

Naturalization Ceremony Voter Registration Toolkit

Citizenship has long been one of the most important privileges the United States can bestow. Each year, hundreds of thousands of immigrants complete the naturalization application process and take part in swearing-in ceremonies—also known as naturalization ceremonies—in cities and counties across the country. According to our partners at Demos, there were 38 million immigrants living in the United States as of 2008, of which 43 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens. **Nearly one out of every four people in the United States in 2008 was either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant.**¹

The League's mission rests on the premise that civic participation is central to improve our systems of government and shape the public policies that affect our lives. To reach this goal, we believe it is critical to bring voter registration opportunities to all eligible citizens.

Many Leagues have worked for years to offer voter registration at naturalization ceremonies, with some Leagues reporting *tens of thousands* of new citizens registered as a result of their volunteers' diligent work. **As of spring 2016, the national League is aware of nearly 100 local and state Leagues that are working to engage new citizens in voting.**



The League of Women Voters Education Fund is initiating efforts to help Leagues become more active in promoting voter registration among new U.S. citizens, especially at naturalization ceremonies. We have created this toolkit to provide relevant information and suggestions to assist those Leagues interested in conducting effective and efficient voter registration at naturalization ceremonies. Thanks to the many League leaders who shared knowledge, resources and materials for the creation of and subsequent updates to this toolkit.

In the following pages you will find:

- Naturalization ceremony voter registration organizing guide
- Template media advisory
- League naturalization ceremony success stories

We welcome your feedback and additions to this guide! Please share your feedback with and/or direct questions to LWVUS Senior Elections Manager Maggie Bush (mbush@lww.org).

¹ <http://www.scribd.com/DemosIdeasAction/d/34544790-A-Citizen-from-Day-One-A-Proposal-to-Provide-Voter-Registration-Services-at-Naturalization-Ceremonies>

Naturalization Ceremony Voter Registration Organizing Guide

Governed by one of two government entities, either the federal courts or USCIS, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (an arm of the Dept. of Homeland Security), naturalization ceremonies provide a key opportunity for Leagues to engage new voters and start them on the path to lifelong interest and involvement in our democracy. This document is intended to help your League plan effective voter registration activities at naturalization ceremonies. For inspiration, read success stories from other local Leagues on the following pages.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Effective Naturalization Ceremony Registration

- **Find out** how naturalization ceremonies are administered in your community; usually either by a federal court or a USCIS field office. Contact information for USCIS offices can be found here: https://egov.uscis.gov/crisgwi/go?action=offices.type&OfficeLocator.office_type=LO and information about federal courts can be found here: http://www.uscourts.gov/court_locator.aspx.
- **Make the ask!** Reach out to either the court or the USCIS field office and ask whether voter registration is currently part of their naturalization ceremony process. Offer the League's services for any upcoming ceremonies. If reaching out to USCIS, you may cite this official 2011 [guidance instructing field offices to incorporate voter registration](#), which allows nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations like the League to conduct voter registration.

In your pitch:

- *Tout the League's track record in your community*
- *Briefly share any details of past work with new citizens*
- *Share that, nationwide, nearly 100 League affiliates are working to engage new citizens*
- *Focus on the benefit you can bring to the new voters.*
- *Make clear that the League will work within the confines of the ceremony set-up and that you will handle the logistical details of bringing and passing out voter registration cards, providing additional nonpartisan election information, and answering registrants' questions. In other words, make it as simple as possible for the officials to say "yes" to your request! You can always work to improve the set-up after you've established a strong relationship.*
- *Offer to provide a guest speaker to talk about the importance of voting, greet new citizens while they wait in line, bring coffee/cookies, or otherwise help make the event a success.*

- **Get to “yes.”** Courts and government offices are busy, so expect that you may need to make several calls.
 - Follow up regularly until you receive a response. If needed, try someone else on the court or field office staff.
 - Think about prominent community members you or your League colleagues may call upon to reiterate the request on your behalf.
 - Consider working with an allied organization, especially group(s) serving the local immigrant community.
- **Plan for the big day.** Once you’ve secured a date for conducting registration at an upcoming ceremony, consider these steps to ensure you help the most new citizens register at the ceremony². Make sure to obtain prior permission from your contact at the court/USCIS/venue as needed.
 - Find out how many new citizens are expected to attend.
 - Ask if you can integrate the idea of voting and registration into the ceremony itself. For example, the League could briefly address the crowd to talk about the importance of voting, or even provide brief basic instructions for filling out the registration form. If that is not possible, might the person administering the ceremony make an announcement that the League is available to assist in voter registration after the ceremony?
 - If allowed by the officials in your area, plan to distribute the registration forms to new citizens *before* the ceremony and accept them upon completion of the oath and distribution of naturalization certificates. **Handing out the forms in advance is the single best way to ensure the most new citizens complete the registration process at the event.** If doing this, instruct attendees not to sign the registration form until AFTER they have taken the oath of citizenship.
 - If possible, **be sure to collect all completed registration forms from new citizens** before they depart. This will ensure a much higher completion rate than, for example, placing the burden on the new voters to mail in or hand deliver their own completed forms.
 - If you receive push-back on these suggestions from immigration officials, remind them: you are simply seeking to empower the most new citizens as voters. **This is about giving *the voters* the best opportunity to participate in democracy.**

² Adapted from “A Citizen from Day One”, Demos, 2010. <http://www.demos.org/publication/citizen-day-one-proposal-provide-voter-registration-services-naturalization-ceremonies> , as well as existing local League training procedures.

- **Prepare your team.** Take time to train your team and handle logistics. At least a few weeks before the ceremony:
 - Assess capacity. Do you have enough volunteers to cover the event? If not, who might you reach out to? Which community partners could help you reach your goal?
 - Assign day-of responsibilities.
 - Who is the chief point of contact with the court or field office?
 - Does your state have online voter registration? Can it be utilized effectively at the ceremonies ([Read LWVEF's guidance on this here](#))?
 - Who will bring the registration forms and pens?
 - Are clipboards needed?
 - Who will bring other League handouts and signs/banners?
 - How will you follow up with the new voters to ensure they have the information they need to cast their first vote? Consider using sign-up sheets, pledge cards (sample below), or creating a database of registrants' contact information, as applicable by state law.

Sample Pledge Card:

I am committing to vote this Election Day so I can stand up for what matters most to me, my family and my community.

I, _____ pledge to vote.

Please send me reminders about upcoming elections:

Email: _____

Cell: _____

VOTE411.org
ELECTION INFORMATION YOU NEED

LWV
LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

For more ideas, review LWVEF's handy registration drive checklist [here](#).

- **Train your team.** Before your first ceremony, gather your team to cover the following:
 - Practice your pitch! What will you say to encourage new citizens to register to vote? **Remind your volunteers to stand up, smile, and step out from behind the voter registration table to engage the new citizens and their families.** Small things make a huge difference!
 - Practice using simple, motivational language to talk about the personal ways voting helps each of us affect the issues facing our communities.
 - Instruct volunteers to stand by to assist individuals in filling out the forms and checking them over for completion.

- Make sure all volunteers know where to “drop” completed forms. Post-ceremony moments are hectic. Designate a secure, out of the way and central location for collecting **all completed registration forms**.
- **Know the rules- and make sure your team does, too.**
 - Has the voter registration form changed since you last held a drive? Are your volunteers clear on the **required fields** on the form?
 - Practice walking registrants through filling out registration form, with a focus on the required and most often missed fields. Find state-by-state rules at <http://fairelectionsnetwork.com/state-guides/>.
 - How about ID requirements? If your state has a voter photo ID requirement, do you know what ID voters will need? Can you direct new citizens where to go to find out what ID they may need to obtain in order to vote? (Hint: try www.VOTE411.org)
 - Special note for AL, AZ, GA and KS (the states with proof-of-citizenship requirements as of May 2016): How does the proof-of-citizenship requirement need to be incorporated into your activity? Will the new citizens’ naturalization numbers be enough? Do you need to submit a copy of their citizenship certificate? If so, will a photocopier be available on site? *If you have questions, check with your state League or LWVEF for help.*
- **Promote the event!**
 - Customize the template news advisory in this toolkit to alert local media outlets about your work.
 - Before publicizing any photo-op, be sure to confirm that media will be allowed into the courthouse/ceremony facility. If not, set up a time to conduct a follow-up interview instead.
 - **Take photos** so that you’ll have powerful imagery to share on your League’s social media pages and website!
- **At the Event:**
 - Use pre-ceremony waiting time to talk with participants about voting and introduce them to the League. Remember, this is a big day for them! Keep your conversations brief and friendly.
 - As the event comes to a close, position volunteers to distribute forms as quickly as possible once the ceremony ends (hopefully before people have even left their seats) and **collect completed forms at all exits**.
 - Ask volunteers to take a moment to check the forms as attendees turn them in to ensure all required fields have been completed, and provide a receipt if required in your state.
- **Send a reminder to volunteers.** A few days before the ceremony, send a reminder to all League volunteers, including:
 - Cell phone/contact information for you (or the event organizer) and all volunteers.

- The place, time and schedule for the ceremony, as well as any relevant parking and/or building entry instructions.
 - Dress code - most likely, business attire and LWV pin. Provide name tags for volunteers on-site.
 - Explain the tasks that they will be doing (Welcome all of the new citizens, provide them with voter information, give them the voter registration paperwork, etc.).
 - Review voter registration requirements for your state.
 - Encourage volunteers to direct any non-registration or voting questions to the appropriate USCIS/court official.
- **Follow up!** After your event:
 - Follow up with the media to share your story and encourage them to cover the issue and profile a new citizen.
 - Share photos and inspiring details on your League's social media pages and website. What was the result of your work? Why should volunteers get involved?
 - Make a record. How many attendees were there? How many voters did you help register? Were the new citizens inspired to register and vote this year? Keeping track of this information can help you evaluate your work and quantify your success for sharing with the media, partners, and even potential funders.
 - Send thank you notes to your key contacts and ask when the next ceremony is scheduled. As you build a relationship with them, see if you can make improvements that both streamline things at the event and help improve your overall registration rate.
 - If you collected contact information from participants, follow up to remind them about upcoming election dates and share information about the League's work in the community. Download helpful follow-up sample communications for new registrants here: <http://forum.lwv.org/member-resources/article/sample-get-out-vote-email-and-phone-scripts>.
 - Debrief with your team. What went well? What can you improve for next time?
 - Publicly thank your volunteers for their hard work!

Best of luck with your voter registration program! For additional voter registration resources, please visit the “voters service” area of the Members section of the LWVUS website at <http://forum.lwv.org/>



MEDIA ADVISORY

**CONTACT: [NAME]
[YOUR PHONE, EMAIL]**

[DATE]

PHOTO OP: New Citizens Register to Vote for First Time

League of Women Voters Volunteers to Register Newly Naturalized Citizens

[Date, Time, and Location]

[Town, Date]- League of Women Voters of [Town/County] is scheduled to attend the [Town] Naturalization Ceremony on [Date], at [Location] in order to help newly sworn-in citizens register to vote.

Approximately [Number] individuals are expected to take the official oath of citizenship, administered by [The Honorable First/Last Name or USCIS Administrator name, TITLE] for [District, State]. [If Applicable: Media is invited to attend at X Time, Location].

Each new citizen is immediately eligible to register to vote. The League of Women Voters will be on site to assist with voter registration. League volunteers will be available to share details about the organization's upcoming plans to engage new and first-time voters in [Town].

The League of Women Voters of [Town/County] has a long tradition of engaging new voters and assisting them in voter registration. Since [DATE], the League has helped more than XXXX new citizens become voters.

If you have any questions, please contact the LWV of [Town/County] at [PHONE, EMAIL].

The League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

League Success Stories: Naturalization Ceremony Voter Registration

The League of Women Voters of Georgia:

In 2013 the League of Women Voters of Georgia launched a New Americans Project to register new citizens at Atlanta-area naturalization ceremonies. As of late 2015, the League had attended hundreds of ceremonies and helped nearly 10,000 new citizens register to vote, with success rates of more than 50 percent! The League is continually making adjustments to improve its registration rate at the ceremonies, and is thrilled to be forging a long term relationship with Georgia's newest voters.



Leagues of Suffolk County, New York:

League volunteers work in partnership across the greater Long Island, NY area to cover volunteer stations at twice-weekly naturalization ceremonies for new citizens. Overall, League volunteers have helped thousands of new citizens register to vote. Following each ceremony, the League works with community partner groups to coordinate follow-up communications with new citizens to ensure they have critical information about the voting process in their state.

League of Women Voters of Houston, Texas:

The LWV of Houston Area organizes volunteer teams to attend about 11 naturalization ceremonies each year in order to provide new citizens with the opportunity to register for voting. As of 2012, then- president of the LWV of Houston, Linda Cohn, reported that within the prior four years, the League had helped more than 90,000 new Harris County citizens complete registration forms (photo courtesy of the LWV of the Houston Area).



League of Women Voters of Charleston, South Carolina:

The LWV of Charleston has been conducting voter registration and education for new citizens at naturalization ceremonies at since 2003, including at regular courthouse ceremonies almost every week throughout the year. Increasingly, the Charleston League volunteers encourage new citizens to register to vote at home using the state's new online registration system.