

ARTICLE

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PREMIUM

Next Time You Visit the Museum, You Might Get a Pitch to Vote

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ISTOCK

As nonprofits and companies across the country join forces today to promote [National Voter Registration Day](#), an unexpected group of nonprofits is getting far more assertive and creative in the electoral push: museums. Many of them are hoping their visitors will see the connection between public policies and the causes the museums focus on, while others simply want to show their support for democracy.

At the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, in Philadelphia, once a home to notorious criminals Al Capone and Willie Sutton, museum leaders say they want more voters to turn

out and focus attention on criminal-justice issues. Sean Kelley, senior vice president and director of interpretation at the historic site, said promoting voter registration has become core to the museum's mission, which challenges people to think about mass incarceration, public policy, race, and voter disenfranchisement.

"We believe that criminal justice is the civil-rights issue of our time," he said. "We are decidedly nonpartisan, but we also do not claim to be neutral," he said, adding that the museum began voter-registration work leading up to the 2016 election. Since April of this year, it has registered 238 people. Other museums are offering enticements as part of the voter-registration push. Take the Mütter Museum, a medical-history museum associated with the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. In a post on Twitter, it said, "If you register to vote onsite, we'll give you a free pass for a future museum visit." That benefit is worth as much as \$18, depending on entry time.

Kevin Impellizeri, education curriculum developer at the College of Physicians, said only a handful of people have registered to vote since the museum started the promotion two weeks ago. Impellizeri said he will continue the marketing drive until the last day voters can register.

"We're not pushing for specific blocks of voters, policies, or candidates. We're just happy if more people are involved in the process," he said. "I see this as an idea to promote civic health. So much of public health is determined by local, state, and federal legislation."

The Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, Calif., also supported voter registration by promoting local events on social media. Similar promotions were made on the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Columbia Museum of Art, in South Carolina, and the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum, in Canton, Ohio.

Navigating the Law

Behind the effort to get museums more involved in voter education and registration is the American Association of Museums. It is joining more than 3,000 nonprofits and companies promoting voter registration today, including BET, Google, and Viacom. The association is helping museums understand that nonpartisan registration efforts are allowed under the federal law that governs charitable nonprofits. These nonprofits, however, are banned from any partisan electioneering.

Not everybody, even those in elected office, recognizes the role nonprofits are allowed to play in encouraging voting.

Kelley of Eastern State said a state representative during a museum tour once asked him whether its work with voter registration breaks laws. "We contacted our lawyer and found the exact section of the law that allows it," Kelley said. "It's explicitly stated as something that's appropriate for a 501(c)(3)," referring to the part of the IRS code that governs charitable institutions.

ELECTIONS AND CHARITIES: WHAT NONPROFITS CAN'T DO

Nonprofits are allowed to encourage voters to register and turn out, plus help them understand key issues. But they aren't allowed to get involved in anything partisan. Here's what Bolder Advocacy, a unit of the Alliance for Justice, notes are prohibited activities:

- Endorse candidates for public office.
- Restrict rental of their mailing lists and facilities to certain candidates.
- Ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue (for instance, ask candidates if they promise to support the Dream Act if elected).
- Publish or communicate anything that explicitly or implicitly favors or opposes a candidate

Abby Levine, director of Bolder Advocacy at the Alliance for Justice, said nonprofits are especially leery about breaking the rules because they don't want to lose their tax-exempt status over a controversy with the Internal Revenue Service.

"There are many organizations that have made mistakes and have done something inadvertent, and oftentimes nothing happens." Levine said, "But we really try to help organizations so they can be bolder and be more comfortable with what they're doing."

Among the resources used by the museums are kits and guides in multiple languages, tips on how to host a registration event, social-media guidelines, and online blog posts about what most nonprofits can and can't do.

'Take a Stand for Your Mission'

Another advocate for voter-registration day is Mike Murawski, director of education and public programs at the Portland Art Museum. He has used his own social-media accounts to promote voter registration this year, such as one [tweet](#) that said, "Don't try to be 'neutral' but rather take a stand for your mission, for your values, for human rights, and for democracy!"

In an interview, he said, "There are a lot of people that work at and visit museums who think it's an overreach for a museum to do voter education or voter registration and would see that as partisan action. One thing I'm trying to do via social media is to make sure people know there are appropriate roles that nonprofit museums can take."

Kelley, of Eastern State Penitentiary, said it can be difficult to strike the right balance on advocacy versus the kind of partisan politics nonprofits are prohibited from, but it's important to try.

"Some members of our staff get frustrated that they can't say more, but our program is not a platform for the political beliefs of our staff. We're in the business of hosting discussions, of drawing people's attention to critical issues in context," Kelley said. "We try to maintain an open mind to multiple viewpoints. We make space for those forces."