Elections 2026: What Pennsylvania Nonprofits Need to Know

Questions about nonpartisan civic engagement or PANO's election resources? Email Anna Keilly, PANO's Senior Manager of Policy & Advocacy.

New Guide and Webinar Recording: Preparing for the 2026 Election Season

New resource: The National Council of Nonprofits (NCN) and Nonprofit VOTE have released the 2026 Voter Engagement Guide, a roadmap for nonpartisan civic engagement. This year's edition adds expanded guidance on drafting candidate questionnaires, a new "Why Vote?" tool, and a resource to inform post-election advocacy.

Download the 2026 Voter Engagement Guide

Missed the webinar?
NCN and Nonprofit VOTE hosted a free public webinar on October 1 showing how to put the new guide into practice. Watch the recording and download the slides (PDF).

Why it matters: Nonprofits are trusted voices in their communities, which makes them strong partners in helping people participate in democracy. Many Pennsylvania nonprofits are fielding new questions about how this election will unfold and what role they can play. The session addresses both.

Talking About the Election With Confidence

The big picture: Nonprofits are often the messengers communities trust most on voting. Warnings about threats to the election can discourage turnout if they are not paired with clear, confidence-building information about how to vote. These resources can help your organization strike that balance.

- **Research-tested messaging:** ASO Communications' Hands Off Our Vote Messaging Guide and accompanying research presentation offer language for talking about protecting the vote without triggering fear.
- **Plan for disruptions:** The Freedom Trainers Election Defense Scenario Booklet walks teams through how to respond to possible Election Day scenarios.
- **Stay current:** States United Democracy Center's 2026 Midterm Elections Resource Hub tracks developments and resources through November.

A reminder: When sharing any outside materials, 501(c)(3)s should keep their own communications strictly nonpartisan: focused on how, when, and where to vote, never on candidates or parties.

Key Pennsylvania Election Dates

The bottom line: The deadlines to register to vote (October 19) and to apply for a mail ballot (October 27) have passed. Voters who already have a mail ballot must make sure it reaches their county election office by 8 PM on Election Day, November 3; a postmark does not count. Voters facing a last-minute emergency, such as a sudden illness, disability, or unexpected absence, can still request an emergency absentee ballot until 8 PM on Election Day.

Date	Deadline	Details
Oct 27, 2026	Mail ballot application deadline (passed)	This deadline has passed. Voters with a last-minute emergency can apply for an emergency absentee ballot until 8 PM on Election Day.
Nov 3, 2026	Election Day	Polls open 7 AM to 8 PM. Completed mail ballots must be received by the county by 8 PM.

Voting tips to share with your community:

- **Check registration status** at pa.gov and find your polling place. The registration deadline has passed, and Pennsylvania has no Election Day registration.
- **Sign and date the outer return envelope** with the current date, not a birth date. Whether counties may count ballots with a missing or wrong date is still being decided in the courts, so state officials tell every voter to include it.
- **Return mail ballots early,** by mail, drop box, or in person at the county election office. Each voter may hand-deliver only their own ballot, and ballots returned to a different county will not be counted.
- **Changed your mind?** Voters who received a mail ballot but did not return it can bring it to their polling place to be voided and vote in person. Those who do not have it can vote by provisional ballot.
- **Facing an emergency?** Voters with a sudden illness, disability, or unexpected absence can request an emergency absentee ballot from their county election office. The application and completed ballot must be received by 8 PM on Election Day.

Ready-to-share materials: Democracy 2025's Voting Toolkit explains how individuals can take part in and help protect elections. A co-brandable PDF version has space to add your logo before sharing with clients, members, and volunteers. More materials are on Democracy 2025's Election Hub.

Sources: PA Department of State, Oct. 20 release, PA emergency absentee ballots, PA on-demand mail ballot voting, Spotlight PA mail ballot guide, Spotlight PA / Votebeat on ballot dating

What's on the Ballot in Pennsylvania

The big picture: Pennsylvania voters will choose a governor and lieutenant governor, all 17 U.S. House members, all 203 state House seats, and the 25 state Senate seats in even-numbered districts. Control of both chambers of the General Assembly is considered competitive: Democrats hold the state House 103-100, and Republicans hold the Senate 27-23.

Governor: Gov. Josh Shapiro (D) faces State Treasurer Stacy Garrity (R). The next governor will shape the next several state budgets, including how revenue gaps are closed and how human services are funded.

Competitive U.S. House races (per primary results in May):

- **PA-1 (Bucks County):** Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R) vs. Bucks County Commissioner Bob Harvie (D)
- **PA-7 (Lehigh Valley):** Rep. Ryan Mackenzie (R) vs. Bob Brooks (D), rated toss-up
- **PA-8 (Northeastern PA / Scranton and Wilkes-Barre):** Rep. Rob Bresnahan (R) vs. Scranton Mayor Paige Cognetti (D), rated toss-up

- **PA-10 (South Central PA / Harrisburg):** Rep. Scott Perry (R) vs. Janelle Stelson (D), rated toss-up

State Senate races to watch: Republicans hold the Senate 27-23, so a net shift of three seats would change control. These are the most competitive seats:

- **SD-6 (Bucks County):** Sen. Frank Farry (R) vs. Eileen Hartnett Albillar (D)
- **SD-16 (Bucks and Lehigh counties):** Sen. Jarrett Coleman (R) vs. Mark Pinsley (D)
- **SD-24 (Montgomery and Berks counties):** Sen. Tracy Pennycuick (R) vs. Chris Thomas (D) and Michael Schonewolf (Green)
- **SD-36 (Lancaster County):** Sen. James Malone (D) vs. Tom Jones (R)
- **SD-40 (Lackawanna, Monroe, and Wayne counties):** Sen. Rosemary Brown (R) vs. Brian Wrightson (D)
- **SD-46 (Southwestern PA, south of Pittsburgh):** Sen. Camera Bartolotta (R) vs. independent Jodi Borello. No Democrat is on the ballot, and the only public poll shows the race tied.

State House: All 203 seats are on the ballot. With a 103-100 split, a net shift of two seats would change control. Spotlight PA's legislative races to watch covers the most competitive districts.

Why it matters for nonprofits: Several incumbents nonprofits have worked with lost their primaries, and new members elected in November will arrive in January without established ties to the sector. The organizations that introduce themselves to all candidates now, regardless of party, will be better positioned for the 2027 session and the next budget cycle. Candidate forums and nonpartisan candidate questionnaires are two permissible ways to do that (see the next section).

Sources: Spotlight PA legislative races to watch, PoliticsPA state Senate races, Spotlight PA on the 46th District, WVIA on PA-8

Rules of the Road: Nonpartisan Civic Engagement for 501(c)(3)s

The bottom line: The Johnson Amendment remains in effect. 501(c)(3) nonprofits can and should help people vote, but cannot support or oppose any candidate or party.

Nonprofits CAN	Nonprofits CANNOT
Register voters and remind people of deadlines	Endorse or oppose a candidate or party
Share how, when, and where to vote	Donate money or staff time to a campaign
Host candidate forums that invite all qualified candidates	Rate or rank candidates, or signal a preferred candidate
Publish nonpartisan candidate questionnaires covering all candidates	Use newsletters, email, or social media to favor a candidate
Take positions on ballot questions and legislation	Target voter outreach based on expected party preference
Recruit poll workers and nonpartisan election volunteers	Let staff campaign on the organization's time or resources

For a full walkthrough, including new guidance on drafting nonpartisan candidate questionnaires, see NCN and Nonprofit VOTE's 2026 Voter Engagement Guide.

Where things stand: A federal court in Texas dismissed a challenge to the Johnson Amendment this spring, along with a proposed IRS settlement. That case, *National Religious Broadcasters v. Bessent*, is now before the Fifth Circuit, where the Justice Department filed a brief on September 21 siding with the churches. Treasury and the IRS have said they will issue new guidance on how the amendment applies to religious organizations. PANO opposes the Free Speech Fairness Act (H.R. 2501 / S. 1205), which would allow charitable nonprofits and houses of worship to make partisan campaign statements. Read PANO's latest update.

Why it matters now: With the IRS Whistleblower Alert and the House Oversight Task Force both focused on nonprofits, clear documentation of nonpartisan practices is the best protection. Apply outreach consistently across communities, keep records of who was invited to forums, and remind staff that personal political activity must happen on their own time and without organizational resources.

The Policy Landscape This Fall

1. Supreme Court Blocks Federal Mail Voting Restrictions

What happened: On September 14, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked a U.S. Postal Service rule, stemming from a March executive order, that would have limited mail ballot delivery before the November election. Justices Thomas and Alito dissented. Secretary of the Commonwealth Al Schmidt said mail voting in Pennsylvania will proceed as usual this fall.

Why it matters: Nearly two million Pennsylvanians voted by mail in 2024. Nonprofits can tell the people they serve, with confidence, that mail voting is available and unchanged for this election.

2. Federal Enforcement on Noncitizen Voting Intensifies

What happened: In late September, the U.S. Department of Justice charged four more Pennsylvania residents with crimes related to noncitizen registration or voting, after charging three others on September 4. DOJ says it has charged 70 people nationwide this year. The Department of Homeland Security claims 14,576 potential noncitizens are on Pennsylvania's voter rolls and says it will share its list with the state. The Pennsylvania Department of State says it will use only "credible" information to maintain the rolls and that eligible citizens will not be disenfranchised.

Why it matters: Nonprofits registering voters, especially in immigrant communities, should confirm staff and volunteers explain eligibility clearly: only U.S. citizens may register and vote. Accurate guidance protects the people you serve. Also expect this issue to fuel fear and confusion among eligible naturalized citizens, and be ready to reassure them with facts from official sources.

3. Proposed 2030 Census Changes: Comments Due November 2

What happened: The Census Bureau published a proposed rule on September 10 that would count only U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents for apportionment. Other lawfully present residents, such as international students and H-1B visa holders, would be excluded, and race and ethnicity questions would be removed. Public comments are due Nov 2, 2026, after an extension.

Why it matters: Census data drives funding formulas and district lines for a decade. Comments that describe how your organization uses census data, such as for grant applications, needs assessments, or service planning, carry the most weight. Submit a public comment, sign NCN's national letter, or see PANO's census update for talking points and a comment template.

Sources: Pennsylvania Capital-Star on the Supreme Court ruling, Votebeat / Capital-Star on DOJ charges, Votebeat / Capital-Star on the DHS list, Baptist News Global on the Johnson Amendment appeal, PANO on the 2030 Census

What Nonprofits Can Do NOW

☐ **Download the 2026 Voter Engagement Guide** and share its new "Why Vote?" tool with your community.

☐ **Watch the October 1 webinar recording** from NCN and Nonprofit VOTE: watch here.

☐ **Push the Election Day return deadline** to clients, staff, and volunteers through newsletters, front desks, and social media: mail ballots must reach the county by 8 PM on November 3, and emergency absentee ballots are available for last-minute emergencies. The co-brandable Voting Toolkit makes this easy.

☐ **Give staff time to vote.** Adapt the NC Center for Nonprofits' sample paid time-off policy for Election Day.

☐ **Comment on the proposed 2030 Census changes** by November 2, describing how your organization uses census data: submit a comment.

☐ **Review your nonpartisan policies** with staff and board, and document how outreach is applied consistently.

☐ **Invite all candidates** in your district to visit your programs or join a forum, and keep records of every invitation.

☐ **Recruit poll workers** from your network; Pennsylvania needs about 45,000 at every election, and the work is paid. Sign up through the Department of State.

☐ **Prepare your messaging** using the Hands Off Our Vote Messaging Guide, so warnings about election threats come paired with clear instructions on how to vote.

☐ **Connect with other organizations** doing this work by joining the Democracy 2025 coalition.

☐ **Point people to official sources** for voting information and results: pa.gov and their county election office.