



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OUR VOTE, OUR POWER: LIFTING UP DEMOCRACY'S VOICES IN THE GARDEN STATE

Low voter turnout is a persistent problem in this country, and New Jersey is no exception. This is particularly true for state and local elections. Consistent with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice's core belief that the best way to understand behavior is by listening to the community – and that the best way to make policy change is “from the ground up” – we decided to ask people why they think their communities are not voting.

We partnered with Topos Partnership, a national research firm with experience in both election and voting research, to ask Newark residents about their thoughts on Newark, why they think people do not vote, and what they think of various civic engagement policies.

The interviews form the foundation of the Institute's report, *Our Vote, Our Power: Lifting up Democracy's Voices in the Garden State*.

We combined the responses of Newark residents with in-depth research to identify four major barriers to democratic participation in New Jersey.

Then, to address these barriers, we recommended a number of policies.

BARRIER #1: Lack of Voter Knowledge

Many voters do not have knowledge about how each part of the government works, about when elections are, and about who the candidates are.

Policy Recommendations:

- Civics should be mandatory for high school and college students
- Consolidate all elections to November
- Eliminate barriers to candidate information and voting for non-English speakers and people with disabilities

BARRIER #2: Systemic Barriers to Voting

There are a number of obstacles to casting a vote, ranging from registration challenges to busy schedules on a weekday.

Policy Recommendations:

- Require employers to provide paid time off to vote
- Set minimum early voting requirements
- Institute same-day registration, including on Election Day

BARRIER #3: A Restricted Electorate

Artificial restrictions on who can vote have limited the democratic process.

Policy Recommendations:

- Restore the vote to incarcerated people
- Lower the voting age

BARRIER #4: Limitations to our Representative Democracy

Too many people decide not to vote because they believe that the system is not responsive to them and the winners seem predetermined.

Policy Recommendations:

- End the party line
- Make our Legislature full-time and pay a full-time wage
- Adopt term limits for local offices

Our Vote, Our Power: Lifting up Democracy's Voices in the Garden State asserts that with the implementation of the recommended policy recommendations, New Jersey can build a robust, equitable, and representative democracy – a democracy where every person knows that our vote is our power, and our power is our vote.