when the most states and territories hold presidential primary elections or caucuses. The candidates who win on Super Tuesday are more likely to win their party's nomination.

**Term:** The set length of time for someone to serve in an elected office. The president and vice president of the United States serve a four-year term. U.S. representatives serve two years and U.S. senators serve six years.

**Town Hall Meeting or Debate:** A setting in which candidates for office answer questions from voters. In a town hall-style debate, a moderator helps ensure candidates follow the rules they agreed to.

**Voter Fraud (Election Fraud):** Interfering with the results of an election by doing illegal things that affect the vote's outcome. Types of voter fraud include bribery, illegal voter registration, tampering with voting machines or ballot boxes, voter impersonation, vote buying, false advertising about the election date or how to vote. Organized voter fraud is often called election fraud.

**Voter Identification (Voter ID):** Requirements implemented by state legislatures in 35 states that require voters to present some form of ID at the polls - which in some cases must include a photo. Commonly accepted forms include driver's licenses, state-issued ID cards, and military ID cards.

**Voter Intimidation (Voter Suppression):** An attempt to prevent eligible people from voting or forcing them to vote a certain way. The attempt may be made by an official, individual, or group. Some voter intimidation tactics include: using verbal or physical threats, threatening with weapons or jail time, tests involving literacy, property ownership, or citizenship, poll taxes, other types of intimidation to prevent an eligible person from voting freely.

# appendix b:

## voter education

### **BallotReady**

<https://www.ballotready.org/>

BallotReady aggregates content from candidates' websites, social media, press, endorsers and board of elections for comprehensive, nonpartisan information about the candidates and referendums on your ballot. We link everything back to its original source so voters can verify any piece of information, and we make every effort to confirm details with the candidates themselves, giving them the opportunity to share even more information.

### **CIRCLE at Tufts University**

<https://circle.tufts.edu/>

CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. They conduct extensive research on youth participation, and they leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. In all of their work, they are especially concerned with understanding, addressing, and ultimately eliminating the systemic barriers that keep some young people marginalized from and underrepresented in civic life. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy. Since 2008, they have been based at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life.

### **Nonprofit VOTE**

<https://www.nonprofitvote.org/>

Nonprofit VOTE is a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2005 by a consortium of state nonprofit associations and national nonprofit networks to provide resources and trainings for the nonprofit sector on how to conduct nonpartisan voter participation and election activities.

### **Students Learn Students Vote Coalition**

<https://www.studentslearnstudentsvote.org/>

The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition promotes civic learning and engagement on campuses across the country by providing a series of key steps and information on best practices that institutions can use to create a more voter friendly campus.

### **U.S. Census Bureau**

<https://www.census.gov/>

The Census Bureau is the federal government's largest statistical agency. It is dedicated to providing current facts and figures about America's people, places, and economy.

# appendix c:

## civic culture & campaigns

### **I am a voter.**

<https://iamavoter.com/>

I am a voter. is a nonpartisan movement that aims to create a cultural shift around voting and civic engagement by unifying around a central truth: our democracy works best when we all participate.

### **Civic Responsibility Project**

<https://www.civicresponsibility.org/>

The Civic Responsibility Project is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that works with businesses, nonprofit experts, and local government leaders to increase voter participation. The Civic Responsibility Project's mission is to support businesses committed to shifting cultural attitudes about civic participation, fostering a healthy and hopeful civic culture. Their most recent project with Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation examines the ways in which companies can play a role to engage their employees and consumers in elections.

### **The Ad Council**

<https://www.adcouncil.org/>

The Ad Council produces, distributes and promotes campaigns that improve everyday lives. Our memorable work inspires ongoing dialogue, engagement and action around significant public issues, creating a measurable difference in society. As a private, non-profit organization, the Ad Council focuses on approximately 50 national campaigns at a time, each sponsored by non-profit organizations or federal government agencies.

### **Center for Secure and Modern Elections**

<https://modernelections.org/>

Center for Secure and Modern Elections aligns bipartisan, pro-voter campaigns in states across the country that modernizes the voting system, making elections more efficient and secure. Center for Secure and Modern Elections works directly with local partners and lawmakers who lead in-state activities.

### **Motivote**

<https://www.motivote.us/>

Motivote fills a critical gap in the voter mobilization landscape. With simple behavioral nudges, they make voting fun, boost turnout, and build better government.

### **National Conference on Citizenship**

<https://ncoc.org/>

NCoC currently works with cross-sector partners in over 30 states and communities to strengthen civic life in America. The Civic Health Initiative uses engaging reports, infographics, fact sheets, and forums to create a deeper understanding of civic health. These tools serve as the foundation for our partners to innovate new ways to increase civic engagement, generate dialogue and catalyze sustainable civic strategies.

## **Time to Vote**

<https://www.maketimetovote.org/>

Workers shouldn't have to choose between earning a paycheck and voting. Time to Vote is a nonpartisan movement, led by the business community, to contribute to the culture shift needed to increase voter participation in our country's elections.

## **Vote Early Day**

<https://www.voteearlyday.org/>

Vote Early Day is a collaboration among media companies, nonprofits, technology platforms, and election administrators to create a national, ownerless holiday to tap the unprecedented energy around the 2020 election and mobilize the largest early turnout in history. The national event is set for Saturday, October 24 when the majority of states have in-person early voting options and most voters will still have enough time to request absentee ballots for Election Day.

# appendix d: civic technology

## **Countable**

<https://www.countable.us/>

Countable makes it quick and easy to understand the laws Congress is considering. You can use Countable to: read clear and succinct summaries of upcoming and active legislation; directly tell your lawmakers how to vote on those bills by clicking “Yea” or “Nay”; follow up on how your elected officials voted on bills, so you can hold them accountable in the next election cycle.

## **TurboVote**

<https://turbovote.org/>

TurboVote is an online service to help people vote in every election—local, state, and national—and is developed by Democracy Works, a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that works to simplify, and modernize the voting process. Over seven million voters receive election reminders through TurboVote.

# appendix e: voting rights

## **Fair Elections Center**

<https://www.fairelectionscenter.org/>

Fair Elections Center is a national, nonpartisan voting rights and election reform 501(c)(3) organization based in Washington, D.C. Our mission is to use litigation and advocacy to remove barriers to registration and voting, particularly those disenfranchising underrepresented and marginalized communities, and to improve election administration.

# appendix f:

## voting registration

### **HeadCount**

<https://www.headcount.org/>

HeadCount is a non-partisan organization that uses the power of music to register voters and promote participation in democracy. We reach young people and music fans where they already are – at concerts and online – to inform and empower.

### **National Voter Registration Day**

<https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org/>

Every year millions of Americans find themselves unable to vote because they miss a registration deadline, don't update their registration, or aren't sure how to register. National Voter Registration Day wants to make sure everyone has the opportunity to vote. On Tuesday September 22, 2020 volunteers and organizations from all over the country will "hit the streets" in a single day of coordinated field, technology and media efforts. National Voter Registration Day seeks to create broad awareness of voter registration opportunities to reach tens of thousands of voters who may not register otherwise.



**thank you to our  
civic alliance  
members who contributed to  
this toolkit**

**attn:**

**CAA**



**VIACOMCBS**

**civic  
alliance**

# **civic storylines toolkit**

**a guide for media companies  
and content creators**

**civic  
alliance**