

How the “Why Vote?” Tool Works

At the Right Question Institute, we bring unique expertise to an important challenge: increasing voting rates in low-income communities across the United States. We’ve spent three decades working in a wide range of communities and fields, developing educational tools that allow people to start advocating for themselves with a new sense of urgency.

The “Why Vote?” Tool is a nonpartisan tool that direct service programs can use to help increase voting rates among their clients. It does two things that provide a foundation for motivating individual voters:

- First, the “Why Vote?” Tool makes it easier for people to see the connection between a) services they use and need and b) decisions elected officials make that affect those services.
- Second, the tool helps people name for themselves the value of voting and generates interest in information about how to actually vote.

People in low-income communities often feel a reluctance to vote that stems from a well-founded wariness of public bureaucracy — where small mistakes in filling out paperwork could, for instance, lead to losing Medicaid, food stamps, housing, and other forms of public support. Many people worry about the consequences of making any kind of mistake in a voting system that has its own set of requirements for documentation, registration, and protocols, not to mention criminal penalties.

The “Why Vote?” Tool fosters in potential voters a feeling that they want to have a say in decisions that affect those services. They begin to feel a new sense of urgency to register and vote. As Angie, a young mother in Concord, New Hampshire, said, “It’s at the welfare office that we learn our voice doesn’t count. But, [after the Right Question Institute workshop], I see that our voices do count ... and we need to vote.”

What happens when people use the “Why Vote?” Tool?

The “Why Vote?” Tool allows clients of direct service programs to:

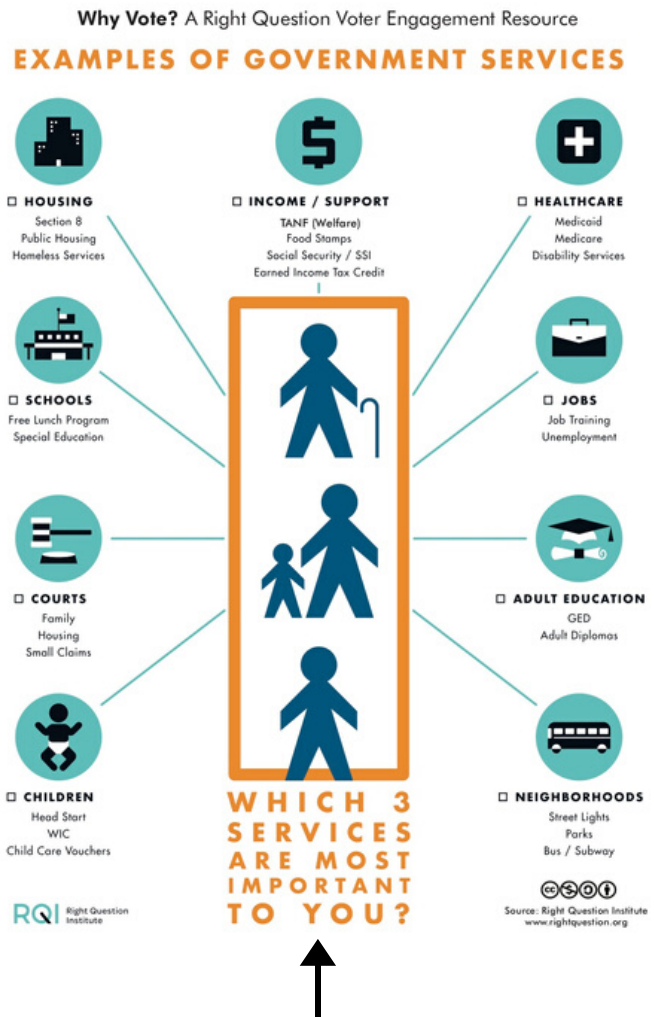
1. See the wide range of publicly funded services they receive and consider the importance of those services in their lives.
2. Prioritize and name for themselves which services are most important.
3. Obtain key information about the connection between decisions made by elected officials and the services they have just named as most important.
4. Name for themselves, after seeing that connection, why they might want to vote.
5. Ask questions about the actual process of registering and voting.
6. Reflect on what they learned and how they feel differently now about voting.
7. Connect to resources and information about how to register and vote.

A pathway toward registering and voting

Here's a closer look at those seven steps and why they're important.

1: Seeing the big picture (Examples of government services)

People who regularly use publicly funded services spend a lot of time navigating a complex maze of requirements and practices that may differ from office to office and service to service. They rarely have the opportunity to step back and see the whole picture of how many publicly funded systems and services are important to them and their families. The "Why Vote?" Tool provides space to contemplate the bigger picture. It helps give people an illuminating perspective on the role of government and public services in their lives.



2: Prioritization of services (Which 3 services are most important to you?)

Basic services for things like health, income, nutrition, housing, and education, are all important. How could you prioritize some over others? Being invited to prioritize them invites a frightening question: Which three would, if lost, have an immediate and drastic impact on your life and the wellbeing of your family? This leads to a new sense of urgency about the importance of these services, and it can lead to a new determination to vote in order to advocate for keeping them available.

3: Learning that “elected officials make decisions that affect all these services”

Many serious efforts to encourage voting flood people with information, but the “Why Vote?” Tool keeps it simple — for a reason. At RQI our expertise is in distilling lots of information into the smallest amount possible that will serve as a catalyst for action. Thirty years of experience working in diverse communities across the country have provided hard-won insight into the effectiveness of this approach. A question that informs all our work is, “What is the maximum impact that can be achieved by teaching the minimum?” The “Why Vote?” Tool reflects this insight. The tool reminds people, but does not overburden them, of the role elected officials play in making decisions about public services. If people aren’t aware of this connection, how likely are they to value voting or engage with the voting system?

4: Naming for themselves the value of voting (Why would YOU want to vote and have a say in who is making decisions about those services?)

People get to articulate in their own words why they would decide to voluntarily engage with the voting system, become a voter, and have a say in who is making decisions that affect them. Do not underestimate the importance of this step. It’s a key moment, when people consider acting as citizens by naming the value of exercising a basic democratic right.

The form is titled "Why Vote? A Right Question Voter Engagement Resource" and "YOUR VOTE AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES". It contains the following text and sections:

- Elected officials make decisions that affect all these services. By voting, you can have a say in who’s making those decisions.
- Why would YOU want to vote and have a say in who is making decisions about those services? (Followed by a large empty text box)
- What questions do you have about being able to vote in the next election? Ask as many questions as you can. (Followed by a large empty text box)
- What did you learn? (Followed by a large empty text box)
- For more information about voting, contact _____
- You can also find where to vote by searching online “find my polling place.”
- At the bottom right, there is the RQI logo, the website rightquestion.org, and Creative Commons BY-NC-ND icons.

5: Asking questions about voting (What questions do you have about being able to vote in the next election?)

We’ve learned that people who have never voted before often ask questions that reveal some of their previously unspoken fears that kept them from voting: “What if I make a mistake?” “Will I be penalized?” “Can I bring my children with me?” “What if I don’t know what to do?” By articulating these concerns, they determine what they want to know before they even consider the idea of voting. This step is grounded in RQI’s 30 years of experience that has shown the transformative power of learning to ask one’s own questions.

Why Vote? A Right Question Voter Engagement Resource

YOUR VOTE AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Elected officials make decisions that affect all these services.
By voting, you can have a say in who's making those decisions.

Why would YOU want to vote and have a say in who is making decisions about those services?

What questions do you have about being able to vote in the next election?
Ask as many questions as you can.

What did you learn?

For more information about voting, contact _____
You can also find where to vote by searching online "find my polling place."

RQI Right Question
Institute
rightquestion.org
CC BY NC ND

6: Reflection (What did you learn?)

Reflection — the opportunity to think about what you've learned and understood — creates space for people to recognize their own thinking process, consider what they've learned, and name how that might lead to action. As John Dewey, the philosopher, educator, and author of *Education and Democracy*, said more than a century ago, "We don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience."



7: Connecting to resources (For more information about voting, contact ...)

The first action someone can take on their new path toward voting is to get more information. Organizations are doing important work to protect voter rights and fight voter suppression. Other groups are doing outreach to provide people with voting information. Some are mobilizing voters — helping them to register and get to the polls. The "Why Vote?" Tool complements this work and contributes a key ingredient: ensuring people want to vote in the first place. Efforts to promote voting become far more relevant when people name for themselves the value of voting.

The "Why Vote?" Tool has a lot happening on one sheet of paper ...

Yes, it does! Often, outreach to people who traditionally don't vote focuses first on giving them information about how to register. That information also appears on the "Why Vote?" Tool, but at the end — after they've discovered and named for themselves the value of voting. That's the point in the process where they are better positioned to seek and receive information about the practicalities of registering and getting to the polls. The "Why Vote?" Tool scaffolds this process of learning and discovery.

To use the "Why Vote?" Tool, visit rightquestion.org/WhyVote