

Activist Toolkit for the Early Voting Challenge



Coming to
Massachusetts
this year!



What's included in the toolkit?

A 10-step process for volunteering overview

A one-page information sheet for you and to give to officials

Talking points to use about the campaign

A frequently asked questions document

Tips on How to Lobby

A Sample Letter to the Editor

A Sample Warrant Article (for towns)

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The 10-Step Process for Volunteering for the Early Voting Challenge

- 1) Get trained by the Coalition - attend an in-person training session, watch a training session online, or set up an individualized meeting. We will give you an overview of the early voting law, our recommendations, and our campaign goals, as well as instructions on how to get your city or town involved in the Challenge, lessons on how to best communicate with your local officials, and a toolkit of sample materials you can use in your advocacy (including scripts, op-eds, etc.)
- 2) Join a team of other activists from your city or town who are also participating in the Challenge. Have team strategy sessions with a point person from the Election Modernization Coalition, who will help you develop a local action plan. This action plan might include using the citizen's process of introducing a warrant article (included in the toolkit) on early voting to your municipal government, or convincing your executive/legislative branch to implement the early voting recommendations themselves. We will work with you to figure out the best strategy for your hometown.
- 3) Work with your team to contact other town residents who might be interested in showing their support for the Early Voting Challenge. Use lists of supporters provided by the coalition, and also consider reaching out to local civic groups and chapters of state-wide organizations like the League of Women Voters. Invite your new contacts to join you in the process of steps 5-10.
- 4) Contact some or all of the following local officials: your mayor, city council, town manager, board of selectmen, and city/town clerk. Try to set up an in-person meeting to discuss the Early Voting Challenge and lobby them for their support. When talking with them note the need for a more robust early voting program than the minimum required by law, describe the early voting challenge and the coalition's recommendations, and have a conversation about any reservations they might have and how they can be addressed/accommodated.
- 5) If no meeting can be arranged, request a time for a personal phone call to those officials. Have your team members and supporters also make their own calls.

- 6) Whether or not setting up a meeting or phone call was successful, follow these communications with personal letters to your officials, outlining the goals of the Early Voting Challenge and urging them to support the effort.
- 7) Send letters to the editor and/or op-eds to local papers in order to show and build public support for the campaign. Brainstorm other ways of getting the word out such as local list serves or meetings.
- 8) Stay in touch with the Election Modernization Coalition throughout this process and keep them updated on progress being made. **You can report the results of your advocacy directly to one of the coalition organizations you are affiliated with or via our shared reporting Google form, which can be found at: www.bitly.com/EarlyVotingChallengeReport**
- 9) Follow and update your local strategy and communication methods until your local officials have made decisions about their early voting programs.
- 10) Be proud and have fun as you work to expand voting opportunity for your fellow citizens in Massachusetts!

At any point, get more information or direct officials to learn more at

www.EarlyVotingMA.com



Early voting starts in 2016

Will you rise to the Challenge?

The Law

A new early voting law will allow Massachusetts voters to cast their ballots up to 11 days before the election, starting in November 2016. Cities and towns across the state are required to have at least one voting site open during normal business hours during the early voting period. Anything beyond that is up to their discretion.

Going Beyond the Law

The minimum requirements of the early voting law will not be enough to provide an equal level of voting access for citizens in every municipality. To guarantee enhanced voting opportunity for all, local officials will need to implement the law with evening and weekend hours and extra voting sites, commensurate with their population.

Why is this important?

Early voting will modernize elections and increase political participation. It promises to shorten long lines at busy polling locations, especially during Presidential years, improve the voting experience, and give those with busy work, school, and childcare schedules greater opportunity to vote. This can only be achieved if the policy is robustly implemented.



The Early Voting Challenge

The Election Modernization Coalition is hosting the Early Voting Challenge to encourage full implementation of the new law. The Coalition will award gold and silver medals to cities and towns that provide an adequate number of voting locations and hours based on their recommended standards drawn from a report of early voting best practices from some of the 32 other early voting states.

Goals of the Early Voting Challenge	Gold Medal	Silver Medal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have at least 1 early voting site for every 35,000 people.* • Have evening hours at least 2 times per week during early voting. • Have 6 or more hours of weekend time available during early voting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have at least 1 early voting site for every 35,000 people.* • Have evening hours at least 1 time per week during early voting. • Have at least 4 hours of weekend time available during early voting.



Early Voting Challenge Talking Points

Overview of the Law

- In May of 2014, after several years of lobbying by the Election Modernization Coalition, the Massachusetts legislature passed an historic reform of our state's election laws that, among other things, established early voting starting with the November 2016 election.
- The early voting period will start 11 business days preceding the election, and municipalities are required to have at least 1 voting site open during normal business hours. Municipalities can and should opt for more hours and locations, the number of which should be based on their population.

Goals of the Early Voting Reform

- Early voting will increase access to the ballot, improve the voting experience, and reduce long lines at busy polling locations, especially during Presidential election years.
- Early voting helps citizens fit voting into busy work, childcare, and school schedules. The increased accessibility of elections improves voter retention and can moderately boost turnout in some communities.
- If implemented fully and robustly, early voting promises to modernize our democracy and get more citizens involved in the political process.

A Robust Implementation

- As the Presidential Commission on Election Administration said, “[early voting] must be administered in an equitable manner so all voters can have equal opportunity to vote.”
- Citizens in major urban areas like Boston must have the same level of voting opportunity through early voting as those in smaller places like Truro.
- A robust implementation means every city and town provides the level of ballot access that is appropriate for their population's needs.

Coalition Recommendations

- The Election Modernization Coalition recommends municipalities provide at least 1 early voting site for every 35,000 people, as well as offer convenient evening and weekend hours for voting.
- The Coalition has launched the Early Voting Challenge to encourage local officials to pursue these goals.

Cost

- Following the Coalition's recommendations should not be expensive. A Common Cause report on early voting best practices in other states showed the main cost was often ballot printing, which the Massachusetts state government is handling here.
- Concerns over the cost of staff time can be alleviated by shifting some normal business hours to encompass evenings and weekends during the 11-day period.

The Early Voting Challenge

- This is a contest launched by the Coalition to encourage officials to follow best practice standards by offering gold and silver medals to those that implement evening and weekend hours and added sites depending on community size.

Early Voting Challenge Frequently Asked Questions

Can you give me an overview of the law?

In May of 2014, the Massachusetts legislature passed [an historic reform](#) of our state's election laws. As part of that, they established early voting starting with the November 2016 election. Before this, the only way to vote before Election Day was to request an absentee ballot. Our early voting period will start 11 business days preceding the election, and within that period, municipalities are required to have at least one voting site open during normal business hours. But beyond these simple specifications, there is a great deal of flexibility for municipal officials in how the law will be implemented.

What were the goals of enacting early voting in Massachusetts?

Early voting is an important reform meant to increase access to the ballot, improve the voting experience, and reduce long lines at busy polling locations, especially in urban locations during Presidential election years. It will help voters fit voting into busy work, childcare, and school schedules. Experience in 32 other states that already have early voting suggests that the policy improves voter retention and may modestly boost turnout, particularly in low-income areas. Overall, it is an important reform that, if implemented fully, promises to modernize our democracy and get more citizens involved in the political process.

Who does early voting help?

Early voting helps everyone by expanding all voters' opportunity to cast their ballot. In particular though, seniors, the disabled, students, parents, and those with busy work schedules are often benefited the most. As these populations are not always able to get to the polls on Election Day or qualify for an absentee ballot, early voting will expand their access to democracy and allow them to better exercise their right to vote

Additionally, data shows that minority and low-income communities are often aided by early voting, as their demographics are also often those who do not have the ability to take time off or wait in long lines on Election Day.

Why is there a need for a robust implementation of early voting beyond the law's requirements?

As the [Presidential Commission on Election Administration](#) said, "[early voting] must be administered in an equitable manner so all voters can have equal opportunity to vote." This means citizens across Massachusetts must have an equal level of access to the ballot box through their respective early voting programs. Implementing the Massachusetts law at its bare minimum requirements will not ensure that equitable level of access.

Larger municipalities with bigger populations will simply require more voting sites and voting hours for individuals in those areas to have the same level of voting opportunity through early voting as those in smaller localities. A robust implementation means individual cities and towns provide an early voting program appropriate to the needs of their population.

How would a robust implementation be achieved?

A robust implementation of early voting in Massachusetts primarily concerns the number, as well as nature, of the voting sites and voting hours our cities and towns provide. Cities and towns need to provide enough accessible polling locations that are open for voting during the necessary time frames for people to cast their ballots. The two main recommendations are providing both evening and weekend hours, and to provide at least 1 site for every 35,000 people in a given locality.

Overview of the Early Voting Challenge

Municipal Goals	
Gold Medal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have at least 1 early voting site for every 35,000 people*• Have evening hours at least 2 times per week during early voting.• Have 6 or more hours of weekend time available during early voting.
Silver Medal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have at least 1 early voting site for every 35,000 people.*• Have evening hours at least 1 time per week during early voting.• Have at least 4 hours of weekend time available during early voting.

*The City of Boston is so large and so densely populated that the 35,000 figure leads to 17 early voting sites, which may be more than is necessary, especially during the first year of implementation.

For all full research report by Common Cause on the best practices for early voting sites and hours (as well as additional considerations like advertising and cost), please go to <http://bit.ly/EarlyVotingMAReport>. For the recommended standards from the Election Modernization Coalition, please go to <http://bit.ly/MAEarlyVotingRecommendations>.

How much will a robust implementation cost a city or town?

Costs will vary depending on the size of the municipality, but early voting should not pose a substantial financial burden. The state is handling the cost of all ballot printing, and the two main expenditures for a city or town will be for staffing and the venue. If a municipality is able to use their normal staff and shift their normal operating hours to include evenings and weekends, they can minimize their costs.

The Common Cause [report](#), found that towns with populations below 15,000 (as many Massachusetts towns are) reported budgets as low as \$85; none were above \$2,000, and most were a few hundred dollars, and most of those included ballot printing costs.

In larger cities, based on the recommend standard of 1 location for every 35,000 people, the report found an average cost of each extra early voting site to be \$362.84 per location per full day, including ballot printing costs, which the state will be handling here in Massachusetts.

What exactly is the Early Voting Challenge then?

The Early Voting Challenge is a contest hosted by the Election Modernization Coalition, in which local officials are encouraged to implement early voting so that it meets its goals: easing access to the ballot for Massachusetts voters, shortening lines at polling locations, and improving the voting experience. We believe these goals can be achieved through [our recommendations](#) for a robust early voting implementation, and are offering awards (electronic gold and silver medals) to the localities that meet our standards. Participation will be further incentivized with online recognition by the Coalition and a featured status for winners in a future report on how early voting went in its first year. Grassroots volunteers will also support the campaign by directly advocating for the Challenge's goals to their own local officials.

Who is in the Election Modernization Coalition?

The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, Common Cause Massachusetts, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts, MassVOTE, the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, the Massachusetts Voter Table, the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MASSPIRG), and Progressive Massachusetts.

How does the Early Voting Challenge work?

The Challenge is based around the recommendations for implementing early voting outlined in the table below. Local officials in individual municipalities are encouraged to implement a robust early voting program for their community by following our recommended goals. We have already taken steps to notify local officials across the state about the Challenge's launch, and the next step is to now convince individual cities and towns to participate. That is where the volunteer campaign comes in. We are recruiting and training local activist teams to advocate for the Challenge's goals in their home areas through grassroots lobbying, media strategies like letters to the editor, and the introduction of warrant articles and resolutions allocating the resources for robust early voting implementation as needed.

Overview of the Early Voting Challenge

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What can I do to support the Early Voting Challenge?

You can support the Early Voting Challenge in a number of ways! Online advocacy is a good first step, sharing or creating social media posts about the campaign. You can [send a petition your local officials](#) asking for their support. You can submit op-eds and letters to the editor, and you can call, meet with, and lobby your local officials [as part of a volunteer team](#) trained by the Election Modernization Coalition. Please let us know how you want to be involved!

What sort of common objections are there and how should I respond?

Someone says “This isn’t that different from absentee voting.”

Early voting and absentee voting are similar but can be quite different. In many states, and hopefully Massachusetts in the future, early voting takes place on regular ballots that go directly into a voting machine. Absentee ballots always require signing an affidavit form and are usually mailed in. One major difference here in Massachusetts is that there are only three permissible reasons to obtain an absentee ballot: if you will be absent from your city or town on Election Day, if you have a physical disability preventing you from voting at the polling place, or if your religious beliefs prevent you from voting on Election Day. This means if you are just school or at work in the city or town where your polling place is, but you can’t get time off to vote, you do not qualify for an absentee ballot. It is true that many local election officials will give someone an absentee regardless, but voters must perjure themselves in order to get it. That is not right. Early voting, by contrast, opens the door for every registered voter to vote early during the established 11-day period, regardless of reason. Another difference is that the early voting law is flexible and allows communities to have multiple voting sites and convenient evening and weekend hours for voting, meaning casting your ballot through such a program can be more accessible at a location and time that works best for you. There are other differences between the two when it comes to deadlines for returning completed ballots. Early voting ballots must be in by Friday before the election.

Someone says, “It won’t make a difference, our town already has a relatively high turnout and we never have lines.”

Early voting can have a positive effect on turnout, especially in low-income and minority neighborhoods, but that is not its main point. The goal of early voting is to modernize our elections and improve the voting experience. Part of that is to reduce long lines to be sure, but also the increased accessibility it provides allows more people to vote without undue hardship. Perhaps people in your city or town are able to get to the polls and not wait too long in line, but maybe they had to take time off of work and lost a portion of their salary for doing so. Early voting ensures no such trade-offs are necessary to participate in the political process.

Someone says, “We need no excuse absentee voting not early voting.”

Early voting and no excuse absentee voting are not mutually exclusive. We agree that no excuse absentee voting is a long-term goal, but early voting compliments that reform. Many states have both. No-excuse absentee voting requires a state Constitutional Amendment which will take a minimum of four years, and we believe that voters deserve more choices now.

Tips on How to Lobby Your Local Officials

Lobbying is simply the process of convincing any individual to support your position. It requires an understanding of the facts, and it helps to have a personal interest, or commitment, to the issue. Your goal is to convince your lobbying target on the merits of your case, and to never threaten or antagonize.

Be Prepared —Before You Lobby, Do Your Homework

Know Your Issue

Phrase the ‘case for’ in your own words, but make sure you know the basic facts. No one can be expected to address every question or matter of concern regarding an issue, however, so don’t hesitate to admit your lack of knowledge on a particular point. Be willing to pursue the answer and report back.

Know Your Official

Make an attempt to understand the basis for your elected official’s positions, which may include his or her:

- record on related legislation and/or votes (be aware of any prior favorable commitment to your cause);
- party, position, and tenure in legislative and political power structure;
- constituent pressures;
- general predispositions;
- responsiveness to various kinds of personal interviews (sensitivity to legislative attitudes about approach is essential);
- listening to their views is a critical part of the process.

Know Your Opposition

It is preferable to anticipate the opposition and answer their arguments positively before those arguments surface publicly.

Effective Individual Communication

You will be lobbying your own local officials. Because you are a constituent and member of the community, they have an incentive to listen to you. Here are some effective ways to communicate with them:

The Personal Visit

Perhaps the most effective method of transmitting your message, a personal visit allows both of you to connect names with faces. In communication afterward, you will have established yourself as a known concerned constituent. If your official is holding a hearing or workshop, try to attend. It is a good time to meet them informally.

The Telephone

The telephone can be an effective tool. Remind the official of any previous contact.

The Letter

Letters are important for the official and/or staff. The amount of mail on a particular issue frequently helps determine the office's approach to an issue. One well written letter will often prove more weight than a formal petition with many signatures. For this reason, it is generally considered better to express your opinion as an individual rather than as a member of an organization whose positions may already be well known.

You can send your letter in the mail, via fax, or an email. Contact information for all methods should be available on your local government website or by calling town or city hall and asking for it.

Timing

Timing is everything. In most cases, we have a short amount of time before these decisions will be made so the sooner the better, provided that you have been trained. Find out your city/town's budget decision making schedule.

Some DOs and DON'Ts for Lobbyists

DO

- Address your official properly by their elected or appointed title.
- Identify yourself immediately at each contact. Public officials meet too many people to remember everyone.
- Know the status of the legislation or warrant article.
- Use your own words.
- Be brief and explicit, courteous and reasonable.
- Know the issue by studying the material provided and present the argument directly and succinctly.
- Give officials succinct, easy to read literature; highlight important facts and arguments.
- Treat office staff courteously. Their cooperation can make or break your chances to reach the elected officials themselves.
- All correspondence should include your address and your name and signature.
- Keep the door open for further discussion in spite of any apparently negative attitudes.

DON'T

- Don't begin with the line, "As a citizen and tax payer" (your official knows we all pay taxes).
- Don't apologize for taking their time (although a thank you is appreciated). Be brief and to the point and they will be glad to hear from you.
- Don't be arrogant, condescending or threatening toward officials or their staff.
- Don't argue or back recalcitrant officials into a corner where they take a definite position against you.

Sample Letter to the Editor on the Early Voting Challenge

As you and your team work on the Early Voting Challenge, you might utilize the advocacy technique of submitting a letter to the editor (LTE) to local newspapers. This is an effective tool for getting your word out to a wider public audience and influencing local official's opinions through the media outlet. We have provided a sample LTE below. You can feel free to submit it as is, substituting in your community's name and the number of voting sites recommended by our standards for your population, or customize more as you see fit.

To the Editor,

In November 2016, Massachusetts will join 32 other states in launching early voting. If done right, early voting will improve the voting experience by shortening long lines at busy polling places and allowing people who otherwise can't get to the ballot box on Election Day the opportunity to vote. I believe that **[insert your town/city name here]** should be a leader in providing more early voting opportunities to our residents, and I hope we can provide adequate number of hours and locations for the reform to be fully effective.

The new state law only requires municipalities to have one early voting site open during normal business hours for 11 days preceding the election, but that will not be enough for everyone in **[insert your town/city name here]** to be able to take advantage of this new opportunity.

According to a Common Cause report, and the Election Modernization Coalition, following the best practices for early voting from other states would require evening and weekend voting hours, as well as multiple voting sites for cities and towns larger than about 35,000 people. Here in **[insert city or town]**, we need **[insert number of sites recommendations provide for]** sites. There's little cost, and if we meet this goal, the Massachusetts Election Modernization Coalition will recognize our efforts.

But the real value in doing early voting right is in expanding the right to vote, and that is something we can all get behind.

Sample Warrant Article for the Early Voting Challenge

Implementing a robust early voting program in a particular community will be a budgetary decision by local government, in which they need to allocate the resources needed for multiple voting sites and convenient evening and weekend hours of operation. In cities, the mayor and city council will need to be convinced to fund such programs.

In towns, your executive and legislative branches (the town manager and select-board) might also be convinced to provide the finances on their own. However, in cases where that does not seem likely, communities with a town meeting have the option of submitting a citizen's warrant article that would allocate the funding. You can find a sample warrant article you might use below. Please substitute in the warrant article number assigned by your town and insert the number of early voting sites and hours required by our coalition's standards for your municipality's population to earn a Gold or Silver Medal.

ARTICLE XX: Will the town provide for __ early voting sites and 4 (or 6) hours of early voting on weekends and at least two evenings of early voting during the 11-day early voting period established by Chapter 54, Sec. 25B.