

Team Voting Rights



Advocacy Handbook 2020

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2020 ADVOCACY

Welcome! This handbook will help you hone your abilities as a Voting Rights Advocate ("VRA") and use them in the most effective way possible to advance pro-voter policies to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans.

I. The top three things you can do right now:

- Get to know your legislators, their committee assignments, and their positions on voting rights issues.
- Get to know your local election officials. This is either your county election commissioner or county clerk.
- Make sure your friends and family are registered to vote with their updated information.

II. Become a VRA and join/create a local chapter:

VRAs are our advocacy superstars, the committed individuals who devote time each month to building relationships in their communities and with their elected officials in order to advance pro-voter policies. VRAs have access to special policy news and updates from the Civic Nebraska, along with exclusive training, resources, and information to help them build relationships with their legislators and staff. Sign up to become a VRA and we will connect you with the nearest VRA chapter or help you start your own.

III. How to use this handbook:

The handbook is designed so that you may begin anywhere and use some or all of the suggestions. You can read through the entire toolkit to get a broad understanding of how to be an effective advocate. Or you can dive into specific sections, such as how to have an effective meeting with your legislators. While the toolkit and resources were developed with state advocacy in the mind, you will find many of the tips and tools useful in your local advocacy.

IV. Overview of the unicameral (there's no place like Nebraska)

While there are many ways to advocate for voting rights in Nebraska much of our efforts will focus on the Nebraska Legislature. Since Nebraska is a unicameral and has only one legislative body, with 49 senators, we the people are the second house of the legislature. This means we have opportunities for input and advocacy that many states don't have so it is important to take advantage of them. In order to do that here are 5 facts to help you understand the Nebraska Legislature better:

1. Each bill is assigned to one of fourteen standing committees and every bill gets a hearing. Bills must be introduced in the first ten days of session. After a bill is introduced, it is assigned by the Executive Committee to the committee that deals with similar issues. A hearing is then scheduled and every Nebraskan has the opportunity to testify before the committee about the bill.

Beyond testifying at a hearing the time when a bill is in committee provides an opportunity to reach out to senators, even if they are not your own. Action while a bill is in committee can help to advance a pro voting rights bill to the floor or stop an anti voting rights bill from making it to the floor.

2. *There are three types of committee testimony.* Individuals testifying before a committee on a bill can testify either 1) in support of the bill, 2) in opposition to the bill, 3) neutral on the bill.

Civic Nebraska testifies on many bills at the Legislature, and we will let you know on which bills we plan to testify, how we will testify, and why. If you are interested in testifying on a bill on which we have not announced a position, we advise our advocate to choose either support or opposition because many committees do not like to hear neutral testimony.

3. *Bills need to be voted out of committee.* Before a bill can be debated by the full Legislature, the committee must vote it out. This takes a majority of committee members.

When a bill affecting voting rights is in committee and doesn't yet have the votes to advance/or be stopped we will let you know which senators your outreach efforts should be focused to be most effective.

4. *There are three rounds of floor debate.* After a bill is voted out of committee, it is debated on General File for the first round of debate. Most bills only need 25 (a simple majority) votes in favor to advance to the second round of debate, known as Select File, which also requires a simple majority to advance. The last round of debate is Final Reading, where the bill is read into the record and senators vote on whether to send the bill to the governor.

During the rounds of debate its best to reach out to your own senator to make sure they will stand with us. Remember, it is still effective to call or write your senator even if they agree with you because information about how a bill affects their constituents can be useful in persuading other Senators.

5. *The governor can veto a bill.* If the governor vetoes a bill, a senator, usually the senator that introduced the bill, may make a motion to override the Governor's veto. Overriding a veto requires 30 votes.

When a bill reaches the governor, do not hesitate to reach out to his office as well. As an elected official who represents all of Nebraska all advocates should call to urge the governor to pass or veto a bill. If a bill that is pro-voting rights is vetoed, it is important to call your senator and urge them to override the governor's veto.

V. Effective Advocacy: An introduction to advocacy tools:

To properly advocate for or against any policy it is important you are both passionate about the issue and have at least a baseline knowledge on the subject. Civic Nebraska has information on various voting rights issues facing Nebraska available at <https://www.civicnebraska.org/voting-rights/election-policy-research/> or you can reach out to Civic Nebraska's voting rights staff at 402-904-5191.

Another great way to learn more about voting rights issues facing Nebraska is to schedule a policy briefing for you and others in your area, found here: <https://goo.gl/forms/zBmmRtN2hVUVouoQ2>. Legislators receive many competing messages on a wide variety of issues affecting their constituents. Doing some advance preparation will help ensure that your message is heard.

Once you have the information it is time to take action. Here are three easy steps to get started:

- Visit our Voting Rights Advocate page.
- Decide the voting rights issue/issues for which you would like to advocate.
- Pick a contact method and platform with which you are comfortable.

VI. Do your homework, know what matters:

Sometimes legislators vote based on ideology or party unity, however, they do not have predetermined views on every single issue that comes before them. Constituents play an important role in educating them about the right policy choices to make. This can make the difference on a bill that affects voting rights.

A. What motivates legislators:

- Personal stories told by constituents. These provide an emotional hook and an engaging way for them to talk about the issue with their colleagues and the press. See *Crafting a Compelling Story* for a template for how to do this.
- Data about the economic impact a policy would have on their district or the state.
- Hearing from dozens or hundreds of their constituents urging them to take a stance.
- Hearing from just a few key constituents; like friends, interest group leaders, or others who have built a strong relationship with them.

B. Get to know your legislator:

Before communicating or visiting with your elected officials or their staff, do some basic research on them or reach out to Civic Nebraska's Team Voting Rights so we can fill you in. Easy first steps include following their social media accounts and reading about any media stories they may have been quoted or mentioned in.

C. Some important information includes:

- Their personal history: Do you have anything in common?
- Their election history: Are they facing an election or primary this year?
- Committees on which they serve: Do they have a role in committees that address voting rights issues?
- Issue interests: Do they care deeply about voting issues and elections? Knowing where your legislator stands will help you talk about voting rights in terms that are most likely to resonate.
- Learn something about his or her views on key issues. Is your legislator a fiscal conservative focused on return on investment? Is your senator a veteran? Has he or she championed senior citizen issues or disability rights? You can email votingrightsemail@civicnebraska.org to find out if we've worked with that legislator on voting rights issues before.

D. Know your issue and your objective:

Develop a clear understanding of what you hope to convey and what you want to accomplish as you plan for a scheduled meeting, hearing testimony, or prepare to send correspondence.

- Have a clear "ask" -- something specific you will be asking the legislator to do
- Prepare to share a story to put a human face on the issue

- Be able to answer questions on the issue or know how to get answers
- Know the arguments for and against the issues you want to discuss
- Address objections your opponents are likely to raise
- Make use of Civic Nebraska's one-page summaries of the specific voting rights issues or legislation for which you plan to advocate

V. The staff:

A senator's staff is a tremendously important part of the legislative process. They are responsible for doing much of the hands-on work required for passing, or defeating legislation. Staff will often have issue-area expertise, and legislators rely on them for advice and guidance when it comes to taking positions on particular issues. To have maximum impact with your senator, you will need to cultivate strong relationships with his or her staff.

Each Nebraska senator typically has 2 staff members a Legislative Aid and an Administrative Aid. Committees have professional staff that assist legislators in the deliberations of those committees. These staff are often issue experts with influence over bills before their committee. Refer to the resource section for a list of important committees. Don't be concerned if you meet with staff instead of the legislators themselves. When reaching out to staff about policy issues, always begin with the Legislative Aid ("LA") for that issue.

A. It's not just about one meeting: Build a relationship your senator and their staff:

If your elected representatives knows you as a voter, constituent, friend and supporter, they are likely to be more responsive to you than if you only contact them when you are in need. Connecting with your legislator is important even if you did not vote for them or they may disagree with you on some policy issues. If legislators don't seem to care about voting rights policy, it doesn't mean you should ignore them. Rather, you need to make more of an effort to educate and influence them about the importance of your issues.

B. Ways to build relationships with legislators and their staff:

- Invite them to an event you are hosting. This allows them to get a first-hand understanding of your work.
- Attend in-district events such as town hall meetings. These are a great way to bring your issues to their attention and speak with them personally.
- Say thank you. Legislators and their staff are constantly bombarded by requests and demands, often couched in less-than polite terms. Showing appreciation for their position or vote on a particular issue means a lot to legislators and staff.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper mentioning your legislator when he or she supports or otherwise advances voting rights issues.
- Become a Voting Rights Advocate because "all politics is local." Advocates highlight the local impact of voting rights policies -- and when votes come down to the wire, their relationships with legislators give them outsize influence in tipping the scales. Civic Nebraska will give you the tools and help you need to build these relationships.

C. Craft a compelling story:

When you are talking to a legislator, stories about the work you do as a voting rights advocates are the most important part of the conversation. They get to the "why we exist" question, are engaging, and help people remember the policy details as you slip into the story the way you slide spinach into your lasagna without the kids knowing. When telling your story, keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is your storyteller?
- Who is your audience?
- How do you want your story to move your audience to action?
- When should your story be shared?
- Where or how can you tell the story?
- How does this story relate to your work/others?

If you need more help crafting your story reach out to Team Voting Rights at Civic Nebraska.

VI. Ways to stay in contact with legislators:

A. Finding contact information:

You can find your State Senator and their contact information at https://nebraskalegislature.gov/senators/senator_list.php. Staff keep a tally of the contacts they receive on particular issues, so they can report to their boss the number of constituents that have contacted them for or against that issue. There are numerous ways to contact your elected officials. Here are some tips on how to be effective with those different ways.

B. Tips for writing letters or emails:

- The email means more coming from a constituent.
- Keep the message short and to the point, and be sure to proofread. Use appropriate grammar and avoid typos.
- Use the legislator's title and last name (e.g., Dear Senator Smith) in the salutation line.
- Tell your legislator specifically what you would like them to do in your opening sentence (e.g., vote for Legislative Bill 1, or contact Chairman Jones and ask him to agree to XYZ).
- Support your request with two or three sentences of relevant facts, avoiding jargon and acronyms that they may not understand.
- Share with your legislator how the people in their district who will be affected by the proposal under consideration.
- Use a polite tone. Avoid ALL CAPS and other things that can seem negative or threatening.
- Politely request a commitment for their support.
- Attach any relevant materials, such as one-pagers from Civic Nebraska, on the issue about which you are writing.
- If you don't receive a written reply, telephone response, or letter within a month or so, feel free to e-mail or write again and enclose your original message.
- Once you get a reply, be sure to thank the person who sends it to you and commit to remaining in touch with her or him.
- If you receive a response with which you disagree, e-mail or write your legislator again and politely commit to remaining in touch on this important issue.

C. Tips for an effective meeting:

There is no substitute for the opportunity to communicate face-to-face with your legislator. They get to hear your story, unfiltered and direct from you, and gain a sense of your dedication to issues important to you and others within your community. *Don't be intimidated.* Your representative wants to hear from constituents.

D. Before the meeting:

- Pick your "ask" and select supporting points or stories you want to share. It is better to focus each meeting on one issue than to bombard them with multiple requests.
- Don't hesitate to meet with staff if the elected official is unavailable.
- Show up 10 minutes early. Never be late yourself, but be understanding if the legislator or staff are late.

E. During the meeting:

- Always address your legislator as "senator," even if you already know them.
- Focus on one issue per meeting, and assume you will have 10 minutes to make your case.
- Don't forget to ask for something concrete. For example, "Please sign on as a co-sponsor to LB..." is better than "Please support voting rights policies."
- Tell them a little about yourself.
- Answer questions the member or staff may have. If you aren't sure of the answer, tell them that you will find it and get back to them. Never provide inaccurate or false information.
- Leave them brief information on the issues you are discussing. Civic Nebraska one-pagers with bullet points are best.
- Thank them for their time, and ask what you can do for them.

F. After the meeting:

- Always send a brief thank you within a day or two of your meeting. In the same email, offer to answer any additional questions.
- Send the documents you provided during the meeting if you weren't able to send them before the meeting.

G. Calls

Here is an example script anyone can use as an outline. It is important to remember the more personal you can make your reasoning for supporting or opposing a bill, the more effective it will be in persuading elected officials. This script should be used as an outline or guide.

H. Example script:

Hi,

My Name is_____. I'm a constituent of Senator _____ and I wanted to call/write/email and urge the senator to stand up for Nebraskans and our voices by supporting/opposing_____. I believe _____ is good/bad because (Pick one or two messages from one-pagers, or another reason you are for/against bill).

Please let the Senator know _____ would be good/bad for their constituents and the entire state of Nebraska. Thank you.

I. Why you should testify:

Testifying at a hearing is a chance to make your voice heard by those making the decisions. Senators can see the support or opposition to the bill based on who shows up. When listening to testimony Senators pay attention to whether the room is only lobbyists or if a bill has enough passion and support behind it for regular citizens to show up. Remember, half the battle is showing up so anytime you are able to attend a hearing on a piece of voting rights legislation, please do! If you cannot attend a hearing but still would like to testify you also have the option to submit a letter to the committee chair by 5 pm the day before the hearing in order for it to be added to the official record.

J. Things to remember about testimony:

- It is usually a relaxed and fairly easygoing experience and sometimes pretty funny.
- Your stance on supporting voting rights will be recorded for history!
- Testifying is a great way to stand up for your voting rights.

K. How to testify:

Civic Nebraska will send out alerts as bills we support or oppose get hearing dates so you will know when voting rights bills are having hearings. You can come to the legislature in person or send a letter or email to be added to the record. When writing your testimony it should be structured similar to placing a call or letter to your senator. At the beginning of your testimony say and spell your name then give your opinion on the bill, a story or relevant facts to support your opinion, and an "ask" that the senators on the committee either support or oppose the bill. Don't forget to keep it concise and remember that Civic Nebraska is available to help you prepare your testimony.

Don't feel like you need to be an expert to testify on a bill. As long as you have a basic understanding of the bills goals and how that would affect you, your community, and Nebraska you're in great shape.

VII. What to do when a legislator says...

During your contacts, legislators will have a variety of reactions. The examples below provide some suggested responses to various comments. Also, don't forget to update Civic Nebraska to the outcome of any visits or meetings about voting rights legislation.

A. How do you respond?

- "This sounds great! I'll sign on to everything!"

Thank them and let them know that you'll be in touch to follow up. Sometimes legislators agree to take specific actions but will forget if not prompted, so it's important to have their LA's contact information.

- "I'm interested. What can I do?"

Thank them and refer to the immediate actions/requests that are listed on the fact sheets. Let them know that you will keep them posted on any future actions, such as signing on to legislation.

- "Sounds interesting. I'd like to learn more."

Legislators, especially those recently elected, are often unwilling to make commitments the first couple times they are asked. This is in part because they simply cannot agree to everything that is asked of them and/or are eager to learn more about an issue before making a decision. If you get this reaction, thank them and let them know you are happy to serve as a resource.

"I've always opposed expanding voting rights."

Be polite, but persistent. Let them know that while you disagree with them, you hope that the legislator or staff might be willing to take some time to learn more about the value of voting rights.

B. Record your interactions:

- Let us know what your state senator says. Once you contact your senator, go to <http://bit.ly/sen-response> to help us keep track of what senators are thinking. It is important to log all contacts and conversations with elected officials and their staffs. This helps Civic Nebraska to understand which elected officials are hearing from constituents and what arguments are working, to make better use of our resources.

VIII. Letters to the editor guidelines:

- Relate your letter to something currently in the headlines.
- Explain how this issue relates to you.
- Be clear, concise, and accurate.
- Don't be mean or rude.
- Have a call to action.

A. Example 1

As a student who turned 18 just a few months before the 2016 election, I was eager to make my voice heard last fall. I registered to vote and had no problem voting on Election Day, but sometimes the voting process isn't so straightforward. Inaccurate and incomplete voter rolls make the process hard, depriving a citizen of their right to vote.

LB290, introduced by Sen. Vargas in the Nebraska Legislature, will help alleviate this problem by changing voter registration at the DMV from an opt-in to an opt-out system. This means if LB290 passes, citizens will be registered to vote when visiting the DMV. This change saves state money and keeps registration records accurate, ensuring the security of our elections. LB290 needs our support.

B. Example 2

When I registered to vote in Nebraska, I was asked to submit enough personal information that one could easily steal my identity. I submitted this information willingly, trusting that my state government would take seriously the task of protecting this information.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election and reports of Russian hacking, I do not believe the security of Nebraskans' personal information is being taken seriously at all. It is the responsibility of our Legislature, especially the Government, Military, and Veterans Affairs Committee, to protect the integrity of our elections and personal information. It must be a priority of our Legislature to keep voter rolls secure, and Nebraskans deserve a system capable of encrypting sensitive voter information to do that. Our Legislature must take action to prevent our elections from being influenced by outside forces.



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