



CULTURE | PULSE

LET'S MAKE HISTORY TOGETHER!

How Artists can build a new kind of power in the 2020 Election. By Erin Potts

(Spoiler: Use your creativity and platforms to energize, excite and inspire your own audiences to participate and engage in democracy.)

Hey Artists!

It's election time again, and there is so much that artists can do to continue the trend of historic turnout that started in the 2018 midterms to ensure turn out on November 3rd the highest it's been in generations!!

As you already know, artists of all types have historically played vital roles in past elections by doing things like writing op-eds, creating posters, billboards, online graphics, songs, music videos (like this or this) or comedy videos (like this, this and this or this), producing tours, parties and concerts, posting pictures and get out the vote messages on social media...and so much more. These examples show that artists are able to achieve what others can't, particularly around energizing and activating fans who are not always politically active.

Artists will play an even bigger role in the 2020 election and beyond, not just because of your historic impact, but also your

unique ability to energize and reach new audiences and disrupt narratives. To put it another way, **your art can be the rocket fuel for change that can inspire your fans to participate and to vote, and doing so can build a new kind of power** — one that leaves behind “fake democracy” based on the concept of “power over” others and unleashes true democracy built around “power with” others. True democracy is what will return





political, economic and cultural power to the hands of “We, the People.” But building it will require more participation from everyone — and especially those who don’t regularly engage in it — not just on November 3rd, but through ongoing collective civic and political engagement and action. Democracy, it turns out, is not a noun at all. It’s a verb that requires continual action.

So what can we do together to build this new power? So effing much! Below are a lot of simple ideas. But if you don’t read another sentence, here’s the cliff notes version of this entire article: **The best things that you can do as artists are to use your creativity and your platform to energize, excite and inspire your own audiences to participate in this election.**

Why? Because in the context of such partisan division in America, it is widely agreed that persuading someone to vote for a candidate of another party is less effective than activating those who are eligible but not yet engaged in voting, particularly in key states (see below for a list). In short, “winning” in 2020 is about which candidate or party can get more people off of the sidelines and into voting booths. This effort to “expand the electorate” is a top priority, and both Republicans and Democrats are working overtime to achieve it. All indication is that enthusiasm for voting on both sides of the aisle is neck-in-neck and higher than its been in decades. Where artists are most effective in this effort is in raising enthusiasm and excitement around the election through the culture and content that they create and is already being consumed by would-be voters. In other words, artists are posed to have a massive impact in the upcoming election by working with their existing fans.

The organization that I founded 15 years ago, Revolutions Per Minute (RPM), knows a lot about how artists can best engage around elections – we were literally founded by artists working on the 2004 election who needed more information and resources in order to have the impact they hoped for. And for the past four presidential election cycles and every midterm in between, we have proudly provided that needed support and

strategy to artists and their teams. For our fifth presidential election, we are excited that RPM is becoming a part of The Center for Cultural Power, a new powerhouse of artist activism started by our dear friend and colleague Favianna Rodriguez and staffed by some of the best doers and thinkers in the field. Together, we want to work with you to make history this year.

To that end, below is a bunch of information to help you energize and inspire your fans in the upcoming election. RPM’s Artist Guide, which was written for musicians but can be adapted for other types of artists, can further help you understand more about the strategies talked about in this article and the basics of election law.

Let’s build a new kind of power together!

Best,

Erin Potts / *Cultural strategist and co-founder of RPM*

Ways for Artists to Excite & Inspire Audiences

- ▶ **Start now!** Whatever you do, don’t wait until August or September. See below for ideas of what you can do now and what you can do.
- ▶ **Create & distribute great content!** Content is what drives engagement on the internet, and content is, in some way, shape or form, part of your superpower as artists. The videos, songs, pictures, GIFs, memes, t-shirts, pins, posters, etc. that you can create and curate around the election and for your audience will be so much more engaging to your audiences than what political and grassroots organizations will create. Strategically, we have found that locally-rooted stories and narratives about “co-creating the world we want” engage more people in elections than straight messages about voting. So grab some strategic advice and research (we can help!) and then get your creative juices flowing!



► **Take action — not once, but regularly.** As I said earlier, democracy is a verb and requires action to thrive. A great way to model this is to commit to doing one thing a month or even a week between now and November (see the list of “Ongoing Actions” below for ideas!). You can then challenge your fans to do similar actions. Modeling actions in this way is the most effective way to get your fans engaged. Below we list a lot of ideas of what actions you and your fans can take when.

► **Talk with your fans aspirationally about what excites and inspires you in this election,** and what is possible when we build power together. Have these conversations through your own emails, posts, press, pictures, tours, events, and especially your creative projects! Talk in specifics, things like how you are checking your voter registration, how you are getting to the polling station or requesting an absentee ballot, how you are learning more about the issues and candidates, who are the three friends or family you are giving voter registration info and reminders to, etc. You can also do more subtle things like posting pictures of you wearing or using election related gear.

► **Make a plan for National Voter Registration Day (Sept 22) and the last two months of the election.** National Voter Registration Day on Sept 22, 2020 is a national day of organizing and celebration around voter registration that occurs BEFORE all of the states’ individual voter registration cut-offs happen. This is going to be a big push, so make sure to get your plan for what you want to do around it in advance.

There are a wide range of specific actions that you can take and post about, and then ask your fans to do the same. I have broken them down into three sections below: ongoing actions that you can start today, actions for the last 2 months before the election, and the week of the election itself.

Ongoing Actions

► **Volunteer** for an organization or campaign to knock on doors, phone bank and / or help register people to vote. Make sure to talk with your fans about the experience and post pictures or videos so that followers can see what it’s really like.

► **Highlight the hard work of organizers — especially young people, women and people of color** — in your social media and press. Maybe even bring them as your +1s to award shows and other high-profile events, or shout them out in press or from the stage.

► **Donate or raise money** for the organizations and campaigns you care about. Here are some ideas of the strategies that RPM has been using with musicians for more than a decade. They are easily adaptable to most other types of artists. It would be especially easy for artists to create election-related merch (t-shirts, totes, buttons, etc) and sell them to raise money. Posting pics of yourself wearing these items, or in the press wearing them, has been found to be an effective and easy way to inspire your fans.

September through November 3

► **Register to vote or check your voter registration.** You can do both of these things, and a whole lot more, at <https://www.vote.org/>

► **Register and / or check three of your friends & families registrations:** Pick three friends or family and commit to helping them to vote this year. <https://www.vote.org/>

► **Spread reliable information** about voter registration cut off dates, polling locations and more. There is a lot of wrong election information that gets shared, sometimes purposefully to confuse would-be voters. Here are three reliable sources of information:



- Voter Registration & information: <https://www.vote.org/>
- Election Info & Protection Hotline: 1-866-OUR-VOTE
- Voter Registration Cut-Off Dates by State: <https://www.headcount.org/deadlines-dates/>

► **Talk about your early voting plan.** Exceptionally high turnout is expected in November, and with voter suppression tactics like closing polling stations and voter purging, lines are expected to be very long. So vote early or by absentee to help make the lines more manageable on election day, and talk about it to your fans. There will be a big, national push on early voting in late October that is being called “Vote Early Day” (date to be announced; more info on that will be here when the launch happens, or ping me and I will give you more info).

The week before November 3

- **Find your polling station** & help your three friends & family from above find theirs.
- **Share a multi-lingual voter protection hotline** to call with questions and problems: 1-866-OUR-VOTE or <https://www.vote.org/election-protection/>
- **Help people stay in long lines.** Anyone in line when the polls close has the right to vote. We’ve seen stories of artists performing, sending pizzas, and more to help keep people comfortable, entertained and in line until they can vote. Others have volunteered to drive people to the polls, or pay for Uber / Lyft rides. Another idea is to publish a playlist of recommended music or podcasts that fans can take with them to the polling stations.
- **Post pictures of your “I Voted” sticker** and ask your fans to do the same.

What Not to Do: There are a lot of things that artists get asked to do during elections that are not as effective. They include many of the traditional candidate/campaign-driven surrogate strategies and the dreaded direct-to-camera P.S.A. You can learn more about what not to do in one of my other articles.

Important Dates

This election is a marathon rather than a sprint. But there are some critical dates and times to keep an eye on.

- The debates, primaries and conventions are all listed here. (Scroll down to find a calendar that you can add to your personal calendars so that you don’t miss anything.)
- Voter Registration cut-off dates by states can be found here.
- National Voter Registration Day is Sept. 22, 2020.
- Vote Early Day is late October 2020.
- Election Day is November 3, 2020.

Important Audiences

The Rising American Electorate is a group of demographics that is the fastest growing in the country — people of color, young people and unmarried women. These groups are large in number, hard-to-reach through traditional organizing methods and largely not yet registered to vote. This makes them critical to electoral wins, and highly targeted by candidates of all parties. (You can learn more here.)

I suspect that most artists reading this have audiences that are made up in part or whole by the Rising American Electorate. This means that you are already a trusted resource for these otherwise hard-to-reach groups. Besides, conversations with your fans around the things that you care about (like justice, democracy, a new kind of power, etc.) can deepen your relationship with them.

Research from a project called Story at Scale (which I was a part of) has revealed a new way of thinking about audiences in America based on their values rather than demographics. These audience segmentations give us a better understanding of who these audiences are, where they live and what stories will motivate them the most. You can learn more here.

**Important States**

The table below contains a list of key states in the 2020 election. These states are considered important because of critical races at the state or federal level, ballot initiatives or redistricting, and / or electoral votes for the presidential race.

	State Legislatures (gerrymandering aka redistricting)	U.S. House	U.S. Senate	Presidential (Electoral Votes & 2016 results)	State-based Orgs
Arizona	-	✓	✓	11 - Trump	Living United for Change in Arizona
Colorado	-	✓	✓	9 - Clinton	New Era Colorado
Florida	✓	✓	-	29 - Trump	Engage Miami
Georgia	✓	✓	✓	16 - Trump	New Georgia Project
Maine	✓	✓	✓	3 - Clinton 1 - Trump	Maine People's Alliance
Michigan	-	✓	✓	16 - Trump	We the People Michigan
Minnesota	✓	✓	✓	10 - Trump	Minnesota Youth Collective
North Carolina	✓	✓	✓	15 - Trump	Advance Carolina
Pennsylvania	-	✓	-	20 - Trump	One PA
Ohio	✓	✓	-	18 - Trump	Ohio Student Association
Texas	✓	✓	✓	38 - Trump	Texas Organizing Project
Virginia	✓	✓	✓	13 - Clinton	New Virginia Majority
Wisconsin	✓	✓	✓	10 - Trump	Lit Milk



If you are from or lived in any of these places, you have a special role to play in these efforts! Please go there to volunteer, play shows, knock on doors, raise money, or anything else that you are able to do. The amazing folks at The Hometown Project can also help you connect with actions in most of these states.

And, finally, directing any dollars and volunteers that you can to the groups on the ground who are doing the hard work of democracy building day in and day out will help. Some great ones are listed in the chart above.

A reminder of what's at stake in 2020

It's not just the White House (and all that goes along with who sits in it), but also:

- 35 out of the 100 Senate seats
- ALL 435 seats in Congress
- 11 state governor seats
- Ballot initiatives in at least 9 states around marijuana legalization, criminal justice, voter rights, redistricting and more.

Let's fucking do this!!

This article was written with support from the Center for Cultural Power.

Erin Potts is a pioneer of several innovative social change strategies, a producer of award-winning cultural events and products, and an organizer of unusual—but potent—groups of change makers. Her work started in the 1990s when she co-founded the Milarepa Fund and the Tibetan Freedom Concerts with the Beastie Boys. A decade later, Erin founded Revolutions Per Minute (RPM), a nonprofit providing support and strategy around activism and philanthropy to over 1,300 musicians, which is now a part of The Center for Cultural Power. Over her twenty-five year career, Erin has been a leader in the emerging field of cultural and narrative strategies, and developed

revenue strategies that have earned tens of millions of dollars for social justice. Erin continues this work as a consultant specializing in artist engagement, cultural strategies and cultural research.
