

**From Julie Sandorf, President of the Revson Foundation
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The ‘Blue State’ Paradox—making democracy work in our own back yard.

200,000 voters illegally removed from voter rolls. 20% of absentee ballots invalidated based on ‘technicalities’. 100,000 faulty absentee ballots mailed to voters during a pandemic. Voter turnout for state and municipal elections among the lowest in the country, with only one in four registered voters exercising their right to vote and less than 14% of voters under 30 voting. Extreme racial, economic, and geographic disparities in voter participation that distort representation and exacerbate inequities.

A rundown of notorious tactics and the impact of voter suppression among the ‘Red State’ South? No, this is the state of affairs in New York City—among the most progressive cities in one of the ‘bluest’ of states.

MIT’s Elections Performance Index ranks New York 49th among U.S. states in voter turnout and electoral administration. The Brennan Center for Justice has called New York’s voting system the worst in the country, noting it was 41st in voter turnout during the 2016 presidential election and close to the bottom in the 2018 cycle. In 2017, only 9% of New Yorkers chose New York City’s Mayor. The abysmally low 6% and 12 voter turnout for the March 2021 special city council races in the Bronx signifies all too clearly the steady erosion of NYC’s civic health and its desperate need for resuscitation.

The stakes could not be higher or the challenges more daunting. New York City’s 2021 municipal elections will be the most consequential in a generation. These elections, including for Mayor, Comptroller, Public Advocate, two District Attorneys, all five Borough Presidents, and 35 out of 51 City Council seats, represents the largest turnover in city government in decades. Over 400 candidates are vying for office, presenting a daunting challenge for candidates and voters alike. Voters will use ranked choice voting for the first time—the largest jurisdiction in the U.S. to do so. At

the same time, the pandemic has significantly altered voting practices and methods of engaging voters.

Revson's founding president, Eli Evans, wrote in his 1998 reflections on the Foundation's first 20 years:

Making the promise of democracy a reality depends on the ability of ordinary citizens to understand and be involved in the political system. The fundamental power of citizens in a democracy rests in the right to vote—a right too many Americans fail to exercise as a result of disinterest or inadequate information.

Eli's words and Revson's early investments in national get-out-the-vote campaigns, voter education and engagement initiatives are a poignant reminder that civic health and democratic practice is taken for granted at our own peril. Democracy requires constant nurturing and vigilance to flourish—including and particularly in our own backyard.

A review of national efforts, research and funder collaboratives across the country has informed the direction and principles of our investments to help restore New York's civic health. We learned that:

- Active civic engagement, including voting, contributes to the health and economic vitality of communities and those communities who vote get more attention from candidates and elected officials and greater influence before and after Election Day.
- Trusted nonprofits who are already connected to residents and neighborhood issues can reach people who have not voted in the past and voters who are typically overlooked in the democratic process because they have less frequent contact from political campaigns or third-party civic engagement efforts. Voter engagement works best when it is personal and relational and integrated with community priorities—the more personal a 'get out the vote' interaction is, the more it raises a person's chance of voting. Studies have

also shown that strategies connecting voting with issues and positive change of import to the community increases turnout.

- According to the New York City Campaign Finance Board, New Yorkers who do not vote feel they do not have enough information about candidates, the races, the offices on the ballot, and how these offices impact their lives. Respondents wanted information tailored to their needs and neighborhoods and connected to the issues they care most about.
- Low voter turnout and structural barriers to voting will not be solved by focusing only on election cycles. It is critical to make long term investments in strengthening community-trusted institutions and our civic engagement infrastructure to integrate voter education and outreach into their existing work, as well as in policy and advocacy work to ensure that election systems are fair and access to voting made as barrier free as possible.

Drawing on the expertise, experiences and best practices across the nation, as well as policy experts working in election reform in New York, the Foundation is investing in the following areas:

1. Supporting nonpartisan efforts at the city, borough and neighborhood level that will increase voter turnout and help ensure the fair and equitable participation of New Yorkers in setting the city's direction.
2. Supporting research, advocacy and technical assistance that uncovers more pathways to voter access, fair and accurate representation, and civic engagement.
3. Encouraging competence, innovation and accountability in our election infrastructure to significantly ease access to voting.
4. Supporting policy research and local journalism that keeps New Yorkers informed and government accountable to the people.

Guided by this framework, the Foundation has made the following investments:

I. Nonpartisan efforts to increase voter turnout

GoVoteNYC: In December 2020, the Foundation convened a group of 20 NY based funders to discuss ways to increase voter turnout in local elections and to support efforts to foster a ‘voter friendly’ election system where barriers to voting are minimized and election administration is competent and fair. Since then, Revson joined with 10 New York based foundations and individual philanthropists to establish GoVoteNYC, a donor collaborative housed at the New York Community Trust. Launched in February with initial funding commitments totaling \$1.9 million, first round funding will support:

- Coalitions of community organizations with a history of successfully engaging, organizing, and mobilizing community residents to further integrate voter education and engagement into their work. GoVoteNYC will also support trusted city-wide organizations who reach a broad diversity of New Yorkers across multiple neighborhoods and who are willing and able to integrate voter education and mobilization into existing programs.
- Civic engagement experts, public relations and communications leaders, designers and technology developers who are developing and/or implementing widescale digital and analog voter education and outreach, and have the willingness and ability to align this work with ‘on the ground’ education and mobilization efforts.

Additionally, the Revson Foundation is supporting 15 settlement houses under the United Neighborhood House’s umbrella to focus on increased voter participation in low turnout communities, and the Children’s Aid Society’s initiative to support young peoples’ civic engagement in the South Bronx.

II. Research, advocacy, and technical assistance to support voter education and strengthen community capacity

In addition to our involvement in GoVoteNYC, Revson is independently supporting Common Cause in its work to inform and educate voters about Ranked Choice Voting, and the NY Civic Engagement Table and Community Votes in their efforts to

strengthen the capacity of nonprofits to incorporate and measure the impact of voter engagement in their communities.

III. Encouraging competence, innovation and accountability in election systems and infrastructure

Efforts to increase voter participation will not succeed without an equally intensive push to remove barriers to voting, which requires reform of the Board of Elections and enactment of state laws that expand access to voting. The Brennan Center for Justice has played a key role as expert advisors on legal and regulatory matters concerning election reform in New York, including the enactment of early voting, voter registration portability, pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds, and automatic voter registration. Continued efforts include policy research and advocacy to pass legislation allowing for no-excuse mail voting and same day registration. Additionally, Revson's support of the Brennan Center extends to NYC Board of Education reform, including a far-reaching analysis of best practices in the administration of elections in states and municipalities across the country.

IV. Supporting local public affairs journalism and policy research that keeps New Yorkers informed and government accountable

As ProPublica's Dick Tofel wisely noted, "It is a critical job of journalism to present citizens with information they need to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities, including the responsibility to vote." Over the past 12 years, the Revson Foundation has supported a wide range of organizations and initiatives to strengthen public service journalism in New York. During the past year, investments have focused specifically on election coverage and civic engagement initiatives that connect voters with the information they need to make informed choices.

The Foundation is supporting THE CITY to expand election coverage beyond the 'horserace', with deeper dives into candidates' records, the role and proliferation of 'independent expenditures' and the introduction of 'Meet the Mayor', an interactive tool which matches one's own position on key issues with those of the candidates—a

policy wonk's version of Match.com meets BuzzFeed quiz. THE CITY also established the 'Civic Newsroom', which offers explainers on everything from Ranked Choice Voting to the roles and responsibilities of every elected office, to a rundown of the hundreds of candidates for city council. Civic Newsroom's explainers draw on questions about the elections from its readers both online and in community meetings they convene across the city.

We are also funding the Newmark Journalism School's Center for Community Media in an unprecedented initiative, 'The City Elections Project', which provides 30 reporting fellowships geared toward helping community media outlets increase and deepen coverage in communities where voter turnout has been low. The Project is also connecting community media to local, borough-wide and city-wide campaigns through comprehensive online and interactive directories.

In addition, the Foundation is supporting the Brooklyn Movement Center's Powerline and The Forward for election reporting, and ProjectNYC2025 at the NYU/Wagner School, which brings together experts from academia, government, and the nonprofit and public sectors to prepare policy proposals on 15-20 topic areas salient to the election.

According to the NYC Board of Election, 81% of registered voters voted in the 1969 Mayoral Race; in 2017, only 26% of registered voters turned out to cast their ballots. We want and need elected officials who reflect and respond to the diverse interests and priorities of residents, and voting is the surest way to ensure that all voices are heard. It is incumbent upon NY's civic leadership, business community, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic sector and policy advocates to put voter engagement and the promotion of competence and accountability in our elections system front and center—the future of our city depends upon it.