Increasing Motivation and Determination to Vote

The Right Question Institute's "Why Vote?" Initiative

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A Letter from RQI Co-Directors Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein

"We were able to help people really interrogate: What's important to me? Why do I need
to show up? What's at stake for me if I don't show up?"
- DJ Sims, Atlanta, Georgia

It may be hard for engaged voters in higher income communities, those who are active consumers of political news and events, to understand how far removed the world of politics feels to many people in low-income communities around the country. Compared to daily challenges around income, food security, education, and health care, politics can feel remote and seemingly irrelevant.

This is an often overlooked obstacle to voter participation, and in 2020 we addressed this problem head on with our "Why Vote?" Initiative. Informed by our work building skills for effective self-advocacy in low-income communities around the country, we created a new resource, the "Why Vote?" Tool, to **make it easier for people who traditionally have not voted to *name for themselves the value of voting.***

The "Why Vote?" Tool was deliberately designed to allow people to see the connection between services they need — such as food assistance, income support, and child care — and decisions that elected officials make. The tool then provides the opportunity for people to ask questions about voting and connect with organizations and efforts that help people overcome the many voter suppression efforts that make it difficult to vote.

Once we created the "Why Vote?" Tool, we then turned it over to people working on the ground all over the country, who used it in creative ways as part of their voter engagement and education efforts during the pandemic.

While waiting in line at a food bank in Denver, the "Why Vote?" Tool helped people connect their immediate need for food to decisions about benefits and services they need that are made by elected officials. High school students in Los Angeles used the tool to engage older family members about the role they could play as voters. In southern Georgia, the tool helped people see the connection between the closing of local hospitals and decisions made by elected officials. In Atlanta, it led people to discover that access to child care is also related to politics.

This report offers a glimpse of what people on the ground and in classrooms around the country working to promote greater voter participation were able to do with the "Why Vote" Tool. We believe the tool can become an essential resource for voter mobilization, outreach, relational organizing, and education efforts to increase voter participation in local, state, and national elections.

Sincerely,

Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein
Co-Directors, The Right Question Institute

Executive summary

In 2020, the Right Question Institute (RQI) tested a nonpartisan model for voter engagement and education that helps fill a gap in the voter-activation landscape. By focusing on having people discover for themselves the value of voting, RQI's "Why Vote?" Initiative demonstrated a unique way to strengthen people's motivation and determination to vote. RQI shared free "Why Vote?" resources with staff and volunteers from more than 250 organizations across 38 states — including organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Nonprofit VOTE, and Spread the Vote. In particular, RQI's two-page ["Why Vote?" Tool](#) provided an easy, scalable, adaptable method for engaging new voters. This brief report includes six examples of people and organizations that used RQI's "Why Vote?" resources to meet their unique voter engagement and education efforts. These examples show how people on the ground and in classrooms around the country quickly recognized the tool as a valuable resource for mobilization, outreach, relational organizing, and civic education efforts to promote greater voter participation in low-income communities.

In their own words

"We were able to help people really interrogate: **What's important to me? Why do I need to show up?** What's at stake for me if I don't show up?" — *DJ Sims, Georgia Justice Project, Atlanta*

"The 'Why Vote?' Tool gave our organizers **a way to engage more deeply with communities about voting and civic engagement**, bringing a deeper understanding of the barriers that folks from marginalized communities often face when voting." — *Alex McHenry, Community Resource Center, Denver*

"I felt overwhelmed and humbled. **I did not expect over ten percent of the students to convince new eligible voters to cast ballots** one week before the election." — *Johnny Walker, PUC Triumph Charter High School, Los Angeles*

"Before [RQI's] webinar I felt that I didn't have the tools and knowledge to have these types of conversations. **I felt more empowered after I learned about the tool.**" — *Julia Sosa, United Parent Leaders Action Network, Los Angeles*

"All of these candidates — from the president to the county attorney — will be making decisions that could have a major impact on our lives. Students understand this at a surface level, but **the 'Why Vote?' Tool helped make this knowledge real and personal.**" — *Joshua Beer, Fall Mountain Regional High School, New Hampshire*

"The tool asks why and really **builds a sense of confidence, responsibility, and collaboration** among adult learners. Especially for refugees and immigrants who are often told what to do by authorities — this tool supports them to make their own decisions and teaches them that their decisions are important and valid." — *Keighty Ward, Literacy Works, Chicago*

Voter turnout in 2020 and beyond

The November 2020 election represented a high water mark for voter turnout in the United States. However, more than one third of eligible voters chose *not* to vote. Eligible voters who are either young, nonwhite, with low levels of formal education, or who earn low incomes are consistently the least likely to vote of all demographic groups. According to a census report, in the 2016 election, 76 percent of eligible voters earning above $75,000 per year reported voting, compared to 45 percent of those earning below $20,000. Data from midterm, state, and local elections show identical or even more striking engagement gaps. With the high stakes of upcoming elections, voter engagement and access will become even more important in the years ahead.

Within this context, in 2020 RQI tested a nonpartisan model for voter engagement and education that helps fill a gap in the voter-activation landscape — engaging low-propensity voters in a process that allows them to name *for themselves* the value of voting and its connection to their lives.

About RQI

The Right Question Institute (RQI) is a nonprofit educational organization that works to build a vibrant democracy where all people — even those furthest from power — can make their voices heard, participate in decisions, and advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. To do this, RQI develops resources, educational methods, and professional learning opportunities. It collaborates with public agencies and educational, health care, social services, community-based, and other organizations to facilitate the use of these resources with the people they serve.

RQI's "Why Vote?" Initiative

RQI launched the "Why Vote?" Initiative in 2020 as a new approach to reaching and engaging potential voters, primarily in low-income communities.

Based on 30 years of experience in the field of education, self-advocacy, and democratic participation, RQI identified a key first step on the pathway to voting that is often overlooked: People need to name *for themselves* the value of voting. Efforts to convince, cajole, or persuade people to vote have limited impact if individuals have not discovered and named for themselves why they wanted to vote.

In order to address this dynamic, RQI created the "Why Vote?" Tool, a nonpartisan, two-page resource designed to strengthen people's motivation and determination to vote. In all its work, RQI seeks to develop the simplest educational method possible to achieve a key goal.

The tool engages new and infrequent voters to:

1. Identify services and government funded programs that are important to them.
2. Draw the connection between those services/programs and decisions elected officials make.
3. Name for themselves why they would want to vote and have a say in who's making decisions on their behalf.
4. Ask questions about the process of registering and voting.
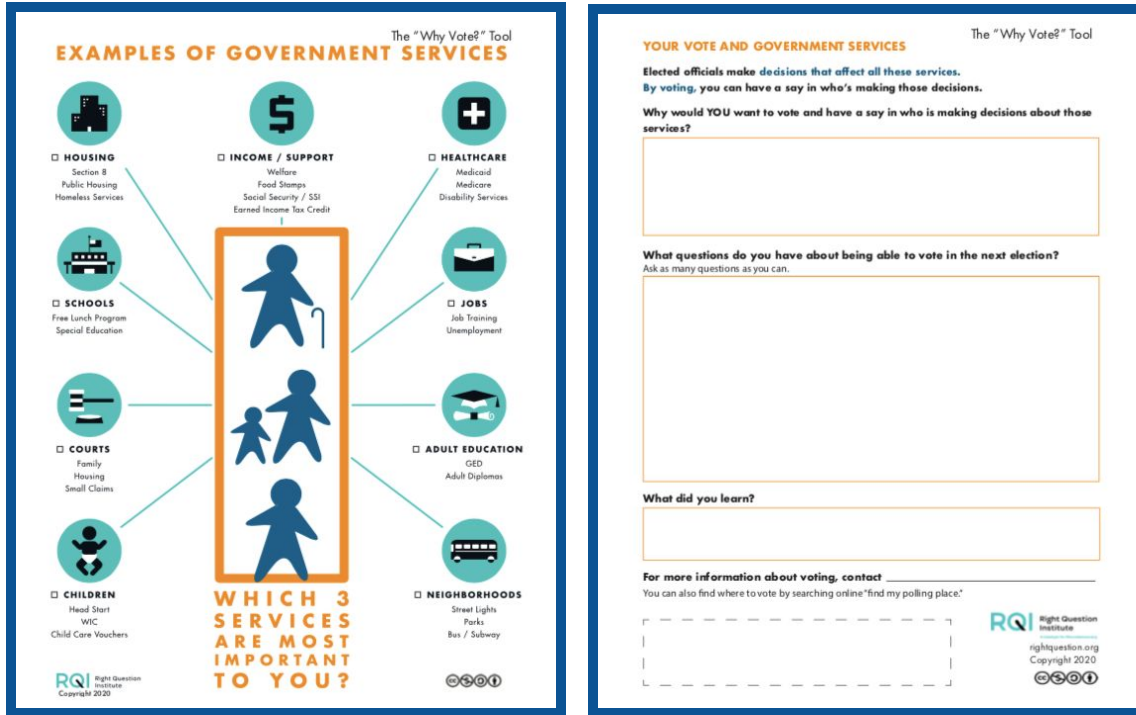
See appendix for a full-size copy of the "Why Vote?" Tool, and visit
rightquestion.org/voter-engagement/resources for more resources.

To engage people around voting, the "Why Vote?" Tool can be used by staff and volunteers in social services organizations, community groups, schools, parent advocacy groups, health care systems, and myriad other organizations that provide direct services to the public. These organizations often have a powerful interest in advancing the voices of communities and individuals they serve, and they can be powerful facilitators in the pathway toward voting — and are currently underutilized for that purpose.

National dissemination

RQI hosted a series of webinars in 2020 to introduce the "Why Vote?" Tool to staff and volunteers at more than 250 organizations across 38 states. Interest in the tool came from a wide range of organizations: nonprofits working in social services, voter engagement organizations, public library systems, schools, universities, parent-advocacy groups, community organizations, church groups, and individuals involved in get-out-the-vote activities. RQI conducted tailored webinars for organizations including the League of Women Voters, Nonprofit VOTE, and United Parent Leaders Action Network. RQI's resources were used and shared by organizations such as Spread the Vote, Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center, the Community Resource Center (in Denver), Western New York Library Resources Council, Minnesota State University Moorhead, Miami Dade College, Hispanic Chamber Cincinnati USA, Health Care Access Now (in Cincinnati), Literacy Works (in Chicago), and Beyond the Ballot.

These organizations adapted the "Why Vote?" Tool to fit their specific needs. For example:
- Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center published a 30-page pamphlet to celebrate Law Day (May 1) featuring RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool. It was distributed around the state to educators,

social studies professional organizations, regional school districts, the Michigan Judicial Institute, State Bar of Michigan, and other groups.

- Spread the Vote, which works in 12 states, including battleground states like Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, published RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool in its series of state-by-state election guides. (Spread the Vote says 77 percent of people they work with have never voted before.)
- Miami Dade College included the "Why Vote?" Tool as a resource on its voting-information website for students.
- Western New York Library Resources Council, led by Heidi Ziemer and Caitlin Kenney, posted the "Why Vote?" Tool to its website, shared the tool with local librarians, and collaborated closely with RQI to build a spin-off resource: the ["Why Answer the Census?" Tool](#).

Using the "Why Vote?" Tool: six examples from the field

The simplicity of the two-page "Why Vote?" Tool allowed organizations to use it in ways that fit the unique needs of communities they serve. Here are six examples of how different organizations — including two schools — incorporated the "Why Vote?" Tool into their voter outreach and education efforts.

- **Voter engagement volunteers, Atlanta: DJ Sims**
  DJ Sims is a reentry services coordinator with Georgia Justice Project, which supports individuals in the criminal justice system and works to reduce barriers to reentry. Sims volunteers in voter outreach efforts in Atlanta and southern Georgia. He used RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool in several presentations to talk about voting, and he used it to foster conversations with individuals about voting.

- **Community Resource Center (CRC), Denver: Alex McHenry**
  Denver's Community Resource Center supports nonprofit organizations throughout Colorado, building their capacity to achieve community impact. Alex McHenry is the community engagement program manager at CRC and works with its nonpartisan Participation Project, elevating civic engagement efforts of nonprofits throughout the state. The initiative "reaches those individuals that are often missed and do not have a voice at the table," McHenry said. CRC learned about RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool through Nonprofit VOTE and shared it with over 30 of its nonprofit partners. It also distributed laminated copies of the "Why Vote?" Tool to 16 field organizers. They used the tool in conversations with people waiting in their cars at food banks and other human service organizations, such as community health clinics, COVID-19 protective housing sites, and homeless-support organizations.

- **United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN), Los Angeles: Julia Sosa**
  United Parent Leaders in Action is a national network that advances parent leadership. Julia Sosa is a governing council member of the organization and is also involved in other parent groups. Based in Los Angeles, Sosa leads workshops for parents (she also works full time in a jewelry store). She incorporated RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool into her workshops with parents to facilitate conversations about voting. Parents who weren't eligible to vote due to citizenship status learned

how to engage others in the community, and Sosa also used the tool to encourage a family member to vote for the first time.

- **Fall Mountain Regional High School, Langdon, New Hampshire: Joshua Beer**
Fall Mountain Regional High School, a public school, serves a rural community in New Hampshire — a "swing state" where political opinions run the gamut. Beer himself graduated from the high school, and he has taught middle school and high school social studies for 13 years. He saw RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool as an opportunity to "help students examine the myriad reasons why a citizen should vote in their local, state, and national elections." He led a "Why Vote" Tool lesson plan with 11th-graders — who will all be of voting age in the near future. "I wanted my students to move beyond simply wanting one person or another to win the election, and to think about how their preferred candidate might govern once they were in office," he said.

- **Literacy Works, Chicago: Keighty Ward**
Literacy Works provides support, training, and professional development to more than 40 adult education organizations in Chicago and throughout Illinois, advancing adult basic education and English language learning. Ward is director of the community literacy program, which in 2020 trained nearly 700 tutors and reached an estimated 10,000 individuals pursuing adult education. RQI conducted a training for a group of Literacy Works tutors, who then used the "Why Vote?" Tool to engage their adult education students prior to the election.

- **PUC Triumph Charter School, Los Angeles: Johnny Walker**
PUC Triumph Charter High School is in Sylmar, a working-class, low-income community on the outskirts of Los Angeles, where "the urban and rural coexist," according to Walker. The high school is a Title I school where 99 percent of students are Latino and 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Walker is a history teacher at the school, and leading up to the 2020 election he used RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool with his students to spark discussion and learning around voting. Walker developed a multi-day lesson plan that led to students becoming "voter facilitators" in their community — helping eligible voters engage with the election and encouraging many people to vote for the first time.

Outcomes: Engagement, Understanding, Action

People using the "Why Vote?" Tool in their work talked about three kinds of changes they saw in potential voters:

- **Engagement:** The tool quickly engages people to think about public services that are important to them.
- **Understanding:** Potential voters reach a new understanding about the connections between services and decisions made by elected officials.
- **Action:** The tool provides space for people to ask their own questions about voting, and ultimately it can lead to individual action, whether by seeking more information, registering, voting, or helping others to vote.

Engagement

In 2020, RQI heard from service providers, organizers, and educators across the country— including the six highlighted in this report — that the "Why Vote?" Tool served as an accessible resource to engage voters during an especially contentious election season.

It was "**a way to start conversations with folks** about why (or why not) voting is important to them and their communities," Alex McHenry, the program manager in Colorado, said. "The clear layout of the tool made it easy to have these nonpartisan conversations, and the icons and visuals made language barriers much easier to overcome."

Julia Sosa, the parent leader in Los Angeles, valued the simplicity of the tool for engaging parents she works with. **"Sometimes the information we're given to pass on is very complicated,"** she said. "It can be even more complicated to explain to others. This tool was simple. We didn't have to go in depth, and so it was easy to use."

Keighty Ward, from Chicago's Literacy Works, said the tool emphasizes "the importance of learner inquiry and decision making, as opposed to **other get-out-the-vote efforts that focus on the importance of voting but miss the 'why should I?' aspect**."

Understanding

The tool notes briefly that elected officials make decisions that affect all the publicly funded services people find important, and it asks people to name for themselves why they would want to vote and have a say in who's making those decisions — a way for potential voters to reach a new understanding about the connection between voting and their lives.

As DJ Sims in Atlanta observed, the details of "what's at stake for me" in an election differs from person to person. "For some communities that was child care, for some communities that was access to benefits and government assistance, for some communities it was education," he said. One potential voter told Sims, **"I didn't think of child care as being a political topic or that I could make it one."**

McHenry said, "'The 'Why Vote?' Tool also **helped make connections for voters about what exactly is at stake in our elections**, creating an opportunity for dialogue and education surrounding the importance of civic engagement."

One of Johnny Walker's high school students in Los Angeles said, "For both me and my mom, **it did help us decide which issues affected our family personally** and what we need as citizens and as a community from the government."

Josh Beer, the high school teacher in New Hampshire, observed something similar: "So many of them" — his students — "mentioned how they didn't know that government provided X, Y, or Z. **The student whose mother had breast cancer was concerned about Medicaid**, and another student who is on the free and reduced-price lunch program wanted someone who would protect free food programs."

Beer continued: "As students were doing this and occasionally asking clarifying questions, **I could start to see the light go on in their heads.**"

"This idea of questions and conversations lets [adult learners] **think about big issues on their own terms instead of being told what to do,**" said Ward.

Action

The six people highlighted in this report also saw that the "Why Vote?" Tool serves as a catalyst for individuals to take action. Individual action can take many forms: registering to vote and casting a ballot, having a conversation with an eligible voter if you are ineligible yourself, researching a topic that's important to one's family, or something else.

Here are just some of the actions taken by Walker's high school students at the end of their "Why Vote?" learning unit:
- Provided babysitting services to give voters free time to cast ballots.
- Helped an eligible voter schedule a time and place to vote.
- Helped register new voters.
- Helped an eligible voter order a replacement ballot.
- Facilitated conversations with family and friends to help voters determine their values and choices.

As Walker said, "I felt overwhelmed and humbled. **I did not expect over ten percent of the students to convince new eligible voters to cast ballots one week before the election**." His students had become "voter facilitators."

In Georgia, Sims said, **"I instantly saw a change in people,** who took the mindset of, 'I need to find out who my legislator is so I can give them a call.'"

He added, **"People began to self-mobilize,** and I was able to just fade back. I'm really just presenting information, and people are deciding what they want to do with it."

One of the tutors in Literacy Works' network "helped start a conversation about voting that put the learner in the center," Ward said. "Afterwards, **the learner committed to voting and has since dropped off their mail-in ballot** with help from their son."

Conclusion

The six examples above — most from low-income communities — demonstrate how RQI's free, nonpartisan "Why Vote?" Tool can be deployed and adapted to start conversations about voting and engage more people to vote.

RQI's "Why Vote?" Tool fills a gap in the voter engagement landscape, focusing on helping people name for themselves the value of voting and the connections voting has to their lives. It builds a pathway of engagement, understanding, and action around voting. It leverages a vast and diverse network of underutilized public-facing organizations — many working in low-income communities — and serves as

a first step for people who may never have set foot in a voting booth to engage with get-out-the-vote and organizing efforts.

The "Why Vote?" Tool can become an essential resource for outreach, organizing, and voter education efforts — building people's motivation and determination to vote and increasing voter participation in all elections. The stakes could not be higher after the 2020 election cycle, with local, state, and national elections in 2021 and beyond shaping the future of our democracy.

Acknowledgements

For more information about the "Why Vote?" Initiative, or to collaborate with the Right Question Institute, please contact Chris Orchard at chris.orchard@rightquestion.org.

The "Why Vote?" Tool

EXAMPLES OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

☐ **HOUSING**
Section 8
Public Housing
Homeless Services

☐ **INCOME / SUPPORT**
Welfare
Food Stamps
Social Security / SSI
Earned Income Tax Credit

☐ **HEALTHCARE**
Medicaid
Medicare
Disability Services

☐ **SCHOOLS**
Free Lunch Program
Special Education

☐ **JOBS**
Job Training
Unemployment

☐ **COURTS**
Family
Housing
Small Claims

☐ **ADULT EDUCATION**
GED
Adult Diplomas

☐ **CHILDREN**
Head Start
WIC
Child Care Vouchers

WHICH 3 SERVICES ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?

☐ **NEIGHBORHOODS**
Street Lights
Parks
Bus / Subway

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."