

Finding a Way to Register New Voters

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When I first heard about our agency's involvement with a voter registration project, I confess my first thoughts were not all positive. I asked myself, "Is this something we should be doing? We're an educational organization, not a political organization." My negativity gradually faded as I began to fully understand the why and what of the process.

In our agency's first meeting to get the initiative started, we heard from a representative from Everybody VOTE, a non-partisan project organized to increase voter registration. This local organization was part of a larger national effort, the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Networks, to increase voter registration through non-profits in United States. The group estimates that there are 600,000 non-profits in the United States.

While we saw the potential impact, we were concerned about the legality of the project. Could our program get in trouble for organizing a voter registration drive? Luckily, the organizing group eased our fears by letting us know that not only *can* non-profit organizations register new voters, in most cases they *should* be encouraging involvement in the democratic process. The only caution is that non-profits cannot endorse or support a particular candidate or party; they must work in a non-partisan way.

We began to incorporate voter registration into our orientation and student intake process. In a six month period, we were able to register nearly 30



new voters. While 30 votes doesn't seem like much, if every non-profit registered 30 new voters, we would be looking at 18 million new vot-

ers — a margin that's larger than the differential of every presidential election in U.S. history!



A Non-Profit (501c3) can: YES

- Register people to vote
- Distribute non-partisan materials on candidates or ballot measures
- Sponsor non-partisan candidate forums or debates (you need to invite everyone who is running)
- Help new voters understand elections and the voting process
- Provide briefings to all candidates on the organization's issues
- Encourage and help people get to the polls on election day

A Non-Profit (501c3) cannot: NO

- Endorse candidates for office
- Contribute money to candidates
- Let candidates use office space, equipment, mailing lists, or other 501(c)(3) resources
- Rate candidates
- Publicize which candidates share the organization's view on contested issues

Source: <www.nonprofitvote.org>

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