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Register to Vote at the Library

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Dara Schmidt, Cedar Rapids Public Library

We're trying to get the community involved every day. We're trying to engage and strengthen our communities. Many of us have amazing stats that say our patrons value our service and our community values the library, but we can't win a vote to save our lives...or our libraries. Our users are not our voters. Non users are making the decisions for us. We have to engage. We should be registering our patrons to vote.

In most cities, voter turnout is rapidly decreasing. Presidential elections see a spike, but that spike is still substantially lower than overall voter turnout used to be overall, particularly in mid-term elections. According to the Knight Foundation, (<http://www.knightfoundation.org/features/votelocal/>) 2014 mid-term election voter turnout was the lowest it has been since WWII, with only 36.3% of eligible voters showing up to the polls. In Cedar Rapids, 16% of our registered voters decided the funding fate of the library during a local odd year election, the only time libraries are allowed to put our levies on the ballot by state law.

As libraries, we often talk about trying to make the library easy for our patrons. In Cedar Rapids, it's on our strategic plan. But what about taking it one step further and making civic engagement easy? Making life easy for our patrons? Making registering to vote as simple as checking a box on a library card application?

Some libraries are making it work, but they are few and far between. Oak Park, Illinois has an amazing program where they have specific staff designated as registrars that allow public library patrons to register to vote at the library. But why not make it easier than that? Why not a check box on a form as easy as becoming an organ donor

at the DMV? Want a library card? Fill out this form. Check this box to also be registered to vote. What if it were just that simple? How much would our landscape change?

Or how about really challenging ourselves and even taking it one step further into universal registration: getting a library card automatically registers you to vote so long as you are eligible. If we want civic engagement, this is how we do it. In our city, which mirrors most, we have over 50% of our population registered for library cards. We have new community members coming to see us on a daily basis, talking about getting to know their new city. We check their IDs, give them a card, a book, and a smile. What if we could give them the tools to be a participant in the life of their community?

Some states are doing this already. Oregon is there and Illinois is giving it a fighting chance. But they have partners like the Department of Motor Vehicles. Not libraries. Not the place that is created for information and civic engagement! We need to step up as an institution and say it should be us. How can we help? Twenty-eight states have Automatic Voter registration in consideration. Find out through the Brennan Center if your state is looking and how you can help: <https://www.brennan-center.org/analysis/automatic-voter-registration>

In most libraries, the requirement to register for a card is a picture ID and proof of address. The same can be said to register to vote. It can't be that hard to make this happen and provide the opportunity for our users to become voters. We're starting conversations with our local officials to try and make it happen. What if you did, too?