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“When Philly Votes, It Can Control Its Own Fate”: How Philadelphia Can Reclaim Its Political Power



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While [deep canvassing](#) ahead of the last presidential election, one moment stayed with Adam Barbanel-Fried. At one home, an African American woman stepped outside and asked, “You want a story about voting?” She then told him how her grandparents, year after year in Texas, would line up to vote, only to be turned away each time. For her, voting was a right not to be taken

for granted. Like many Black Americans who have lived through the civil rights movement and continue to fight for voting rights, she never misses an election.

Yet, despite powerful personal convictions like hers, voter turnout in Philadelphia remains stubbornly low. In this year's primary election, just 16.61% of the city's 1,062,864 registered voters cast a ballot, down from around 21% in the 2021 primary cycle, the last comparable election when the district attorney was also on the ballot.

In a city where democratic participation is lagging, there are also efforts showing promise. This story explores what's working, and what these initiatives reveal about the city's complex voting landscape.

How national elections disrupt local civic culture

To understand Philadelphia's voting landscape, it's essential to place it within the broader national context. Pennsylvania is consistently recognized as a pivotal swing state in presidential elections, and Philadelphia, its largest city with a strong record of supporting Democratic candidates, plays a significant role in shaping statewide outcomes and, by extension, the national electoral map.

The intense spotlight on Philadelphia during presidential elections often brings a flood of national organizations and campaigns to the city. But this attention doesn't always translate into long-term civic empowerment.

"National organizations come in during these big elections and then leave, creating a democratic culture that doesn't foster engagement year-round," says Genevieve Greene, Communications Director at the [Committee of Seventy](#), a nonpartisan civic leadership organization that promotes citizen engagement and public policy reform across Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. While the city receives high visibility during key races, this intermittent focus can disrupt deeper civic education and awareness, especially at the local level. "A lot of people don't even know that we have elections at least twice a year, every year," Greene adds.

To counter this pattern, organizations and civic leaders are working to build more consistent, year-round engagement. They've found that many

Philadelphians feel disconnected from the political process, seeing little relevance between elections and their day-to-day lives. The key, advocates say, is creating opportunities for connection, trust, and meaningful participation beyond high-profile election cycles.

Information, a missing link to participation

The gaps in civic engagement go far beyond not knowing when elections take place. In Philadelphia, many residents lack a clear understanding of how the democratic system works, what offices are on the ballot, and how to advocate for local issues. Maurice Sampson II and Michael Kleiner, elected Democratic committee persons in the 22nd Ward, 6th Division of Mt. Airy, see it as part of their role to help demystify the process for their neighbors.

"We need to make sure people understand who the candidates are and what the issues are," says Sampson. To do that, they rely heavily on face-to-face outreach. Canvassing is a cornerstone of their work, but they also distribute a hyperlocal newsletter curated by Kleiner, organize block-specific email listservs, and, most importantly, host and attend block parties. "Most of our work is done in a social environment. We love block parties. That's where the talking happens," Sampson adds.

The 22nd Ward consistently ranks amongst the highest in voter turnout in the city. In the most recent general election, it saw a turnout of 77.38%—12.28 percentage points higher than the citywide average. During the 2025 primary elections, it had the second-highest turnout among all wards, with 30.74% of registered voters casting a ballot. While 30% may still seem low, it more than doubles the turnout in nearly half of the city's wards, many of which failed to surpass 15%.

Their efforts aim to make a complicated system more accessible and to help people see government as something they are part of, not something distant or impenetrable. "We work to really understand how the system works, how you can vote, how and when the system changes, that's a job for committee people as well," says Kleiner. One success story involved neighborhood organizing to get speed bumps installed. Initially, residents believed they needed their city councilmember's approval. But through collective effort and

shared knowledge, they discovered they could work directly with the city's Streets Department to get the speed bumps they were asking for.

Across the city in the 45th Ward, which includes parts of Port Richmond and Bridesburg, Republican ward leader Charles E. O'Connor Jr. attributes the lack of information on local elections to [the disappearance of local news](#).

"We used to have a lot of community papers, and they used to cover a lot of local stuff. And that's what engaged people in the community. Everybody got it," O'Connor recalls. Without those hyperlocal sources, he notes, residents are less likely to know about local races and decision-making that directly affects their neighborhoods.

The challenge isn't just about access to information, recalls Adam Barbanel-Fried, director of [Changing the Conversation Together \(CTC\) for Progress](#). It's also about education on how the democratic system works. Barbanel-Fried recalls deep canvassing—a research-backed method of voter engagement that relies on empathetic, nonjudgmental conversations to shift opinions on complex issues—during the 2022 midterms, when some voters asked questions like, "What does a senator do?" and, "What is the Senate?"

"It's not that people are stupid," he explains. "It's just the culture we live in, we don't talk about politics that much." In his view, low turnout isn't at all about apathy but about the system's complexity. "There are a number of people who want to vote and try to vote and fail, not because of any reason other than we as a country haven't done a good enough job making it simple," he adds.

Greene echoes this concern and emphasizes the need for accessible tools that build voter confidence.

"Our goal is to provide voters with the tools to engage with our democratic process and vote with confidence," she says. Some of those tools include an [Interactive Voter Guide](#) and the [How Philly Works](#) civic education series, which was recently translated into Spanish and Chinese, with French on the way. "Voters really want to understand how certain processes work," Greene says. "And when they do, they're able to better advocate for the issues they care about."

Still, one of the biggest limitations is that these kinds of efforts are not evenly distributed across the city. The strength of voter education and engagement often depends on the commitment and capacity of ward leaders and individual committee people within each ward. As O'Connor points out, with the rising cost of living and demanding schedules, fewer people have the time or resources to volunteer with political parties. "You don't have as many people volunteering. People are busy. You know, life has gotten so expensive that you don't have the time." Not every committee person can be as active or deeply engaged as Sampson or Kleiner.

"You want to see a lot of people turn out to vote in Philly? You have to be neighbors."

While Sampson and Kleiner use a variety of outreach strategies in their community, all of their efforts are grounded in one central principle: building trust. For them, the foundation of civic participation is simple: connect with your neighbors.

Their approach is time-intensive and deeply personal. They make it a point to knock on every door in their division and engage in real conversations with the people who live there. But it's not just about delivering a message, it's about listening first. "We make sure to first ask about something they may be concerned about," says Kleiner. From there, they stay involved in community issues throughout the year, not just during election season. "You want to see a lot of people turn out to vote in Philly? You have to be neighbors," says Sampson.

For Sampson and Kleiner, a key component to increasing civic engagement is helping people understand democracy as a bottom-up system. They work to show constituents that those in power are members of the same community. "Most of the councilpeople are very sincere. They live here. They live in a house just like you and me, they pay a mortgage. They don't sit on pedestals, and you can talk to them. They are accessible," says Sampson.



Michael Kleiner (left) and Maurice Sampson (right), elected Democratic committee persons in the 22nd Ward, 6th Division of Mt. Airy

Yet, their approach hasn't always aligned with the priorities of the official Democratic Party. In the 2023 City Council primary elections, Sampson and Kleiner supported Seth Anderson-Oberman, a democrat endorsed by the Working Families Party, instead of the incumbent candidate, Councilmember Cindy Bass. After Bass, who also serves as the 22nd Ward leader, narrowly held onto her seat, the party removed at least thirteen committee members from their posts, including Sampson and Kleiner.

"The party is not interested in that level of connection, that's what we have learned," Sampson explains. In the aftermath of their ejection, they've chosen to operate independently. "Our attitude now is: we are the Democratic Party. We may not be the official party, but we're inviting people in Mt. Airy who care about democracy to join us. Changing the whole system starts right here, at this level, with reforming the party from the ground up."

Deep Canvassing: It may not be scalable, but it's effective

Much like the hyperlocal outreach of Sampson and Kleiner, the work of Changing the Conversation Together (CTC) is rooted in personal connection. As director Adam Barbanel-Fried puts it, the organization aims to "build a core of deep canvassers who can grow a universe of people with unflinching support for compassion, inclusion, and a forward-thinking country."

CTC's primary strategy is deep canvassing, a voter engagement method built around meaningful, two-way conversations. Unlike traditional canvassing, deep canvassers aren't guided by a rigid script. Instead, they use a flexible conversation framework grounded in active listening and personal storytelling, creating space for voters to speak openly in a nonjudgmental setting. Canvassers are trained not just on messaging, but on how to connect authentically.



Deep Canvassing volunteer with CTC, knocking on doors ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Deep canvassing originated in the early 2000s within the LGBTQ+ rights movement and has since been shown to shift public opinion on important topics such as immigration and transgender rights. [A 2016 study](#) found that just one 10-minute deep canvassing conversation significantly reduced transphobia—more so than the average decrease in homophobia seen nationwide over a 14-year period. These effects lasted at least three months, demonstrating the method's potential to create lasting change.

CTC began operating in Philadelphia in 2020 and has focused in recent years on West Philly. In the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, their deep canvassing emphasized resisting the rise of Trumpism. More recently, they've engaged voters around proposed cuts to Medicaid and SNAP benefits, encouraging people not just to vote, but to contact their elected officials and advocate directly.

While the policy outcomes haven't always gone their way, Trump was not defeated in 2024, and the proposed cuts have advanced; CTC's internal data suggests their approach is working. According to their [2024 impact report](#), voters who were deep canvassed turned out at rates 22 percentage points higher than comparable neighbors.

Barbanel-Fried acknowledges that the model is time and resource-intensive. "There's a critique that some people offer of deep canvassing where they say, 'Well, how does it scale?'" he says. "And, you know, to me, the question I'm asking is different, which is: what works?" He emphasizes that deep canvassing isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. Each neighborhood requires adaptations, ongoing training, and community-specific approaches. But while it's not fast, it's effective.

Beyond its impact on voter behavior, deep canvassing also builds democratic infrastructure within its volunteer base. Volunteers become civic leaders, committed to building long-term engagement. "I think there's no better way to respond to the anger and rage than to be in community with people who are trying to do something, day in and day out," says Barbanel-Fried.

The need to inspire excitement and belonging

Across the political spectrum, many voting advocates agree: part of the reason for low voter turnout is that politics often feels irrelevant to people's lives. According to O'Connor, the city sees higher turnout when races are competitive or candidates are controversial.

"Whenever something controversial is happening in a neighborhood, that's when people organize and get involved." In other words, people engage when they feel something is at stake.

But for many Philadelphians, it's not just about a lack of urgency, it's about a lack of inclusion. Greene believes that voter disengagement is partly rooted in feeling excluded from the process altogether. One major example: Pennsylvania's closed primary system, which bars 1.4 million third-party and independent voters from participating in primary elections.

To address this, the Committee of Seventy has been advocating for open primaries that would allow all registered voters, regardless of party affiliation, to vote for partisan candidates. "Open primaries would make Pennsylvania elections more competitive by encouraging politicians to appeal to a broader range of voters, not just their base," Greene explains. "Increasing participation and competition in elections strengthens democracy."

The push for open primaries is gaining traction. Last year, a bipartisan majority in the Pennsylvania House voted to advance a bill to repeal the state's closed primary system. Most recently, on May 13, 2025, the House State Government Committee approved another open primaries bill, marking continued progress.

For Adam Barbanel-Fried, the solution isn't just in policy reform, it's also in how we talk to each other. Deep canvassing, he says, helps overcome political disillusionment by focusing on shared values, not party lines. "What's beautiful about our conversations is that they're not about the parties," he says. "We're just two individuals concerned about the future of our country. And we can have an impact."

Ultimately, voter engagement grows when people feel informed, included, and inspired. "When Philly turns out in big numbers, we control every state office," says Sampson. So when Philadelphia really votes, it can control its own fate."