

Democracy, Voter Turnout, and Public Health

A strong democracy matters to public health: How to talk about it, starting with voting

Democracy and public health are deeply connected.

Democracy and civic participation influence the public's health and wellbeing, and advancing the public's health is fundamentally part of creating a free and fair society.

- In a strong democracy, leaders are accountable, decisions are guided by science and community wisdom, and all people benefit from shared resources like clean air, safe workplaces, and access to healthcare. We see how our lives are connected, and that freedom to make choices about our own health should not harm others.
- Healthy people make democracy stronger. People experiencing poor health face higher barriers to civic participation.¹ They may lack the time, physical energy, mobility, or social inclusion required to navigate voting and other civic actions.

People across the political spectrum want a stronger democracy.

National polling² shows that most people prefer to live in a democracy, view democratic principles as central to U.S. identity, and care about the future of democracy. These include free and fair elections, checks on power, freedom of speech, a fair justice system, and an honest government. They see a wide gap between the ideal and the reality. They say polarization is a major obstacle, and believe debate and compromise are vital.

It's powerful for public health leaders to talk about protecting and improving both public health and democracy.

Voting strengthens both democracy and public health.

Voting is just one piece of democracy, but it's a critical and timely piece. Voting strongly influences the public's health. Leaders we elect and votes on issues shape rules, funding, and resources for healthy conditions in our communities. People who face barriers to voting aren't represented in policy decisions, which directly leads back to worse community health outcomes.

Strengthening democracy, including free and fair elections, is a public health strategy.

Public health professionals can confidently talk about the benefits of a fair and representative democracy to the public's health (in accordance with your institutional policies). You can model and encourage civic participation, including voting and actions to protect free and fair elections as well as year-round actions like participating in civic dialogue. **This guide, including tips and a worksheet, supports you to talk about democracy specific to your issues and audiences, and in your own words.**

¹ Health and Democracy Index. Institute for Responsive Government. <https://democracyindex.responsivegov.org/>

² U.S. Democracy Narrative Research + Findings Report, December 2025, pages 16-17. https://prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/US-Democracy-Narrative-Research-Findings-Report_FINAL_Dec-5-2025.pdf

Tips for public health professionals

From the [Pro-Democracy and Public Health Narrative Playbook](#) and [Health & Democracy](#):

Center core values: These shared, evidence-based values are strongly linked with democracy:

PROSPERITY thriving	FAIRNESS equity and justice, dignity	RESPONSIBILITY
FAMILY / BELONGING interdependence, compassion, respect	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH courageousness	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY authenticity	FREEDOM	REPRESENTATION

Connect the public's health and democracy: Make it clear that the public's health is strongest when it is grounded in an inclusive democracy.

Focus on everyday benefits: Connect public health and democracy to the tangible things people care about. In the case of voting, the data from the [Health & Democracy Index](#) is clear:

- **Voting impacts health:** The healthiest states have accessible voter registration and the highest levels of civic participation. Votes shape rules, funding, and resources for healthy conditions in our communities.
- **Health impacts voting:** People in poor health face higher barriers to voting. They may lack time, physical energy, mobility, or social inclusion to navigate the process; therefore, they aren't represented in policy decisions, leading to worse community health outcomes.

Use accessible language: Avoid jargon about both public health and democracy, which can make people feel excluded or talked down to.

Highlight shared responsibility: Emphasize that we all contribute to the health of our community and the health of our democracy. Voting is key, along with taking actions that protect both ourselves and each other, as well as speaking up and participating in decisions.

Practice humility and honesty: Acknowledge that public health and democracy are not perfect, haven't always gotten it right, and depend on both civic participation (voting, community engagement, and input) and accountable leadership to improve.

Encourage action: Public health leaders can provide paid time off for staff to vote, and can advocate for vote by mail and online voter registration. Public health clinics can share nonpartisan voter registration in waiting rooms. See this [tipsheet](#) for details on defending the vote. For additional ideas: Health & Democracy's [Recommended Policies](#) page, [VotER's page of free voting resources](#), and [HealthBegins' Election Engagement Guide](#).

Public health and voting

A guide to shape your messages

1. Clearly define your audience

Who do you want to talk to about why democracy and voting matter to your public health issue? Be as specific as you can (e.g., “people in my town who are concerned about access to healthy food” not “the public”).

2. Identify trusted communication channel and messengers

- What communication channel(s) will be most effective for reaching your audience (social media, press release, one-on-one conversations)?
- Who is the most effective (i.e., trusted) messenger for this communication? (Hint: It may be a new or even unexpected ally.)

3. Identify your call to action

How can your audience take action to strengthen democracy and public health? Be specific. How can you support them with information, resources, coalition-building, etc.?

4. Craft your message:

Write a crisp sentence for each of these prompts:

- What is the public health issue you are addressing?

- Why does it matter to your audience?

- Why will strengthening democracy by voting make a difference for this issue and in the lives of your audience?

- What do you want them to do?

Double-check your message against the tips on the prior page. Be sure it:

- ☐ Centers core values
- ☐ Connects the public's health and democracy
- ☐ Focuses on everyday benefits
- ☐ Uses accessible language
- ☐ Highlights shared responsibility
- ☐ Practices humility and honesty
- ☐ Encourages action

The next page has sample messages that you can adapt and use. You'll also find many more message tips and examples in the [Pro-Democracy and Public Health Narrative Playbook](#).

5. Plan the actions you will take to *show* as well as *tell* the importance of civic engagement.

Narratives form when many stories and experiences combine to shape a new idea about how the world works. The messages you are creating here build the narrative: ***Advancing the public's health is part of creating a free and fair society. And it depends on all of us.***

Beyond what you say, the actions you take are just as powerful to amplify this narrative. Trusted public health messengers have an opportunity to take action.

- In addition to going to the polls, you might sign up to register voters and become a poll worker. See this [tipsheet](#) for details on defending the vote.
- If you lead an organization, you might include civic engagement in your organization's policies and programs
- You could become an active member of local decision-making bodies
- You could submit a public comment, or flex your citizen muscle by speaking out at a local town hall meeting

All of these actions, along with showing up, listening, and discussing issues with humility, respect, empathy, and compassion, are core to a strong democracy and central to good public health practice. These same actions can help rebuild trust in public health by demonstrating awareness and consideration of community members' emotions, beliefs, and experiences. See the [Pro-Democracy and Public Health Narrative Playbook](#) for more information and resources.

6. Get help if you need it

Members of the [Campaign for the Public's Health](#) can request free technical assistance to apply the narrative to conversations about voting or other issues. To find out more about the Campaign and/or sign up, please email campaign@apha.org.

Putting it together: Sample messages about voting and public health

These messages are meant to inspire—not prescribe—how public health communicators can apply the pro-democracy narrative to talk about the importance of voting. Thank you to Public Citizen, Protect Democracy, and Institute for Responsive Government for input.

Sample messages to use with public health colleagues	Sample messages to use with external audiences
The public's health is stronger in a democracy firmly grounded in freedom, fairness, and shared responsibility to one another. That's why I'm talking about democracy and voting as part of my public health work.	The public's health is stronger in a democracy firmly grounded in freedom, fairness, and shared responsibility to one another. The actions that protect our health in our communities are made by the local, state, and federal government. Your vote matters.
National polling shows that most people—across ideologies—prefer to live in a democracy and care about the future of democracy. But they see a wide gap between the ideal democracy and the reality. They want more debate and compromise, and less polarization. Voting is just one piece of democracy, but it's a critical and timely piece. It also strongly influences the public's health. The leaders we elect and our votes on issues shape the rules, funding, and resources for healthy conditions in our communities. People who face barriers to voting aren't represented in policy decisions, which directly leads back to worse community health outcomes.	In a strong democracy, leaders are accountable to the people and decisions are made openly, guided by both science and community wisdom. When our leaders prioritize our health, we can all live our lives with more confidence. We can count on clean air and water, safe foods, and protection from disease, injury, and violence. We can gather without worrying that our health or safety might be put at risk by others. We have more freedom in our everyday lives. But when leaders fail to act openly or ignore community needs and experience, it's harder for people to protect their health and have a fair opportunity to live well. And when people are not healthy, they may lack the time, energy, mobility, or social support required to navigate the voting process.
As public health professionals, we can talk about why a strong democracy is better for everyone's health. We can support free and fair elections, and encourage people to vote. This directly supports the public's health. It's also an opportunity to keep building trust between public health workers and their communities.	Voting is your chance to have a real say in the choices that affect all of our health. • <i>Here's how you can vote in our community.</i> • <i>Here's how you can volunteer to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to vote.</i>