



Strengthening Political Engagement Among Working-Class and Low-Income Communities

Daniel Laurison, Swarthmore College

Across the United States, the foundation of democracy is weakened by an enduring civic divide. Those with the fewest resources are the [least likely to participate in electoral politics](#). In 2024, [lower-income people of all races](#) voted at lower rates than they had in 2020. Both the [racial](#) and the [class](#) turnout gaps grew larger.

Working-class and low-income citizens are not abstaining from voting because they are apathetic or uninformed, but because they believe politics is not working for them. Increasing political participation among disengaged, disadvantaged people requires a sustained effort across multiple election cycles to close the distance between professional politics and everyday people.

The Political Disconnect Between Low-Income People and Politics

We interviewed 144 people, in all racial groups, who were not regular voters. The fundamental barriers to voting cited by our interviewees were their negative perceptions and experiences of politics. They believe that politics is by, for, and about people who are wealthier or more educated than themselves. They also believe that politics is corrupt and unable to create meaningful change, and that politicians are not interested in helping them or their communities. Many common voter mobilization strategies—such as registration drives, media messaging, and election-month canvasses—are unlikely to increase participation by the most disaffected because they do nothing to address these views.

Electoral campaigns often avoid contacting nonvoters due to resource and time constraints. Campaigns are designed to win a single election, not to build long-term political power. People who run campaigns are not evaluated on expanding democratic participation. Campaigns rely heavily on predictive models that work best with proven voters and tend to prefer targeting sporadic voters over trying to convert people who never vote. This creates a problem where campaigns under-invest in voter expansion, even though all future campaigns would benefit. Finally, electoral campaign volunteers, staff and candidates are economically and culturally distant from nonvoters.

Improving Political Participation by Connecting Politics to Communities

Increasing political participation among low-income people, therefore, requires long-term, coordinated investment focused on forging better connections between disadvantaged people, communities, and democratic processes. We recommend three primary ways to accomplish this:

Invest in Long-Term Connections with Communities. Most respondents said they rarely, if ever, hear from political or civic organizations outside election seasons. Short-term outreach creates skepticism, while

consistent presence builds trust. It takes months or years to build the trust necessary for people to take risks like speaking at public hearings, confronting elected officials, or mobilizing their neighbors. Year-round organizing builds trained leaders, established communication channels, detailed voter and community data, and long-term relationships.

- Invest in year-round community engagement, not just pre-election drives.
- Hold regular listening sessions, town halls, and neighborhood meetings that allow residents to share concerns before proposing solutions.
- Invest in coalition building with community organizations, labor unions, faith groups, and schools to create broader networks, reduce duplication of effort, and maintain visibility while reaching different community groups.

Trust grows when civic and political organizations are consistently present, responsive, and accountable, showing communities that their voices matter between elections, not only during them. Outreach should be reciprocal. Listen as much as inform, and remain focused on building relationships rather than one-time transactions.

Hire and Empower People Who Reflect Their Communities. The vast majority of people involved in US politics are [white, highly educated, and from well-off families](#).

Representation builds trust. Effective political engagement of nonvoters calls for staff, volunteers, and leadership to reflect the communities they seek to mobilize. This can make outreach more authentic and relatable while countering the widespread perception that politics is “for other people.”

- Recruit and pay local residents as canvassers, organizers, and outreach ambassadors.
- Offer leadership pathways, including stipends or fellowships for people from low-income and working-class backgrounds.
- Value lived experience over formal credentials when hiring.

When people see someone like themselves, they are more likely to trust, engage, and believe in the process.

Make Politics Relevant to Everyday Life. Many working-class and low-income people do not see how electoral politics affects their daily lives. In fact, policy change rarely happens because of a single election. It requires ongoing advocacy, relationship-building with decision-makers and community groups, and the ability to mobilize quickly when opportunities or threats emerge. Organizations doing year-round work can respond immediately to budget hearings, administrative rule changes, or local crises, while groups that only activate during elections miss most of the actual governing process. Community-based organizations should make civic participation relevant and concrete for the communities they aim to reach.

- Build campaigns around local issues such as wages, housing, healthcare, and transportation.
- Integrate civic engagement into existing services, whether that is discussing policy impacts during food distribution, including know-your-rights information in ESL classes, or connecting advocacy around air quality at a health clinic. Use storytelling, visuals, and trusted community messengers to show how political decisions shape daily life.
- Highlight how past policies or elections have produced visible benefits, such as new schools, transit routes, or social programs.

When mobilization speaks directly to people's concerns and lived experiences, voting shifts from a chore to an act of agency and self-interest, offering both a sense of meaning and value in their time.

It is Possible to Have a Democracy That Includes Everyone

Lower rates of voting among working-class and low-income people are neither natural nor immutable. People will vote if they believe that politics can meaningfully improve their lives, if they see themselves reflected in politics, campaigns, candidates, and government, and if they feel genuinely listened to and cared about by those who have, or seek, political power.

Read more in Daniel Laurison et al. “The Political Disconnect: Working-Class And Low-Income People On What Politics Means To Them And How They Might Be Mobilized” (2026).