

# Celebrities Strengthening Our Culture of Democracy

A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF CELEBRITY  
ENGAGEMENT ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION

**Ashley Spillane**

**Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation  
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AUGUST 2024



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## About the Author

Ashley Spillane was the 2017-2018 Roy and Lila Ash Fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. She has spent over a decade working at the intersection of pop culture, technology, and politics. Ashley is the former president of Rock the Vote and has served as an adviser to the Harvard Institute of Politics, Tufts University Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning, Civic Responsibility Project, and Power the Polls. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from The George Washington University and a Master in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School. She currently leads a social impact consulting firm, Impactual LLC, that supports brands, nonprofits, and philanthropists that want to see positive social change in the world by creating innovative programs, producing engaging and educational resources, and facilitating trusted partnerships across different sectors and leaders.

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# Contents

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|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b> .....   | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....  | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>The Different Approaches</b> .....  | <b>16</b> |
| Approach 1: Online Engagement .....  | 17        |
| Approach 2: Offline Engagement .....   | 23        |
| <b>Lessons Learned</b> .....   | <b>29</b> |
| 1. Celebrity Engagement Is Good for Democracy—and Celebrity Brand .....                        | 30        |
| 2. Articulate Goals and Measure Your Impact .....  | 33        |
| 3. Big Activations Do Not Always Equal Big Impact; Understand Your<br>Audience and Voice ..... | 34        |
| 4. Find the Right Partners and Civic Engagement Experts .....                                  | 36        |
| 5. Money Matters: Talk Openly about the Role of Fees, Funding,<br>and Fundraising .....        | 40        |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....  | <b>42</b> |
| <b>Endnotes</b> .....  | <b>44</b> |


# Executive Summary

This study provides an analysis and evaluation of how celebrity engagement impacts civic participation in the United States. When and why do celebrities decide to use their influence to encourage civic engagement? What difference do their actions make?

A healthy democracy can be measured in many ways, with a core marker being the level of engagement in the process of electing public representatives.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, despite record-breaking voter participation levels in recent elections, the United States still ranks 31st out of 50 developed nations in terms of eligible voter participation.<sup>2</sup> Lagging voter engagement and rising distrust of political institutions weaken our democracy.

Today, many celebrities are involved in efforts to help boost civic interest, engagement, and participation while building goodwill with their fans. Celebrities, defined broadly as famous people, are distinctively positioned to tackle this critical issue because of their ability to garner media coverage, attract large crowds, reach their fans, and influence society.

Celebrities, like all of us, face choices about how to engage in democracy. For example, they can serve as surrogates for political candidates, helping to “rally the base” or reach new audiences. Additionally, there is evidence that celebrities can help with candidate fundraising,<sup>3</sup> attracting large crowds to political events or volunteer shifts, which draws press attention.<sup>4</sup>



**Today, many celebrities are involved in efforts to help boost civic interest, engagement, and participation.**

Instead, this study focuses specifically on what celebrities are doing, and can do, to promote voter participation, including voter education and mobilization efforts. However imperfectly, the impact of these efforts can be measured by examining whether they lead people to take actions related to voting, such as registering to vote, requesting a ballot, and casting a ballot.

**HAILEY BIEBER  
DAVID DOBRIK  
BILLIE EILISH  
TREVOR NOAH  
TAYLOR SWIFT  
KERRY WASHINGTON  
QUESTLOVE**

The celebrity engagements we analyzed and the individuals we interviewed varied in their approaches, reach, calls to action, resources, and methods of evaluation. For this study, we spoke with 15 managers, publicists, nonprofit partners, philanthropic advisers, and celebrities themselves. They discussed their experience with activations aimed at promoting civic participation undertaken by Hailey Bieber, David Dobrik, Billie Eilish, Trevor Noah, Taylor Swift, Kerry Washington, and Questlove.

They provided specific details about each initiative, including an overview of the internal decision-making and planning process, details about program execution, and the perceived impact. This input, in conjunction with the data we analyzed, helped determine the general efficacy of celebrities in promoting voter participation and identify the most successful strategies and tactics employed.

Based on the interviews conducted for this case study, we find that celebrities encourage voter participation because they believe it is not only good for democracy but also good for their brands. This idea aligns with the findings we published in our 2019 case study, “Corporate Responsibility: The Power of Companies to Increase Voter Turnout,” which analyzed the role that companies could play in driving increased voter participation. Business case study participants described various benefits, including meeting consumer expectations for social and political engagement, raising brand awareness with new audiences, and increasing employee satisfaction. Similarly, celebrity teams observed that promoting civic engagement as a prominent public figure adds long-term value. According to Dawn White, Questlove’s longtime manager, “It helps your audience stay connected to you—a connection based on values, which humanizes an artist and a celebrity in a way that the audience then feels like they know you. And then, when your next film or album comes out, this audience that’s connected to you wants to support you, wants to show up.”<sup>5</sup>

While some polling shows that people claim they aren’t influenced by celebrity voices when it comes to politics,<sup>6</sup> more rigorous evidence indicates that these voices are incredibly powerful. For example, nonprofits report higher rates of online voter registration or poll worker sign-ups when a celebrity promotes these calls to action.<sup>7</sup> This potential impact is why nonprofits, candidates, and elected officials are increasingly seeking ways to engage celebrities.



Image 1: Taylor Swift at the 2012 MTV Video Music Awards at Staples Center in Los Angeles, California on September 6, 2012. (Photo by Paul Smith)  
Source: [Shutterstock](#)



Image 2: Kerry Washington attends 'Django Unchained' Berlin Premiere at Cinestar Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, Germany on January 8, 2013. (Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images for Sony Pictures)  
Source: [Getty Images](#)

“” **There’s a spotlight following them that hits whatever cause or candidate they decide to promote. It’s why politicians love celebrities.**

– SHAWN SACHS, CEO, COMMUNICATIONS FIRM SUNSHINE SACHS MORGAN & LYLIS®



Wading into a political conversation, even from a nonpartisan perspective, requires careful consideration. For a famous person, making a public declaration or taking a stance can be intimidating, and the pressure to execute it correctly is immense; after all, an innocent misstep could alienate millions of fans. But as one case study participant argued, it’s critical for artists to get their audience involved in the political process because “the machine of politics has relied on people thinking that their vote doesn’t matter, so reaching disheartened voters and helping them see themselves in the process, helping them understand that they can be impactful”<sup>9</sup> is a matter of fundamental importance. Celebrities are uniquely positioned to empower everyday Americans to use their voices and exercise their civic rights.

Upon reviewing data from recent celebrity activations and conversations with key case study participants, it became clear that celebrities have many opportunities to contribute to greater voter participation at all stages of their own civic journeys, whether they have never publicly discussed voting or are seasoned leaders with years of experience recruiting new voters and civic participants. While all celebrities can advance greater participation, our research surfaced five key lessons that will be useful to celebrities and their supporting teams as well as to nonprofit organizations and donors interested in partnering with or supporting the work of civically minded celebrities:

**1) CELEBRITY ENGAGEMENT IS GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY—AND CAN BENEFIT CELEBRITIES’ REPUTATIONS AND BRANDS.**

While protecting one’s brand is core to the decision-making process for celebrities, case study participants unanimously found promoting civic engagement to be a net positive for celebrity image.

**2) BE AWARE OF GOALS AND IMPACT MEASUREMENT.**

One of the biggest challenges celebrities face in evaluating opportunities to promote causes or civic participation is unclear goals around their involvement and insufficient metrics around their impact. Especially for online calls to action, it is possible to track engagement rates; however, few celebrity teams do it, and fewer are willing to share the results.



**3) EMPHASIZE AUTHENTICITY AND CONFIRM ALIGNMENT.**

Impact hinges on authenticity and relevance to the audience. Celebrities must be willing to turn down requests from nonprofits that are at odds with their work and values.

**4) FIND THE RIGHT PARTNERS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EXPERTS.**

While civic engagement can be an intimidating space, many nonprofit organizations and elected officials have been able to help interested celebrities and their teams engage. The key to effective civic engagement efforts is finding individuals who respect the celebrity's voice, creativity, and needs while providing expertise and connections.

**5) FOSTER CANDOR AND TRANSPARENCY REGARDING FEES, FUNDING, AND FUNDRAISING.**

While celebrities can donate their own time, volunteering their full team or additional production costs can be a burden. Many higher-impact efforts involve larger budgets, even when the programs themselves are highly cost-effective. Celebrities, their teams, nonprofits, and donors must have open and transparent conversations about financial needs to ensure the greatest impact—not least to avoid misplaced expectations or damaged relationships.



# Introduction

Celebrities are an unparalleled force in American culture, informing what we buy, what we wear, and what we talk about. With their significant influence and reach, they are powerful advocates for social and political causes. A widely known actor, musician, athlete, or comedian can garner an enormous amount of (free) attention, especially online. Gen Z and millennials spend an average of 180 minutes and 157 minutes daily on social media, respectively,<sup>10</sup> and it is their primary source of news.<sup>11</sup>

Brands have long understood the power of celebrity, working with stars to promote products and set trends. In recent years, the definition of “celebrity” has broadened beyond artists to include athletes and “creators,” or individuals who independently produce content for a large social media following. By using their platforms to encourage young people to vote, artists and creators can amplify civic engagement and participation in democracy. Their endorsements can inspire millions of fans and followers to become more politically active, fostering a culture of informed decision-making and civic responsibility, especially among young people.

Celebrities also represent diverse backgrounds and perspectives, often resonating with different audiences. By leveraging their visibility and relatability, they can effectively communicate the significance of voting by addressing issues that most impact their followers. This outreach can bridge gaps in political awareness and mobilize a broader spectrum of young people in our democratic process.

Furthermore, celebrities can make voting appear not only relevant but also trendy and socially appealing. By incorporating messages about voting into their public appearances, interviews, and social media posts, celebrities can demystify and destigmatize political engagement, helping to normalize civic participation as a cool and integral part of young adulthood. This normalization can lead to increased voter turnout and sustained civic involvement, ultimately strengthening democracy and promoting a more inclusive, representative society.

We found that celebrity political action is informed by both a personal commitment to specific issues (or to our democracy itself) and a careful consideration of the potential impact on their brand. Celebrities (and their advisers) evaluate engagement opportunities by asking questions like: Will this engagement feel authentic? Will it be in line with what the fanbase has come to expect? Is it likely to elicit backlash? The decisions aren’t always easy or clear-cut, especially in a polarized environment and particularly for newer, often younger celebrities whose brands are not as firmly established. This was the case with Michael Jordan, who stayed out of politics during his playing career to focus on building his Nike Air Jordan brand. He once famously defended his decision not to endorse the Democratic candidate in a contested U.S. Senate race in his home state by stating, “Republicans buy shoes too.”<sup>12</sup>

The concern for brand and bottom line isn’t unfounded. Unlike most consumer brand campaigns, celebrities are criticized for weighing in on politics or participating civically. Pundits and fans alike have a history of telling artists and athletes to stick to their lanes and stay out of politics. In 2018, media personality Laura Ingraham famously told NBA star LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” after he discussed his political views during an interview. Ingraham said she was not interested in political advice from “someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball.”<sup>13</sup>

At a Harvard Institute of Politics event in 2017, Golden State Warriors player Draymond Green shared that he gets similar criticism, with people telling him to “stick to basketball.” Green summed up the hypocrisy in this argument: “They say athletes can’t speak on politics. Well, I find that funny because everyone thinks they can speak basketball.”<sup>14</sup>

Several case study participants recounted facing criticism for harnessing their celebrity to encourage civic engagement and political participation. One participant said these critiques are more than mere “trolling,” representing an active effort to keep younger Americans out of political processes and conversations.<sup>15</sup> They think efforts to discredit celebrity political engagement is a strategy that goes beyond having a distaste for it: “Beating up on celebrities who talk about policies or our democracy is just part of an effort to destabilize the energy and effort they bring to the cause. It’s an attempt to undercut a large, free asset being largely used by one side.”<sup>16</sup> This sentiment has merit; as we find in this study, celebrities can quickly and easily share their spotlight with a candidate or cause, helping to move the political needle with a civic-focused call to action.

For this report, we reviewed data from 10 different influencer engagements and conducted 15 interviews to understand the measurable social impact of celebrity involvement as it relates to campaigns and nonprofit causes. In the following sections, we surface best practices for celebrity engagement; identify lessons learned by prominent celebrities, creators, and organizational leaders experienced in this work; and provide recommendations for measuring such efforts going forward.

## The Low Voter Participation Problem

Voting is the cornerstone of American democracy and a measure of healthy civic life.<sup>17</sup> In the United States, voter participation rates have broken records in recent years.<sup>18</sup> In fact, in the 2018 midterm elections, voter turnout hit a 50-year record high—yet just under 50% of the voting-eligible population (those over the age of 18 minus the number of non-citizens and ineligible felons) cast a ballot.<sup>19</sup> This means that nearly half the country stayed home. Voter turnout during presidential years isn't much better; while these contests see higher engagement, still just two-thirds of Americans show up.<sup>20</sup>

Low turnout rates in the United States raise concerns about the health of our democracy.<sup>21</sup> According to a Council on Foreign Relations study, the U.S. share of the voting-eligible population that actually votes lags behind most other highly developed democratic states, as seen in the chart below. Two of these—Australia and Belgium—employ penalties for not showing up.<sup>22</sup>

### U.S. TURNOUT RANKS BELOW THAT OF SOME PEERS

Turnout as a share of voting-age population in most recent national elections as of August 2022 for selected countries

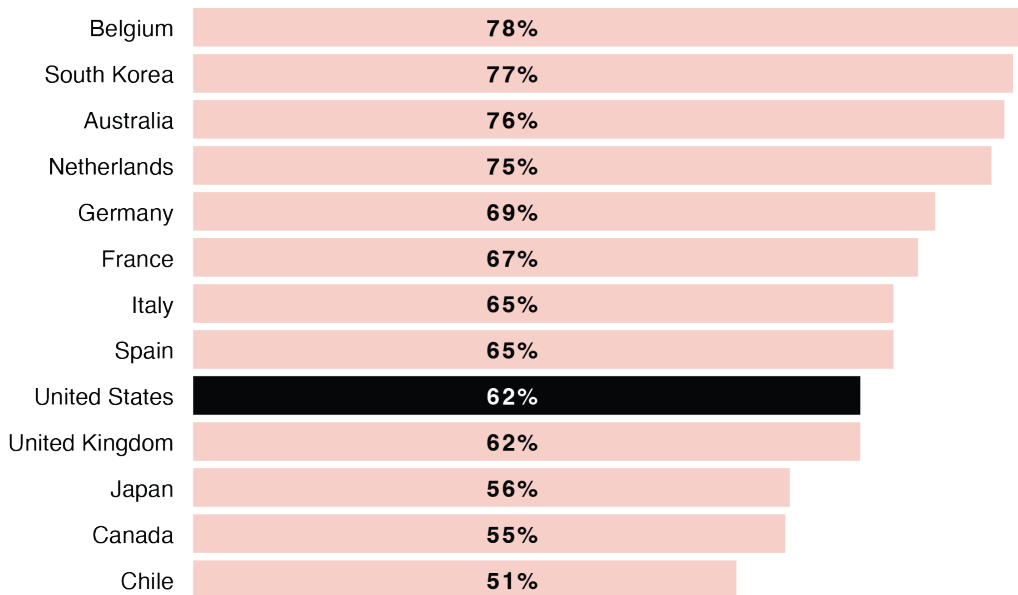


Figure 1: The graph shows the United States having 62% turnout of the voting age population in recent national elections as of August 2022, scoring 9th out of 13 highly developed democratic countries.

Source: [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Even more alarming, voter participation rates are lower among traditionally underrepresented citizens. Eligible voters of color participate at lower rates than non-Hispanic white voters.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, young people turn out at rates 20 points behind the national turnout average in nearly every election.<sup>24</sup> In 2020, for example, just 51.4% of voting-eligible Gen Z and 62.6% of voting-eligible millennials cast a ballot, compared to 71% of Gen X and 74.5% of baby boomers.<sup>25</sup>

### VOTER TURNOUT RATES BY RACE

% of eligible voters who say they voted by midterm election year

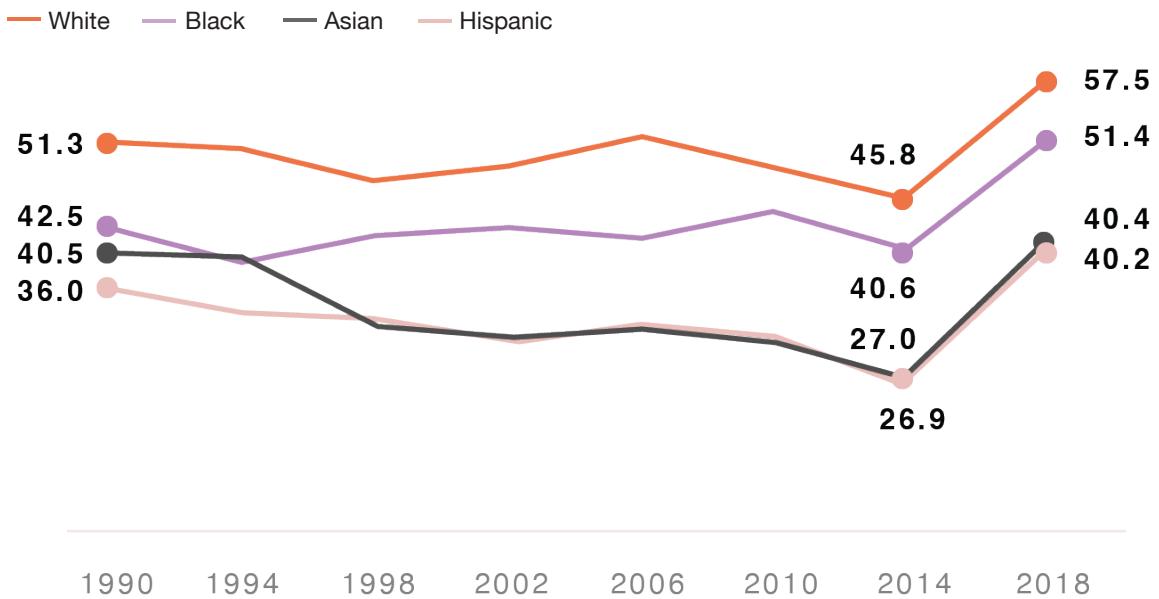


Figure 2: Graph of voter turnout rates by race in the United States from 1990 to 2018. In 2018, 57.5% of White Americans said they voted in the midterm election, compared to 51.4% of Black voters, 40.4% of Asian voters, and 40.2% of Hispanic voters.

*Note:* Eligible voters are U.S. citizens ages 18 and older. White, Black, and Asian eligible voters include only non-Hispanic eligible voters. Hispanic eligible voters are of any race, as Hispanic is an ethnicity not a race.

*Source:* [Pew Research Center](#)

## Causes of Low Turnout

*Celebrities are well positioned to address some important causes of low turnout.*

### 1) **Lack of information:**

The Gen Z and millennial generations will make up the majority of potential voters by 2028,<sup>26</sup> but they face barriers to their participation, largely due to a dearth of easily available information about the basic mechanics of casting a ballot in their state. A Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics survey, below, found that nearly two-thirds of people under the age of 30 do not feel that high school civics education adequately prepared them to understand voting deadlines, how to research candidates, or how to vote by mail—and over half say they were not taught how to register to vote.<sup>27</sup>

### DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOUR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION TAUGHT AND PREPARED YOU TO UNDERSTAND . . .



(% who said yes)

|   | ALL,<br>18-29 | LIKELY 2024<br>VOTER | POSSIBLE<br>VOTER | UNLIKELY<br>VOTER |
|---|---------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Importance of my vote                           | 57%           | 67%                  | 50%               | 33%               |
| How to register to vote                         | 45%           | 53%                  | 41%               | 22%               |
| When the voting deadlines are                   | 38%           | 46%                  | 33%               | 23%               |
| How to research candidates<br>and ballot issues | 36%           | 43%                  | 31%               | 20%               |
| How to request and submit<br>completed ballots  | 33%           | 41%                  | 28%               | 15%               |

Figure 3: Graph of how young Americans ages 18-29 feel high school education prepared them to understand practical aspects of voting. 38% feel that high school education prepared them to understand when voting deadlines are, 36% feel it taught them how to research candidates and ballot issues, and 33% feel it taught them how to request and submit completed ballots.

Source: [Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics](#)

According to CIRCLE, an initiative at Tufts University that studies youth civic and political participation, many of the barriers to voting come down to a lack of knowledge:

- 22% of newly eligible voters who are not registered to vote say they “don’t know how.”
- 50% do not know whether online voter registration is available in their state.
- 63% of young people do not know the felony re-enfranchisement laws in their state.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, there were racial and ethnic disparities in this knowledge gap. For example, 14% of Latino youth said that they struggled with their application for a mail-in ballot (compared to 3%–8% of other racial/ethnic groups).<sup>29</sup>

## 2) **Lack of trust:**

People are passionate about political issues that will affect them directly, like climate change, gun violence, health care, crime, and public safety. However, trust that the government will take action is at a near-record low; only 2% of Americans trust the government to do what is right “just about always.”<sup>30</sup> Among Asian, Hispanic, and Black adults, 23%, 23%, and 21% respectively say they trust the federal government “most of the time” or “just about always”; only about 19% of young people report the same.<sup>31</sup>

## 3) **Lack of motivation and mobilization:**

If distrust in the federal government wasn’t enough, voters also lack additional motivation to show up to the polls. Candidate campaigns don’t invest the kind of time and resources into communicating with infrequent or non-voters as they do with the voters they know will turn out on Election Day.<sup>32</sup> Even during the highly contested 2020 presidential election, research shows that almost half of young people (46%) did not receive outreach from political campaigns or committees.<sup>33</sup>

Voting hasn’t historically been seen as “cool,” and politics is often an off-limits topic at social and family gatherings. But there were signs of a cultural shift around the 2020 election, even amid the in-person limitations of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Election news was unavoidable on social media, and over 1,000 companies promoted voting to their employees and consumers.<sup>34</sup>

Celebrities leveraged their platforms to encourage people to vote, and numerous brands even started selling civic merchandise.



## Ways Celebrities Can Address Low Voter Turnout

Celebrity engagement in American civic life is not new. In fact, celebrities have used their fame to draw attention to issues and causes throughout history, well before the internet and social media increased the number of those doing so. Famously, after the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr., some of the era’s biggest celebrities—like Jackie Robinson, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, Aretha Franklin, and Nina Simone—helped galvanize supporters and raise money for the civil rights movement.<sup>35</sup> In the 1990s, MTV empowered artists like Madonna, LL Cool J, and Lenny Kravitz to mobilize young viewers to the ballot box in an effort to push back on congressional censorship efforts.<sup>36</sup>

Our case study surfaced numerous examples of measurably impactful celebrity civic activations in recent years. Promotion of voter registration is a prime example.

In 2018, Taylor Swift shared a single Instagram Story asking her then-112 million followers to register to vote at [www.vote.org](http://www.vote.org). The organization reported adding 65,000 new registrants on the site in 24 hours.<sup>37</sup> In 72 hours, they’d added 250,000 new registrants.<sup>38</sup> Swift has repeated this request several times since, sending her now 283+ million followers to register on the site as recently as 2023.<sup>39</sup> However, Swift has never used a custom URL for her civic calls to action, and as a result, the organization can only estimate the impact of her actions based on general traffic spikes around the time of her posts.

In 2019, during her “Sweetener” world tour, Ariana Grande promoted voter registration by setting up booths at her concerts on the American leg. Thanks to her efforts, she signed up more than 33,000 voters and broke the all-time record for the most tour registrations of her partner organization.<sup>40</sup>

And in 2020, Kylie Jenner took to Instagram, urging her then-196 million followers to register to vote in a post. The site to which she linked reported a 1,500% increase in traffic compared to the day before—and an 80% increase in total users registering to vote.<sup>41</sup>

Despite new tools that can track the impact of a celebrity’s call to action, critiques persist regarding celebrities using their platforms to raise awareness, educate their followers, and mobilize people to act. Media, academia, and members of political parties have called into question the appropriateness of celebrities using their platforms to promote civic or political engagement;<sup>42</sup> diminished celebrities’ contributions to social or political conversations;<sup>43</sup> raised questions about the efficacy and impact of their efforts;<sup>44</sup> and occasionally led efforts to stir backlash to their engagement.<sup>45</sup> Negative responses to celebrity civic engagement existed before the internet and social media, but just as it has become easier for celebrities to reach audiences quickly and efficiently, it has become easier to criticize and dismiss such efforts, with negative reactions intensifying. According to those interviewed who work with celebrities, the potential backlash and “canceling” of an artist or actor discourages many from getting involved.

The three examples above underscore the need for further research and, most importantly, for celebrities involved in this work to track (or find partners who can track) the impact and responses to their efforts more closely.

The celebrities and creators' teams we spoke to all expressed enthusiasm for nonpartisan civic engagement work, but they noted that many question the impact they can have in highly partisan environments without publicly taking a political stance. The good news? By focusing on the areas below, celebrities can provide education and energy that can help potential voters successfully navigate the sometimes challenging path to the ballot box.

- 1) **Voter registration:** Unlike other developed countries, the United States does not automatically register citizens to vote when they turn 18. In 31 states, voters must register before an election to be eligible to participate in it.<sup>46</sup> Although 94% of registered voters cast ballots in the 2020 presidential election, this represented only 62.8% of voting-age adults in the country.<sup>47</sup> The overwhelming majority of non-voters are either not registered or have out-of-date registrations.<sup>48</sup>
- 2) **Voter ID and deadlines:** The rules around voter registration, ID requirements, deadlines, early voting, absentee voting, and language access vary from state to state. As a result, it can be challenging for voters, especially young and new voters, to find the information they need given the variances in state laws and local practices.
- 3) **The power of a vote:** According to CIRCLE, an initiative at Tufts University that studies civic and political participation among young people, many young people lack knowledge about how voting processes work, leading to a misunderstanding of why their votes matter.<sup>49</sup> Students who were not encouraged to vote by high school teachers were twice more likely to agree with the statement "Voting is a waste of time" than those who were encouraged.<sup>50</sup>
- 4) **Finding a convenient way to vote:** In 2018, voting was widely seen as "important" across different generations, but young people were less likely to describe it as "convenient."<sup>51</sup> Most states allow voting by mail or during early voting periods; voters just need the information about where, when, and how to show up before Election Day to take advantage of these offerings.

## The Case for Engaging

Celebrities have a unique ability to connect with younger generations in ways that mainstream media and other get-out-the-vote efforts may not be able to. Their control of and presence on social media positions them as centralized sources of information to be tapped into and utilized by those looking to increase voter participation. Nonprofits can help celebrities track the impact of their voter registration efforts in real time, as the collection of a registration application is tangible and nearly instantaneous.



**Based on our research and conversations with 15 participants interviewed for this study, we find that celebrities who use their platforms to encourage people to vote can not only increase participation but also strengthen their brands.**

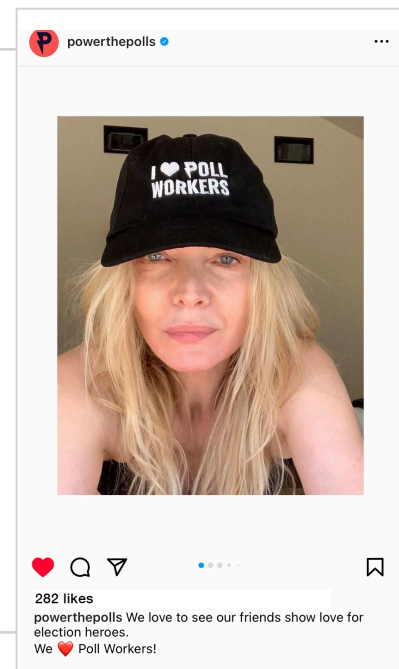


Image 3: Power the Polls Instagram post on September 18, 2022 featuring Michelle Pfeiffer wearing an “I [Heart] Poll Workers” hat.  
Source: [Power the Polls Instagram](#)

# The Different Approaches

In recent years, celebrities have increasingly used their platforms (both online and offline) to promote voting. By entering our social dialogue about the importance of voting, celebrities help create a permission structure for a traditionally under-engaged population to participate. Study participants describe seeing several benefits to promoting civic participation, ranging from positive feedback from existing fans to increased engagement with new audiences.

### **Approach 1: Online Engagement**

The celebrities in this study took different approaches to civic engagement, but several leveraged their online presence to speak directly to younger, less engaged voters. While their platforms and tactics to promote civic participation differed, they all emphasized the importance of authenticity. All of those interviewed for this study stressed the importance of engaging with fans around the election in the same way they do with any other topic: maintaining the same tone, posting the same type of content, and promoting other issues outside of the election that they already regularly promote. This approach helps prevent their efforts from feeling inauthentic or trite.

“ Taylor Swift’s post was a major inflection point for the organization and voter registration that [2018] election cycle. The registration activation she single-handedly generated was unlike anything we’d seen at that point.

— DEBRA CLEAVER, FOUNDER, VOTE.ORG<sup>52</sup>

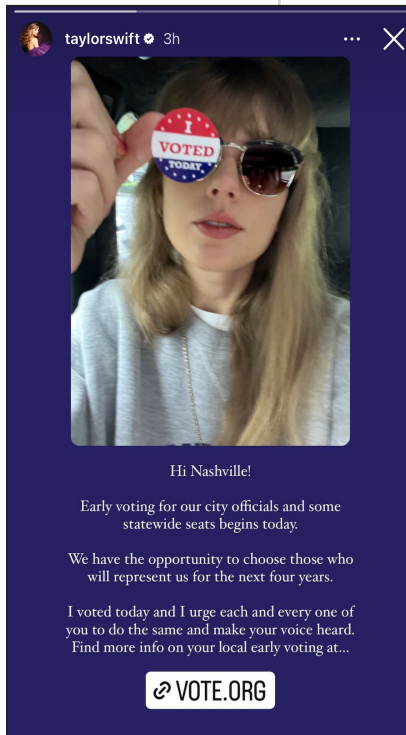


Image 4: Taylor Swift Instagram story on July 14, 2023 featuring Swift with an “I Voted Today” sticker and a message educating viewers in Nashville about the early vote period and urging them to vote, linking to [vote.org](https://www.vote.org).

Source: Taylor Swift Instagram (no longer available)

Much of Taylor Swift’s success in engaging voters in 2018 and beyond is because she spreads the message with her signature style of sincerity. In “Miss Americana,” the 2020 documentary about her life as a songwriter, performer, and woman finding her power, Swift gives viewers an authentic look behind the scenes of her daily life—including the conversations leading up to her impactful 2018 Instagram post. “This is something that I know is right, and I need to be on the right side of history. And if [Phil Bredesen] doesn’t win, then at least I tried,” she tells her parents and management team through tears. “It really is a big deal to me.” By including this in the documentary, Swift effectively empowers her audience to consider the causes she cares about.

Voter registration is a popular call to action among celebrities. In 2020, YouTube celebrity **David Dobrik** leveraged his popular gimmick of giving away expensive cars to friends and family to promote voter registration. With an average of 2 million views per video,<sup>53</sup> Dobrik heeded a fan’s call to do a voter registration-focused giveaway.<sup>54</sup> He partnered with the nonprofit HeadCount to give away five Teslas to followers who checked their voter registration status through a custom registration URL.<sup>55</sup> Dobrik posted about the contest on his social media platforms, encouraging followers to like, share, or tag friends in his post (although this was not required to enter the contest).<sup>55</sup>

Dobrik’s giveaway garnered nearly 456,000 unique raffle entries; 128,000 of those who checked their registration status also completed a voter registration application—a conversion rate of 28%,<sup>56</sup> as compared to many (successful) digital programs with conversion rates of less than 1%. Of those who registered via Dobrik’s giveaway contest, a full two-thirds cast a ballot in the 2020 election.<sup>57</sup> To contextualize the success of this initiative, the voters Dobrik registered made up over 30% of HeadCount’s total registrations that year.

According to Andy Bernstein, then-executive director of HeadCount, the initiative was successful because Dobrik’s activation was “completely in line with what his fans expected of him: car giveaways. It was simple, had that buzzworthy ‘wow’ factor, and required very little of the participant. There’s no question that that was a big part of the success.”<sup>58</sup>

| <b>Dobrik Campaign Statistics: Participants Were Younger, More Diverse, and Voted at Higher Rates Than Expected</b> |   |
|---|---|
| <b>VOTER TURNOUT RATE</b>   | 67.1%   |
| <b>VOTER TURNOUT SCORE</b>  | 58.0%   |
| <b>AGE</b>  | 75.4% Millennial & Gen Z                              |
| <b>RACE</b>   | 42.6% Latino<br>37% White<br>5.6% Black<br>6.6% Asian |

Figure 4: Graph of voter turnout rate (67.1%), voter turnout score (58%), age (75.4% Millennial and Gen Z), and race of participants (42.6% Latino, 37% White, 5.6% Black, 6.6% Asian) that competed in the David Dobrik giveaway campaign. Participants were younger, more diverse, and voted at higher rates than expected.

*Note:* Turnout rate is the share of a group of people who actually voted in a given election. Turnout scores is the share of a group of people who are expected to vote (an estimate). This is the estimated turnout rate of HeadCount’s contestant participants before the election, provided by TargetSmart. It indicates that contestant participants voted at a rate 9 points higher than they were expected to.

*Source:* Bernstein and Vickery, virtual interview



Image 5: David Dobrik Instagram post on September 29, 2020 featuring Dobrik and 5 Teslas available for a giveaway, with a caption detailing how to enter the giveaway contest in partnership with HeadCount.

*Source:* [David Dobrik Instagram](#)

\* HeadCount also provided alternate forms of entry to this contest for non-eligible individuals or those not interested in voting to ensure legal compliance.



Singer-songwriter **Billie Eilish** has had similar success engaging her fans through social media, especially when she championed poll worker recruitment in 2020. With an audience that skews overwhelmingly young (under 35 years old) and female, Eilish’s call to action to become a poll worker generated significant social media activity and raised awareness of the initiative, Power the Polls, in its early days.<sup>59</sup> Eilish not only directly recruited poll workers in 2020 through a unique URL shared with her followers, but she also posted frequently on social media expressing her gratitude for election and poll workers. This initiative garnered positive responses from her followers, resulting in millions of impressions online for Power the Polls and even spurring other celebrities to create similar posts. Eilish capped off her engagement with Power the Polls in 2020 by headlining a “Prep Rally” session for over 35,000 poll workers a few weeks before the election, thanking them for their service and asking them to keep their commitment.<sup>60</sup>



Image 6: Power the Polls Instagram video post on September 1, 2020 featuring Billie Eilish detailing the 2020 poll worker shortage and urging viewers to sign up to be poll workers via Power the Polls.  
 Source: [Power the Polls Instagram](#)



Kerry Washington, a known champion of democracy and social change,<sup>61</sup> has also leaned into leveraging her social media platforms to drive civic action. Washington takes a unique approach to her work, having built her own nonprofit, Influence Change, to recruit and activate fellow celebrities to promote civic engagement. Through her nonprofit, Washington recruited over 250 celebrities in 2020 to promote voter registration, early voting, poll worker recruitment, and making a voting plan on their social media platforms. By helping to craft messaging, create digital assets, provide vetted nonprofit partners to uplift, and fact-check voting information, Washington equipped celebrities with the necessary tools to help make voting a social norm.

“

Over the course of six months, we took Kerry Washington’s passion and recruited 250 artists, generated \$32 million in organic earned media coverage, and generated one billion engagements online.

— TOBY LELLIOTT, ADVISOR, INFLUENCE CHANGE<sup>62</sup>

Image 7: Kerry Washington Instagram post on October 13, 2020 featuring Washington holding an “I Voted” sticker, participating in a social media contest urging celebrity friends to vote early, responding to Michelle Obama’s challenge and tagging Mariah Carey, Sterling Brown, and Kourtney Kardashian to do the same.

Source: [Kerry Washington Instagram](#)



Questlove, who set a trend of streaming live DJ sets from home for his music-loving social media followers during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, used this format to get out the vote in 2022. He hosted a two-night virtual “Get Down for Democracy” series to raise awareness about the importance of voting in down-ballot races, like secretary of state and attorney general in the midterm elections, and to raise money for pro-democracy candidates. Staying true to his typical style for virtual sets, Questlove leveraged his celebrity network to enlist people like Amy Schumer, Tracee Ellis Ross, and Mark Ruffalo to join him and talk about the importance of the midterm elections. While he DJ’d and chatted with special guests about what was at stake in the upcoming election, he also provided links for viewers to donate, check their voter registration status, make a plan to vote, find their local polling place, and/or volunteer to get out the vote. These virtual events drew 200,000+ followers across Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, social platform X (formerly Twitter), Twitch, and Hovercast, raising over \$75,000.<sup>63</sup>

Questlove’s virtual “Get Down for Democracy” event was successful because he continuously uses his art to uplift his beliefs. Having created a community of followers and fans whose values align with his own, he’s cultivated a mutually supportive relationship, so they show up when he asks them to and when he explains why it matters.<sup>64</sup>

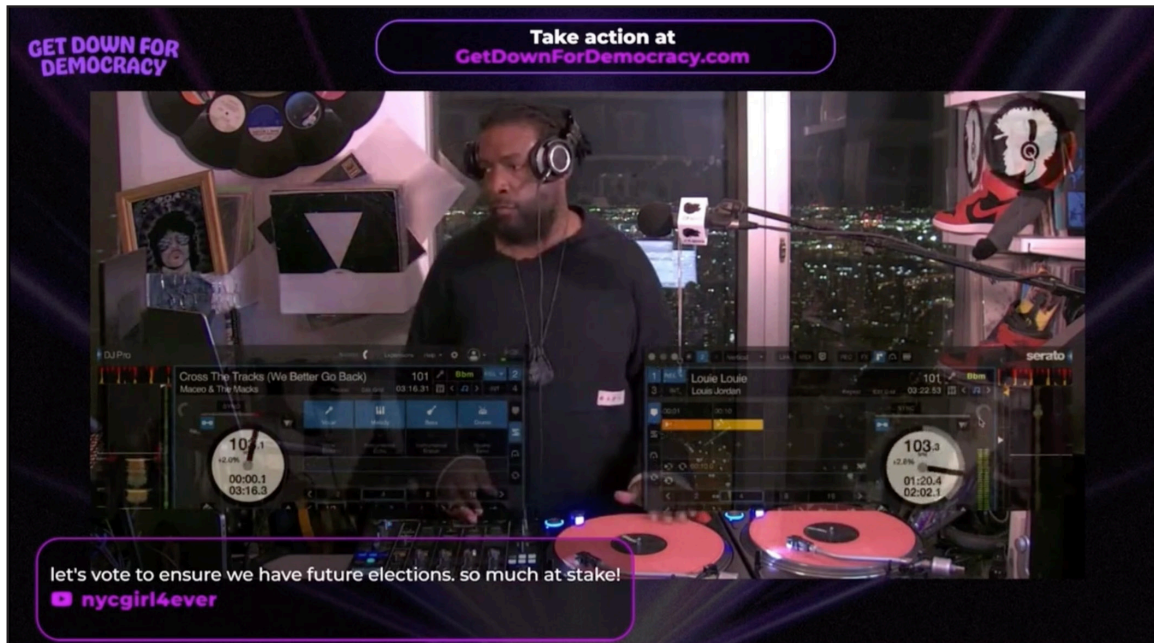


Image 8: Questlove on November 7, 2022 DJing for the virtual fundraiser “Get Down For Democracy.”  
 Source: Impactual (Unpublished)

## Approach 2: Offline Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic brought online engagement into sharp focus. But data shows that offline activations (in person or through other media, including television, movies, and merchandise) are particularly critical supplements for online activity to reach younger, more engaged audiences, as seen below. Some offline tactics build upon platforms celebrities are already using, such as their own television shows, while others can help celebrities gain access to potential new audiences. One of the most measurably impactful examples of offline engagement was **Trevor Noah** using “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” platform to address the nation’s poll worker shortage in 2020. He used his nightly broadcast platform not only to highlight a civic issue but also to provide tangible actions his (already civically minded) audience could take to fix the problem. Noah called attention to the fact that the 2020 poll worker shortage had the potential to trigger a cascade of issues for our democratic process, including polling site closures, extremely long wait times, and the potential disenfranchisement of thousands of voters.



Image 9: Trevor Noah in July 2020 on “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” calling on viewers to sign up to be poll workers via Power the Polls.

Source: [Shorty Awards](#)

**HOW MANY PERCENTAGE POINTS DOES TURNOUT RISE?**

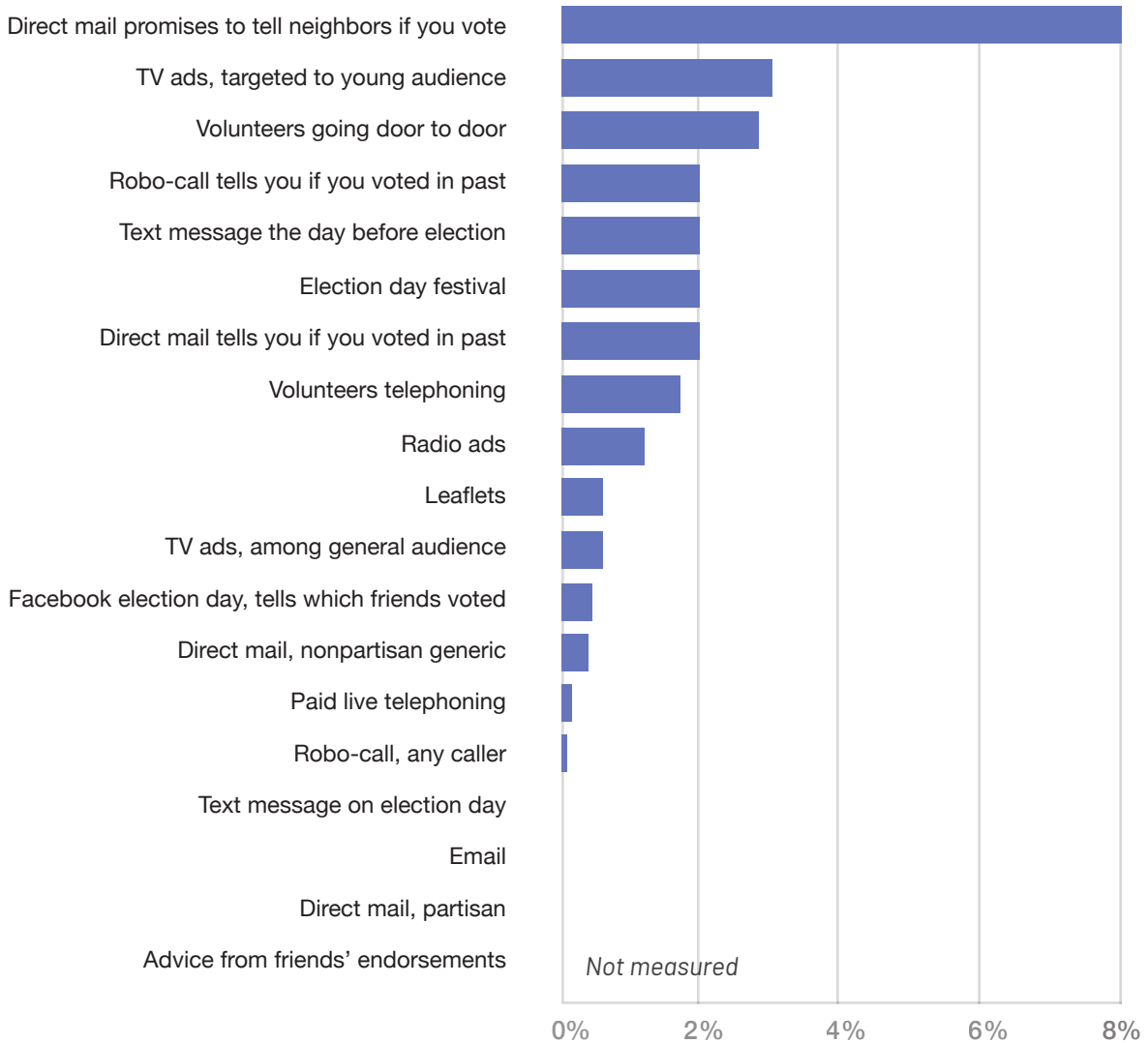


Figure 5: Graph of how many percentage points voter turnout rises among targeted people in the United States by voter engagement tactic. “Direct mail promises to tell neighbors if you vote” is the most impactful at 8%.

*Note:* Percentage Points Rise in Turnout Among Targeted People, If 30%-50% of Them Would Vote Otherwise

*Source:* Green and Gerber, “Get Out the Vote,” 2015, pg. 181

Beginning on July 13, 2020, and running for five weeks, Noah concluded each show by directing the audience to visit the Power the Polls website to sign up as poll workers. He emphasized this nonprofit partner as the place for interested volunteers to sign up, get training, and help make a difference. Ultimately, Noah directly recruited over 35,000 poll workers in 2020 through this simple call to action.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to using their own media platforms, celebrities can team up with corporations, nonprofits, or both to help promote voting. In 2022, entrepreneur and model **Hailey Bieber** teamed up with the nonprofit organization I Am a Voter., multimedia production company and studio OBB Media, and AMC Theatres to create a public service announcement (PSA) encouraging all Americans to vote in the midterm elections. I Am a Voter. used donated advertising space from AMC Theatres, the nation’s largest movie theater chain (with locations in almost every state),<sup>66</sup> to broadcast this nonpartisan motivational message to moviegoers. Bieber’s PSA had prime placement as the last spot before the movie began. This approach aimed to remind voters of the upcoming election during a year that typically sees lower engagement; no midterm has cracked 50% participation for the past 100 years.<sup>67</sup> What’s more, it sought to shift people’s perspectives on what a voter looks like.

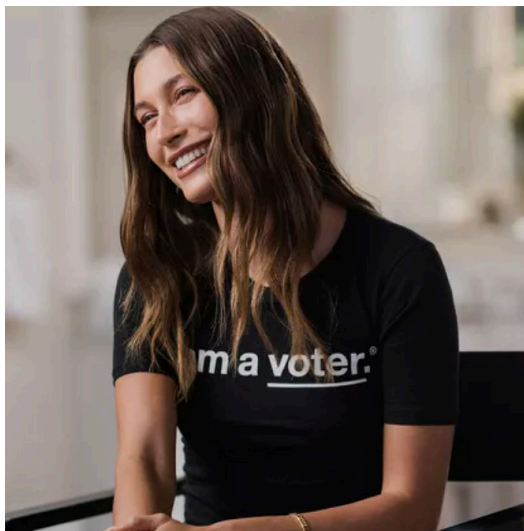


Image 10: Hailey Bieber in 2022 wearing an “i am a voter” t-shirt while filming a pro-voting PSA.

Source: [People Magazine](#)

As I Am a Voter. cofounder Mandana Dayani puts it, “Seeing a celebrity you respect celebrate their identity as a voter can change your perception of what it even means to be a voter. It can inspire and excite you to make civic participation integral to how you see the world—which brands you shop, who you date, the causes you champion, and more. With I Am a Voter., we saw that there was an opportunity for a modern voting brand that really spoke to our generation. One that was positive, empowering, and more focused on what unites us. A brand that really captured how cool it is to be an active participant and maybe made you feel a little FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] if you weren’t.”<sup>68</sup>

“” **The Daily Show with Trevor Noah’s calls to action weren’t about determining the outcome of any race, but rather to make sure the voting process worked and people could cast their ballots in an accessible, easy way.**

— ERIKA SOTO LAMB, VICE PRESIDENT OF SOCIAL IMPACT STRATEGY, SHOWTIME/MTV ENTERTAINMENT STUDIOS AT PARAMOUNT<sup>72</sup>

I Am a Voter. reports that AMC rated this PSA as one of its most well received: moviegoers stayed in their seats to watch it and later talked about it on social media. These moviegoers themselves became influencers, spreading Bieber’s message.

Michael D. Ratner’s OBB Media, which works with stars like Hailey Bieber, Justin Bieber, Kevin Hart, Demi Lovato, and more, and its social impact arm OBB Cares, also worked with Bieber to amplify the announcement’s reach on her social platforms in a way that felt authentic to her voice and audience. In addition to reaching over 20 million moviegoers nationwide, Bieber did a collaborative post on Instagram with I Am a Voter. that resulted in 11.5 million additional views, meeting her audience where they are and introducing them to I Am a Voter. This resulted in the nonprofit’s highest-performing social post to date. As of mid-2024, Bieber has nearly 53 million followers on Instagram.<sup>69</sup>

In the PSA, Bieber wore a T-shirt that said, “I am a voter.” This approach represents another effective—and relatively easy—offline way to promote civic engagement: merchandise. Celebrities have been setting style trends and selling products for decades; now, they’re bringing this power to the civic space. At the 2020 Billboard Music Awards ceremony, Grammy-nominated Lizzo accepted her Top Songs Sales Artist award in a Christian Siriano dress with “vote” printed all over it. During the 2020 Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama wore a V-O-T-E necklace that led to a surge in sales for the same item.<sup>70</sup>

The intention of civic merchandise is simple: infuse popular culture with cool, coveted “swag” that also delivers a pro-voting message to help new, younger voters enter the civic pipeline in a nontraditional, engaging way. I Am a Voter. has focused on this angle of the civic engagement ecosystem, tapping into entertainment and fashion industries that had previously not been involved in this space. The nonprofit specifically seeks to create a visual medium that shifts how people—especially young people and people of color—see themselves in the civic process.

Merchandise is a core component of meeting people where they are: at Starbucks, in an AMC Theatre, shopping at Urban Outfitters, or watching an NBA game. Dayani argues that this direct-to-consumer marketing of civics is not only good for engaging voters but also for raising the profile of the brands, artists, and athletes who are willing to promote them.<sup>71</sup>

## Ladder of Engagement

Celebrities looking to promote voter participation can engage in a wide range of activities. The following represents a sample, categorized by level of difficulty, as well as basic information regarding measurement of impact. Please note that this is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>LOW DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p><b>Post on Social Media</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>01</b></p> | <p><b>ACTIVITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a call-to-action post, like “register to vote” or “find your polling place.”</li> <li>• Celebrate civic holidays by posting about National Voter Registration Day, Poll Worker Recruitment Day, Vote Early Day, Election Hero Day, and Election Day.</li> <li>• Repost trusted nonprofit content with election information.</li> <li>• Link to trusted sources of election information.</li> <li>• Post an “I Voted” selfie.</li> </ul>  | <p><b>MEASURE OF IMPACT</b></p> <p>Technology partners can provide unique URLs that track how many people click the link, how many start to take the action requested, and how many complete the action requested.</p> <p>For example, using unique URLs enables tracking the number of voter registrations, prospective poll workers, mail ballot requests, or vote pledges, as well as the eventual votes cast by individuals referred through the link.</p>                                   |
| <p><b>DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p><b>Create Original Content</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>02</b></p>  | <p><b>ACTIVITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a selfie-style video sharing your experience registering to vote, finding your polling place, casting a ballot, or engaging with election administrators.</li> <li>• Encourage followers to sign up as poll workers.</li> <li>• Share an “I Voted” sticker selfie with followers.</li> <li>• Create and share a plan to vote with followers and peers.</li> <li>• Share your plan for giving your team time off for voting.</li> <li>• Share your platform via a livestream with other celebrities, elected officials, candidates for office, or organizational leaders to raise awareness of elections and lawmaking throughout the cycle.</li> <li>• Partner with nonprofit organizations to share their content with a larger audience.</li> <li>• Either in-platform or offline, encourage other celebrities to share your content, potentially creating a significant increase in eyes on the content than it would otherwise have received.</li> </ul> | <p><b>MEASURE OF IMPACT</b></p> <p>Social media impressions and engagement can be used to understand demographic or geographic audiences where a celebrity has the greatest impact. This information can inform future efforts by tailoring materials to most effectively educate those audiences. Use publicly available information (such as likes, comments, and shares) to estimate the reach of content shared by nonprofit partners or similar content developed by other celebrities.</p> |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p>Join Existing In-Person Activations</p> <hr/> <p>03</p> | <p><b>ACTIVITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show up to support voters stuck in long lines.</li> <li>• Kick off an in-person voter registration drive, campaign rally, volunteer shift, or event.</li> <li>• Use public platforms to discuss voting or democracy (e.g., award shows, media interviews).</li> <li>• Deliver treats or flowers to local election workers on Election Hero Day.</li> </ul>   | <p><b>MEASURE OF IMPACT</b></p> <p>Traditional news coverage, including analysis of viewership and demographics, can be used to measure the impact of in-person activations. Nonprofit reports on downstream fundraising, volunteer sign-ups, voter registrations, and event attendance, along with feedback from host organizations, are also helpful measures.</p>  |
| <p><b>DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p>Host an Event or Donate Money</p> <hr/> <p>04</p>       | <p><b>ACTIVITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donate to nonprofit organizations and publicize the donation via social or traditional media.</li> <li>• Host a virtual or in-person event to generate donations and draw attention to a specific issue.</li> <li>• Perform at local voting events, registration drives, or similar activations pro bono or for a discounted rate.</li> <li>• Partner with brands or companies for joint activations centered around the election (to promote custom merchandise, digital activations, or town halls with employees).</li> </ul>   | <p><b>MEASURE OF IMPACT</b></p> <p>The total number of contributions and amount of money raised are the key metrics when hosting an event. Organic social media content as measured via hashtags and engagement, actions taken, and new relationships and partnerships developed can also be used to measure impact.</p>  |
| <p><b>HIGH DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p>Lead an Integrated Civic Life</p> <hr/> <p>05</p>  | <p><b>ACTIVITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become a poll worker.</li> <li>• Convene celebrity peers to share the work they've done and provide options for others to get involved.</li> <li>• Co-host educational sessions for other celebrities.</li> <li>• Invite voter registration organizations to attend events and promote their work.</li> <li>• Write an op-ed about civic efforts and leadership.</li> <li>• Give away tickets, meet-and-greets, merch, or other prizes based on individuals taking civic action.</li> <li>• Create documentaries or other media to raise awareness.</li> <li>• Join panel discussions on voting initiatives and voter protection.</li> <li>• Participate in public debates and town halls.</li> <li>• Become an ambassador for a civic engagement organization.</li> </ul> | <p><b>MEASURE OF IMPACT</b></p> <p>Leading an integrated civic life can be measured by the number of deep and lasting relationships formed with nonprofits, volunteer leaders, and other civic celebrities. Other helpful metrics of success include dollars raised, actions taken, and social and traditional media viewership. Similarly, it is important to measure new messages, tactics, and strategies developed from as a result of your engagement.</p> |



# Lessons Learned

Celebrities employed a wide range of civic engagement tactics, but several consistent themes emerged in our conversations with them and those supporting their civic engagement work. Given the variance in an individual celebrity's industry, reach, and areas of interest, these themes may guide many celebrities as they embark on civic responsibility programs in 2024 and beyond.

## 1. Celebrity Engagement Is Good for Democracy—and Celebrity Brand

Based on our research and interviews for this case study, we find that celebrities encourage voter participation because they believe it is not only good for democracy but also good for their brand positioning. The benefits described by case study participants included growing their fan base, promoting positive conversations and fan engagement, and increasing their brand positioning in society.

“” **We've actually seen a big tide changing where celebrities are no longer afraid to step into this conversation and say, 'It's really important to vote and here's why.'**

— NATALIE TRAN, CO-FOUNDER, I AM A VOTER.<sup>75</sup>



For example, Taylor Swift has posted a single Instagram story each year promoting vote.org. It requires minimal effort from the star's social media team, who are already engaged full-time in curating her online presence. Despite initial warnings from her team that engaging in politics could decrease attendance at her concerts, this has had no discernible negative impact on Swift's brand. In the documentary "Miss Americana," Swift's team can be heard warning her that posting about politics could harm her career, saying, "Imagine if we came to you and said, 'Hey, we've got this idea that we could halve the number of people that come to your next tour.'" Contrary to these warnings, in the years since the documentary came out, Swift has successfully mobilized her fans to both register to vote **and** attend the Eras Tour around the world. In fact, since wading into civic engagement, Swift has gone on to run the highest-grossing tour in music history,<sup>73</sup> making her a prime example of how celebrities can contribute to democracy while enhancing their personal brand.

The democratic impact of Swift's single, temporary social media post is both significant and measurable: over 65,000 new voters registered in a single day in 2018, the largest day of new voter registration in vote.org's history.<sup>74</sup>

David Dobrik’s giveaway activation exemplifies how democratic engagement can align with brand growth and expansion. By encouraging his followers to share his post and tag a friend to enter the Tesla raffle, Dobrik’s voter registration promotion gained virality, reaching social media users previously unfamiliar with his content. While the extent to which the 456,000 unique raffle entries converted to new subscribers and followers for Dobrik’s channel is unclear, the effort undeniably increased the reach of his brand. Better measured are the civic impacts of his campaign: Dobrik and HeadCount concretely spurred half a million Americans to check their voter registration status, registered 128,000 new individuals, and saw more than 85,000 actual ballots eventually cast by those new registrants.<sup>76</sup>

The campaign by “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah,” in partnership with Power the Polls, raised awareness of poll worker shortages and the threat of polling place closures, a problem that disproportionately affects voters of color. It was met with measurable success and did not result in any backlash or harm to the “Daily Show” brand. According to Erika Soto Lamb, vice president of social impact strategy at Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios at Paramount, the nonpartisan effort was authentic to the show’s brand and audience.<sup>77</sup> As a genuine response to a real-time issue, this engagement approach provided a low barrier of entry by meeting the audience where they already were—watching the show—and simply proposing a solution to the issue already being discussed.

However, this simple solution had a measurable impact on poll worker sign-ups. Before “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah’s” poll worker PSA campaign began in July 2020, Power the Polls reported 3,000 total sign-ups by prospective poll workers through their portal. Over the course of the five-week campaign, 3,000 poll workers signed up each day, totaling 170,000 sign-ups, 35,000 of which came directly through the link from “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah.” Power the Polls’ original poll worker recruitment goal for 2020 was 250,000; ultimately, the organization reported recruiting 713,000 poll workers that year.<sup>78</sup>

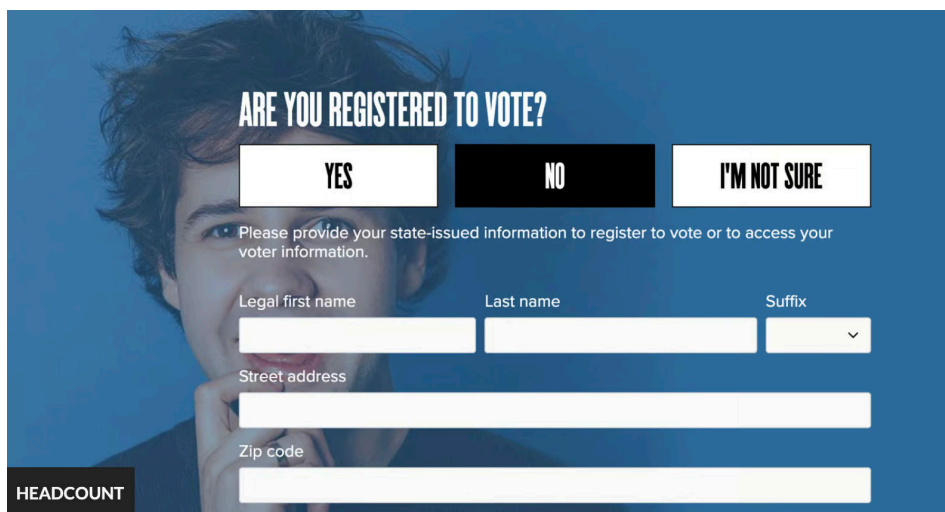
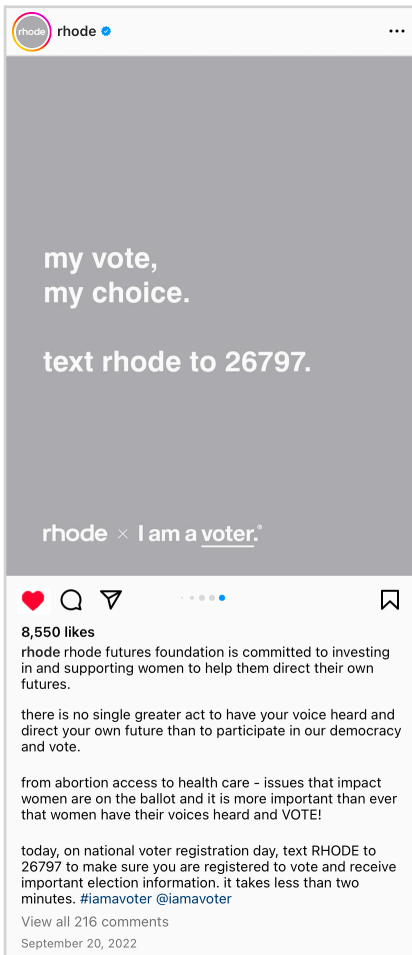


Image 11: HeadCount’s voter registration portal branded with David Dobrik during 2020 giveaway contest.

Source: [Dexerto](#)

“” There are so many candidates and measures being voted on which will impact millions of lives— especially women’s lives—and I hope everyone can take two minutes to make sure they are registered and ready to vote today.

— HAILEY BIEBER<sup>80</sup>



Hailey Bieber’s personal campaign reflects the young star’s ongoing commitment to voter education; her skincare company’s philanthropic arm, rhode futures foundation, also partnered with I Am a Voter. In 2022, urging her followers to check their voter registration status. At the time, the company’s social media post highlighted the rhode futures foundation, which is committed to empowering women, and shared, “There is no single greater act to have your voice heard and direct your own future than to participate in our democracy and vote.”<sup>79</sup>

Questlove’s “Get Down for Democracy” livestream not only raised a significant amount of money—\$75,000 in just one night—but also exposed over 200,000 viewers to key down-ballot races, like secretaries of state and attorneys general. While emceeing and DJing, Questlove interviewed pro-democracy candidates for the positions and chatted with the audience, seamlessly interweaving the entertainment that already appealed to his fans with civic engagement ahead of the 2022 elections. During live sets, he discussed the stakes of the upcoming election while providing easy ways for viewers to donate to key races and volunteer to knock on doors or make calls to get out the vote. These viewers also used interactive features to check their voter registration, make a plan to vote, and find their local polling place.

Image 12: September 20, 2022 Instagram post by rhode, Hailey Bieber’s skincare company promoting their philanthropic arm’s partnership with I Am a Voter. rhode shared a simple, empowering message directing people to check their voter registration status with a text message.

Source: [rhode.instagram](https://www.instagram.com/rhode)

## 2. Articulate Goals and Measure Your Impact

As a celebrity, actively contributing to civic engagement without establishing clear and specific goals increases the risk of a low-impact effort. Establishing clear objectives that align with the celebrity's audience and effectively engage them is essential for success, as is tailoring that engagement to reflect the celebrity's authentic voice and personality.

Registering more voters—whether “more” is 50 or 50,000—is a clear goal, but the ability to measure the relative success of these goals keeps celebrities motivated to use their star power to accomplish them. Measuring this impact is both an essential component of celebrity civic engagement work and, at the same time, often its most underdeveloped and underutilized. While having more famous people involved in democratic advocacy is a net societal good, not measuring the impacts of civic involvement can lead to missed opportunities to maximize effectiveness or, worse, leave the celebrity feeling that their involvement didn't actually make a difference, perhaps dampening their future enthusiasm for participating in civic engagement projects.

Civic-focused companies and nonprofits offer many tools to help track celebrities' civic impact metrics, with unique URLs in calls to action being one of the simplest and most effective. For instance, David Dobrik's raffle requirements allowed his nonprofit partner to track the number of people who checked their registration status, registered to vote, requested an absentee ballot, or looked up their polling place.<sup>81</sup> These URLs are generally quick and easy for any nonprofit to create, and (usually) nonprofits are happy to share results in real time with the celebrities. It should be noted that fundraising platforms also routinely make use of unique URLs to track donation sources, so any civic endeavor that involves soliciting donations for an organization is easily trackable.

Using tools to measure celebrity impact through civic engagement gives those celebrities and their teams concrete accomplishments to celebrate and evaluate for future efforts. Hard metrics help teams capture lessons for further civic engagement work, allowing them to improve on campaigns and expand their goals over time. Metrics also provide clear examples of success to share with other celebrities, aiding in recruitment for similar efforts.

While this report details a growing body of evidence supporting the less concretely measurable accomplishments reported by celebrities and their managers and teams, it is important to note that celebrities have not formalized their civic engagement approaches to the same extent as many advocacy groups or even companies, as highlighted in our 2019 case study on corporate civic engagement. For example, companies have become more rigorous in their approaches to civic programs, putting a greater emphasis on testing messaging, measuring impact, and/or vetting nonprofit partners. Celebrities can scale their impact even further by employing some of the tactics in the ladder of engagement above, mirroring the approaches of many corporations.<sup>82</sup>

### 3. Big Activations Do Not Always Equal Big Impact; Understand Your Audience and Voice

A through line of success in many of our interviews and celebrity activations is that authenticity is key to success. When the content aligns with a celebrity and their brand, it is more likely to be received positively. In fact, none of the celebrities involved in the nonpartisan efforts we investigated experienced any notable backlash. While there will always be trolls criticizing social impact campaigns, no alarms were raised by the press or online.<sup>83</sup>

Part of this positivity can be explained by the authenticity of the activations and their clear connection to the celebrities' brands. David Dobrik and HeadCount's Tesla giveaway to promote voter registration was specific and authentic to Dobrik's brand. "The Daily Show with Trevor Noah's" poll worker recruitment effort merely added an action component to existing coverage of the poll worker shortage. Questlove, already known for DJing to support philanthropic causes, smoothly transitioned to democracy- and election-focused causes. Hailey Bieber often shares simple, selfie-style videos speaking to her audience; according to rapid message testing conducted by the Civic Responsibility Project through GrowProgress, when she posted about what's at stake in the midterms and urged people to vote, it felt persuasive and genuine to her audience, especially compared to other highly produced celebrity advertisements.<sup>84</sup> These activations, specific to each celebrity, demonstrate that authenticity moves the needle on civic engagement.

Understanding a celebrity's audience allows for authentic activations and effective engagement efforts, as seen in the graph below. For instance, a YouTuber's young fan base may be an ideal target for voter registration outreach and reminders, while a TV host's older audience is a better target for more time-intensive volunteer work. Younger audiences may be more inclined to purchase and wear an edgy, pro-democracy T-shirt, while a better push for, say, older women could be pricier and more subtle jewelry. Additionally, the various demographics of a celebrity's fan base can help inform their selection of partner organizations. Working with a nonprofit that aligns culturally with a celebrity's audience will resonate more deeply with that base and lead to more successful civic activations.

It's also important for celebrities to temper their expectations when it comes to the performance of advocacy posts on social media relative to their general posts, especially if this is a new area of engagement for their audience. A crucial takeaway from our interview with Influence Change, Kerry Washington's nonprofit, is that while civic engagement posts can generate a high return relative to most nonprofit or campaign calls to action, these posts do not typically perform as well in terms of likes and comments compared to typical celebrity posts. Success for social media-focused campaigns should be judged in comparison to other advocacy posts, not by the usual engagement metrics. As one member of Washington's team at Influence Change put it, "Kerry [Washington] wanted to be able to maintain her digital community while educating and engaging them about important issues or driving them to organizations that would resonate."<sup>85</sup>

All parties involved in a celebrity-focused civic activation campaign must remain aware and respectful of each other’s relative expertise regarding audience, authenticity, and effectiveness. Celebrities and nonprofits approach democratic efforts from vastly different perspectives and have very different skill sets and methods. An organization may, for example, ask a celebrity to attract major donors to a fundraiser, but that celebrity may better understand that such engagement contradicts the narrative of inclusivity central to their own brand. Celebrities should never feel uncomfortable declining activities that are a poor fit for them.

### AUTHENTICITY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT TRAIT FOR INFLUENCERS WHILE “HAVING A LARGE FOLLOWING” IS LESS SO

When deciding whether to follow an influencer on social media, how important are the following?

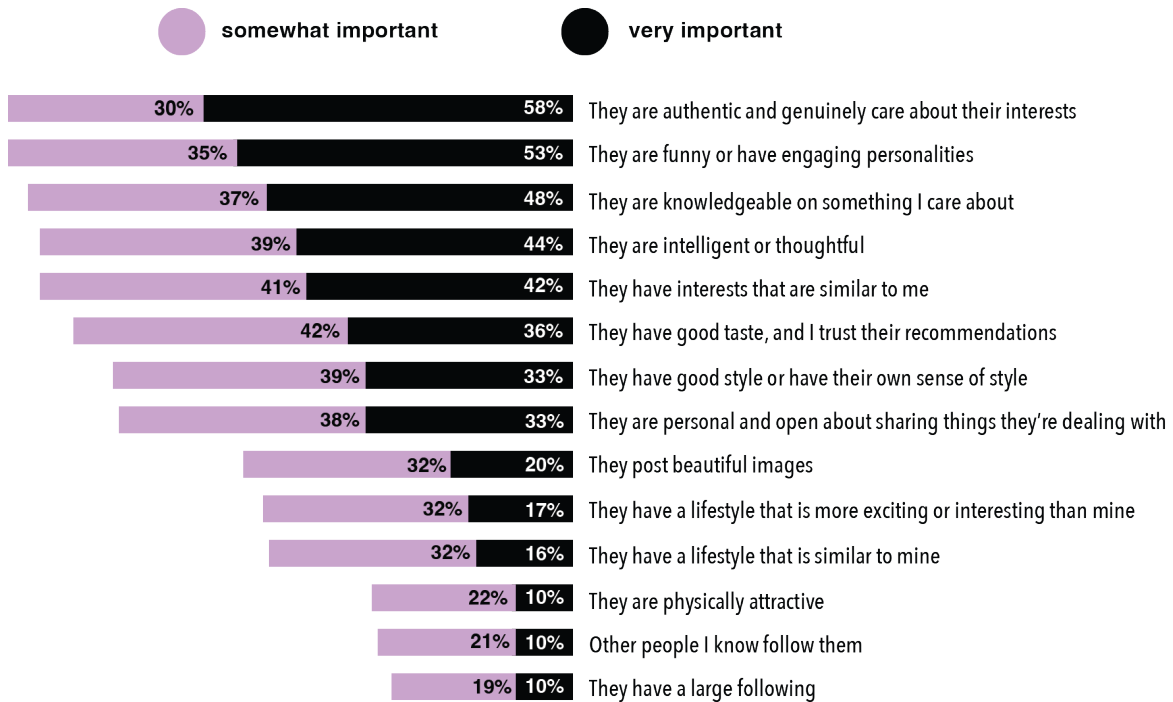


Figure 6: Graph of the importance of different factors on an individual’s decision to follow an influencer on social media. Authenticity is the most important trait at 58%, and having a large following is the least important trait at 10%.

Source: [Morning Consult Pro](#)

#### 4. Find the Right Partners and Civic Engagement Experts

Civic engagement remains uncharted territory for many celebrities, even those with a keen interest in using their brand to improve democratic society. Easing the path to entry is essential for boosting celebrity involvement in this space. An important aspect of this is connecting celebrities with partners that fit their brands and can help them meet their civic engagement goals.



Image 13: Logos of civic engagement organizations, including BallotReady, Civic Responsibility Project, Election Hero Day, HeadCount, I am a voter, Influence Change, National Voter Registration Day, Pizza to the Polls, Power the Polls, Vote Early Day, Voting Information Project, and The Team.

Celebrities themselves, even with their massive audiences and well-known brands, often find themselves siloed when it comes to their specific fields. However, civic engagement may be an exception to this tendency, according to Shawn Sachs, a political alumnus who works in the celebrity entertainment PR and political advocacy space. Sachs believes that celebrities engaging in civic activism have fostered “connection amongst folks who do this work.”<sup>86</sup> Now, celebrities are taking their lessons from these experiences and sharing them with one another.



## Tips for Celebrities and Their Teams on Finding the Right Partners and Experts

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While it is not necessary for celebrities to partner with nonprofit organizations for civic engagement work, many celebrities and their teams find the expertise these civic leaders lend to be very helpful. Whether a celebrity is exploring a formal/public partnership, considering participating in a nonprofit campaign, or simply seeking advice and resources, it is important to have a vetting process that will ensure clear expectations on both sides. Here are a few helpful considerations:

- **SET CLEAR PARAMETERS.** Before making partnership decisions, celebrities and their teams should try to identify and articulate their goals and needs. Celebrity teams should clearly communicate these to potential partners. The strongest nonprofit leaders will be able to both articulate their goals—including where they are different from your goals—and be strategic about identifying shared interests. Conversely, such leaders can also be upfront about significant differences that might prevent a successful partnership.
- **MAKE SURE IT FITS WITH YOUR BRAND.** Organizations should be able to articulate which voters they are targeting, what tactics they're using, and whether the intention for the engagement is innovation (testing) or scale (reach). They should situate themselves within the broader ecosystem of organizations and explain why they are the best fit for you. It is important to evaluate these opportunities based on how they fit into your broader strategy and your understanding of your audience.
- **ASK ABOUT IMPACT MEASUREMENT.** Organizations should be able to articulate what success looks like for your engagement and how they will measure it. They should be comfortable with you independently evaluating their efforts and the overall impact of the partnership, should you choose to.
- **AGREE ON HOW A PARTNERSHIP WILL BE DISCUSSED PUBLICLY (IF AT ALL).** You should negotiate how this effort will be discussed publicly, whether by you or the organization, and how to avoid conflating your use of a nonprofit's resources with endorsing the organization or contributing resources. Identify conflicts of interest and set accountability standards to prevent negative repercussions for you or the organization's work.
- **UNDERSTAND IT MAY FALL FLAT.** Celebrity efforts may fail to resonate with their audience or deliver the outcome desired. Social media posts about civic engagement are almost never going to deliver the kind of engagement as normal content—but celebrity teams report those engagements grow over time when the audience comes to expect them. And nonprofits report that, regardless of whether a celebrity post or event goes "viral," these efforts still make a difference.

## Tips for Nonprofits and Experts on Supporting Celebrities

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Celebrities are inundated with requests from nonprofits, and there are dozens of nonprofit organizations that lend advice, research, technology, tools, and staff to support celebrity civic engagement efforts. However, evaluating which organization to partner with can be challenging. Nonprofits can best help celebrities navigate planning and implementation by making clear, concise requests and presenting a plan to measure impact.

- **CONSIDER THE CELEBRITY’S GOALS.** Nonprofits should consider the nature of the existing activism space around the celebrity’s issue of interest and how to best plug in to existing efforts while avoiding potential pitfalls. While these partners may not have specific experience connecting a celebrity to their cause, they can raise helpful flags for those new to this work.
- **UNDERSTAND THE CELEBRITY’S AUDIENCE.** Among the hundreds of organizations dedicated to encouraging voter participation, many target specific segments of the electorate, such as Latino voters, Black voters, voters with disabilities, voters of a distinct age cohort, voters with specialized interests and hobbies, and more. Additionally, many aspects of democratic activism—especially voting or providing financial support—are governed by state-specific laws. An experienced nonprofit can help navigate potential issues while ensuring their work and audience is a good fit for the celebrity.
- **MAKE ENGAGEMENT EASY.** Nonprofits can support a celebrity’s team by providing the staff, volunteers, and/or tools needed to not only succeed in their civic engagement efforts but also to track that success and follow up in a meaningful way. Like celebrity engagement, pro-democracy engagement is most effective when it extends beyond a single touch or action. The most successful movements are built over time, when those involved can evaluate what works and to what extent.
- **BE UPFRONT ABOUT IDEOLOGY.** Many celebrities want to engage in a nonpartisan way, separate from a specific partisan or political agenda. While nonprofit organizations can advance ideas or engage specific communities, most are required by law to be nonpartisan. To that end, celebrities should be able to turn to nonprofit organizations for messaging advice and nonpartisan validation. State and local officials can also be valuable sources of support. Being transparent about the ideological brand a celebrity will be affiliated with is important.
- **SET A CALENDAR FOR ACTIVATION.** Many celebrities have busy schedules with travel and content calendars booked months in advance. Providing a simple timeline for requested activations early in the year can help the celebrity’s team with planning.

“ I believe the most effective use of the spotlight that follows me is to point it toward tools people need to claim their own power. I want people to know that whatever the issue is that you care about, your right to vote is central to having a voice. If we don't vote, we silence our ability to have opinions.

— KERRY WASHINGTON<sup>87</sup>



Image 14: TIME Magazine's cover of TIME's inaugural Women of the Year issue in March 2022 featuring Kerry Washington.

Source: [TIME Magazine](https://www.time.com)

## 5. Money Matters: Talk Openly about the Role of Fees, Funding, and Fundraising

Many nonprofits expect celebrities to promote civic participation for free. While simple activations can usually be done at no cost, more elaborate engagements often come with significant expenses, even if the celebrities themselves volunteer their time. This reality should not be a surprise, as highlighted by almost every case study participant we interviewed.

It's important to discuss budgets upfront and for each party to advocate for their needs. While most celebrities prefer to engage with nonprofits or campaigns at no cost for their time (i.e., no appearance fee), it's important to remember that there is usually a team or business behind these individuals, which may still incur costs. For example, even recording a simple video for online distribution on a celebrity's social media platform may require "glam" (hair and makeup) or production (videographers, lighting, set design). For in-person events, there is usually a manager or assistant who will accompany the celebrity, whose time and travel may need to be covered. The people managing the business side for celebrities will try to quantify the costs of any engagement and ensure their team is compensated in a manner that is fair to them and the nonprofit. As one study participant said, "It's my job to make sure my clients don't lose money, so I like to negotiate as close to a break-even scenario as possible."<sup>88</sup>

More complex activations bring additional costs, as seen in David Dobrik's Tesla giveaway, produced in partnership with HeadCount. HeadCount's staff coordinated the raffle, managed the online voter registration system, and followed up with all contest registrants via a peer-to-peer text message program. These efforts were central to the success of Dobrik's voter outreach and registration initiative. Despite the initiative's scale and impact, the costs were kept relatively low. The social media effort was entirely organic: Dobrik was not paid to promote the initiative,



Image 15: David Dobrik standing in front of a Tesla to promote the 2020 HeadCount voter registration Tesla giveaway.

Source: [SK Pop](#)

and there was no paid social media promotion or advertising. The five Teslas cost HeadCount a total of \$250,000. HeadCount estimated the ultimate cost was \$1 to get someone to check their registration status and \$2 to get someone to register to vote—more cost-efficient than any of the organization’s other programs and most other nonprofit registration efforts.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, HeadCount’s investment in the partnership with Dobrik was an incredibly good use of funds; however, it was not free. Celebrities and their teams engaging in civic activism need a clear understanding of what resources they will supply to make a campaign successful and what others will have to bring to the table.

The bottom line for nonprofits and campaigns is to plan for significant costs for any celebrity engagement. To do so, nonprofits and campaigns must begin to articulate (and measure) the value celebrities can bring to a program and ensure that their funders understand this work is a critical part of any budget. As one interviewee said, “No one has been able to make a real case for real investment in this line of work despite ample evidence it returns exponentially more for the money than many other programs that get funding. It’s high time to have the conversation about making this a core line item in any campaign budget.”<sup>90</sup>

# Conclusion

The data collected for this report contributes to the growing body of work examining the impact of celebrity engagement on civic participation. The cases we examined demonstrate that celebrity participation in civic responsibility initiatives is not only good for democracy but also good for celebrity brands.

One clear finding from our research and interviews is that celebrities do not yet have formal civic engagement programs that allow them to systematically test, track, or report on their impact, despite there being ample ways to do so. Consequently, there is an extraordinary opportunity and potential to grow, mature, and formalize celebrity civic engagement efforts, which can significantly impact civic culture. That being said, the available data indicate that some approaches work better than others.

One of the greatest commonalities between both celebrities and companies when it comes to increasing civic engagement is that authenticity is key. It is the main trait people want to see in influencers they follow: 88% say it's important for influencers to be authentic and genuinely care about their interests.<sup>91</sup> The largest impact is realized by those influencers who are personally motivated and passionate about the cause at hand. Voters respond better to authentic messaging from influencers that conveys personal passion and doesn't require a high production value.

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