



**THE 2024 ELECTION  
SEASON & THE  
GREAT LAKES**

**HOW TO GET INVOLVED**



ALLIANCE *for the*  
**GREAT  
LAKES**

*Find this guide online at  
[greatlakes.org/VoterToolkit](https://greatlakes.org/VoterToolkit)*

**As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Alliance for the Great Lakes cannot support or oppose candidates or political parties. However, we can – and do – educate candidates and voters on Great Lakes issues.**

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## WHAT'S IN THIS TOOLKIT

As the 2024 election season ramps up, voters are getting ready to cast their ballots. They're researching candidate platforms, attending events, asking tough questions of candidates, and talking with family, neighbors, and friends about the election.

While the presidential election is driving much of the election-year conversation, every office on the ballot, from mayors to the president of the United States, will have the opportunity to influence Great Lakes and water issues once in office.

Federal officeholders set program and funding priorities that can lead to better protections for the Great Lakes – or leave the lakes more vulnerable to pollution. They oversee national agencies that implement clean water laws and regulations. They make budget decisions that impact Great Lakes programs. They determine funding levels that flow into state drinking water, sewage, and stormwater infrastructure funds throughout the Great Lakes region.

While federal officeholders and agencies have significant influence on the health of the Great Lakes, your local mayor, city council members, governor, and state house representatives can have enormous impact on local environmental issues. They oversee agencies that implement clean water laws and regulations, like those set by local environmental departments. They make decisions on issues from local drinking water quality to parks and recreation to your water and sewer bills to reducing plastic pollution that ends up in the lakes.

We need laws and policies that protect and restore the Great Lakes. We must keep pushing for stronger, better safeguards for the world's largest source of surface freshwater. And we must ensure that everyone in the Great Lakes region has access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water, and is safe from community flooding, basement backups, and sewage overflows.

Voters like you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation. You can have an impact by using this toolkit to join the conversation today.





This toolkit will show you how to:

### **Make the Great Lakes and clean water part of the election-year conversation in your area**

- Brainstorm questions to ask candidates about water issues that are important to you
- Ask a question at a candidate forum
- Write a letter to the editor
- Talk with candidates in person, over the phone, or on social media
- Speak out on social media

### **Vote, and encourage others to vote**

- Make your plan to vote
- Learn about the candidates on your ballot
- Encourage others to vote



## **MAKE THE GREAT LAKES AND CLEAN WATER PART OF THE ELECTION-YEAR CONVERSATION**

Right now, you have an opportunity to encourage candidates to stand up for the Great Lakes and hold them accountable once elected.

Civic engagement is a critical part of protecting the Great Lakes. Your voice makes a difference – whether you're asking questions at a candidate forum, chiming in on social media, speaking directly with a candidate, or highlighting water issues in a letter to the editor. People running for elected office pay attention to issues that bubble to the top in all these venues.

Voters like you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation.

## SPEAKING UP:

### What questions do you want to ask the candidates?

Asking candidates for any office where they stand on Great Lakes issues raises awareness, highlights the issues, and allows us as constituents to hold elected officials accountable once they take office. It also helps you and others in the community understand how candidates would govern if elected.

Here are some issues where elected officials at all levels of government can make a difference. Decide which issues you want to make part of the election-year conversation. Then think of a few key questions you want to ask the candidates. Here are some ideas to get you started:

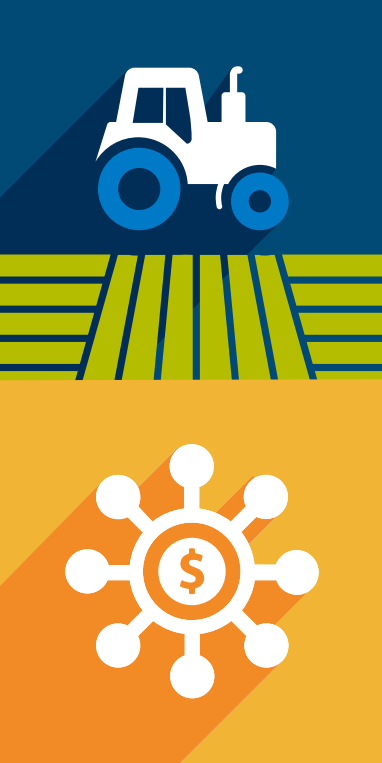
#### WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

No one should be without clean, safe, affordable drinking water in their home. No one should suffer harm from lead service lines. No one should have to worry about sewage backing up into their basement or chronic community flooding that damages homes, businesses, and community gathering places. Yet communities across the Great Lakes region continue to grapple with antiquated drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater infrastructure. These burdens fall especially hard on disadvantaged communities, who too often experience all these water impacts along with other environmental and socioeconomic harms. And with climate change causing more extreme storms and periods of drought throughout the region, our communities face heightened threats to well-being from inadequate and/or failing water infrastructure.

#### Sample candidate questions:

- How would you keep our drinking water safe and affordable?
- What is your plan to replace lead drinking water pipes in our state/our community?
- How will you fund much-needed improvements to our drinking water, sewage, and stormwater infrastructure?
- What is your plan to ensure that water infrastructure funding reaches the communities/neighborhoods most in need? Which communities/neighborhoods do you think are most in need of water infrastructure improvements?
- How would you get community input about drinking water, sewage, and stormwater infrastructure needs and improvements?
- Do you support funding for projects that reduce neighborhood flooding and sewage impacts, such as green infrastructure and other solutions for those hit hardest by these threats to people and property?
- How would you decide which water infrastructure improvements to prioritize?
- What laws, policies, and programs would you promote to ensure that our water is safe to drink? That our communities are free from flooding and sewage?





## AGRICULTURAL RUNOFF

Nutrient runoff from farm fields fuels a bumper crop of algae, causing harmful algal blooms. These blooms can make water toxic to fish, wildlife, and people; create “dead zones” where fish and other aquatic creatures can’t survive; increase downstream costs for drinking water treatment; harm the regional economy; and prevent people from enjoying recreation on the Great Lakes. In August 2014, an algal bloom in Lake Erie left more than half a million people in Toledo, Ohio, without drinking water for nearly three days.

### Sample candidate questions:

- What would you do to reduce nutrient runoff from agricultural lands that pollutes local waters?
  - What standards would you support to reduce agricultural runoff?
  - Most agricultural pollution reduction programs are voluntary. What role does the government play in ensuring that runoff is reduced enough to help our local waters?
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- We’ve spent billions of dollars on voluntary programs to stop agricultural runoff, but there are still harmful algal blooms. What would you do differently to finally address this problem and make better use of taxpayer dollars?
  - How will you help the public get accurate information on whether nutrient pollution is being reduced in our waters?
  - How will you fund programs that reduce agricultural runoff into local waterways?

## MAKE IT LOCAL

While federal and state officeholders and agencies have great influence on the health of the Great Lakes, your local mayor, city council members, and state house representatives also have a big impact. They make decisions on issues from local drinking water quality to parks and recreation to your water and sewer bills to reducing plastic pollution that ends up in the lakes.

The key to advocating locally is to connect the dots between the issue you care about, the public institution responsible, and the public officeholder who has the most influence on that institution. For example, if you’re concerned about increasing water and sewer rates, your city’s water department is responsible for setting rates, and your mayor has influence over the water department.

Some quick detective work by searching your local government webpages will describe which officeholders are responsible for the issues you are concerned about this election. After you have identified the local issue you care about and the candidates who are seeking offices that influence that issue, you can use the tips in this guide to connect with them directly.

## INVASIVE SPECIES

Invasive species have caused irreparable harm to the Great Lakes ecosystem, and have cost the region billions of dollars since the late 1980s. Preventing new invasives from entering is the best way to protect the Great Lakes. We must stop invasive carp by building structural measures that block their path as they make their way up the Illinois River toward Lake Michigan. And we must treat the water in ships' ballast tanks to prevent ballast water from carrying invasive species from overseas to the lakes and from one Great Lake to another.

### Sample candidate questions:

- How will you fund programs and agencies that keep aquatic invasive species from establishing and spreading in our waterways?
- Are there new programs or initiatives that you would support to reduce the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species?
- Studies have shown that ships traveling exclusively on the Great Lakes can spread invasive species in their ballast water. Do you support mandating ballast water treatment for these "Lakers"?



## PLASTIC POLLUTION

More than 22 million pounds of plastic pollution end up in the Great Lakes every year. And plastic never really goes away. Instead, it just breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as "microplastics." Researchers have found stunningly high amounts of microplastics in all five Great Lakes. They've found microplastics in Great Lakes fish, drinking water, bottled water, and beer. Microplastics have been found in human blood, lungs, stool, and even breast milk.

### Sample candidate questions:

- What policies do you support that would reduce waste from single-use plastics in our state/community?
- How would you reduce government purchasing of single-use plastics?
- Do you support bans on the most problematic single-use plastic items, like foam food ware and plastic shopping bags?
- Do you support regulations that allow customers to bring their own refillable containers to grocery stores, beauty care stores, and restaurants?
- How would you hold manufacturers accountable for spilling industrial plastic pellets into our waterways?
- Do you support monitoring our drinking water for microplastics and microfibers?
- Would you support an Extended Producer Responsibility law to reduce packaging waste in our state?

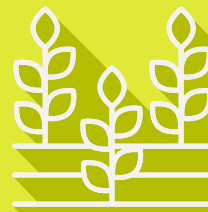


## GREAT LAKES RESTORATION

Restoration projects include everything from cleaning up toxic hot spots to restoring wetlands, reducing runoff pollution, protecting native fisheries, and restoring habitat for fish and other wildlife. Funding for these projects can come from federal, state, and local governments. And many government agencies must often work together to make restoration projects happen, from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to your local parks district or forest preserve.

### Sample candidate questions:

- How will you fund projects that restore local waterways?
- Which restoration projects would you prioritize?
- How will you ensure that restoration projects help the communities where they're located, and are designed to include benefits like reduced community flooding, more green space, and economic development?
- How would you get community input to guide restoration efforts?
- What would you do to clean up a specific toxic hot spot in our local waters?
- Climate change will cause more extreme high and low water levels along the Great Lakes. What policies do you support to make our shorelines resilient to changing water levels?



## OTHER LOCAL ISSUES

Other local water issues may have a big impact on your community. Perhaps decisions need to be made about permits for mining companies, pipelines, or industrial facilities. There may be local beach access issues or plans to store hazardous waste near local waterways. Make sure to ask candidates about the issue that will have the biggest impact on your community.





## SPEAKING UP:

### Ask a question at a candidate forum

Asking a question at a candidate forum can be a powerful way to show candidates that you care about the Great Lakes and clean water, and get candidates on the record on these issues.

The formats can vary, but candidate forums generally allow time for participants from the audience to ask questions of the candidates. Some events ask for questions to be submitted ahead of time, and sometimes questions can be asked right there on the spot. Candidate forums are an important way for you to get your issue on the agenda by asking how the candidate plans to take action if elected.

Below are tips to help you find candidate forums and ask important questions of candidates in your area.

**Find a candidate forum.** Check with groups like local media outlets, civic organizations, and chambers of commerce that regularly organize these events, and follow them on social media or sign up for their email lists to receive announcements.

**Know the format.** Forums may be public or private, may accept questions only in advance, and may follow other specific guidelines. Check the rules before you plan to attend so you know what to expect.

**Ask your question and make it personal.** Keep your questions direct and to the point, giving only as much information as is necessary. Make your question more impactful by sharing why it is personal to you and your community.



## ARE YOU ORGANIZING A CANDIDATE FORUM?

Are you organizing a nonpartisan candidate forum that will focus on environmental issues or water infrastructure? If so, please let us know. Email us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org).

## SPEAKING UP:

### Write a letter to the editor

Writing a letter to the editor is another way to send candidates a powerful, public message about the importance of protecting the Great Lakes and clean water.

Here are six simple steps to write your letter and get it published:

**Choose what to write in your letter to the editor (LTE).** LTEs should be able to stand on their own and make sense to readers who may not already be familiar with water issues. LTEs that respond to a recent article are most likely to be published, so consider monitoring your local news outlets for the right opportunity, such as articles related to water pollution, invasive species, algal blooms, drinking water, neighborhood flooding, or other Great Lakes and water infrastructure issues. The best LTEs are an opportunity for you to use your personal experience to offer a new perspective on the newspaper's existing coverage.

**Write your LTE.** LTEs should be focused and direct. Trying to cover several topics and making too many points reduces a letter's impact, so try to keep to one subject if possible. Explain the problem that you see, and how you think the next person elected to the office you're writing about can help.

**Keep it brief.** Newspapers and online outlets have different word count requirements for LTEs, but in general it is best to keep them as short and succinct as possible (usually no more than 250 words).

**List your info.** Always include your credentials and contact information, as most publications will require written verification that you have authored the piece. For example, if you're writing about plastic pollution and you were an Adopt-a-Beach Team Leader, make sure to include that! Similarly, if you're writing about sewage and stormwater infrastructure, and your neighborhood suffers from flooding and basement backups, include that as part of your credentials.

**Submit your LTE.** Each outlet has different LTE submission guidelines, so be sure to check the outlet's website for specific guidance. Usually, you will need to send an email to an address specifically assigned to letters to the editor at the particular publication, or to the letters/opinion editor directly. When you send in your letter, include a note in the email about why your LTE is timely, interesting, and relevant, connecting it to any recent coverage about the Great Lakes, if possible. Include the text of your letter in your email, not as an attachment.

**Follow up after you submit.** Most newspapers have areas online where you can post comments to articles. If your LTE does not get placed within 24 hours, give the letters/opinion editor a call and/or consider going online and adding your letter as a comment to a story.



## SPEAKING UP:

### Talk with candidates in person, over the phone, or on social media

An in-person meeting or phone call with candidates is a great opportunity to educate them about a water issue you care about. Here are some tips to get started.

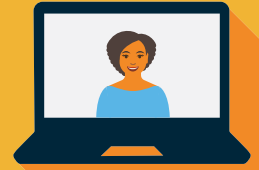
#### **Reach out to a candidate who you're interested in speaking to.**

Most candidates have campaign websites, Facebook pages, or other social media accounts. You can find an email address, call the campaign headquarters, or send a message to their social media account to let them know that you'd like to speak to them about a water issue that is important to you.

**Attend an event that you know candidates will be at.** Some organizations hold in-person events with candidates, giving community members an opportunity to meet them, and sometimes candidates hold their own opportunities to meet and greet. Come prepared to such events with your talking points, questions you may have for the candidate, and any reference materials such as fact sheets, news articles, or relevant research.

**Make it personal.** When you get the opportunity to speak with a candidate, introduce yourself, and let them know you live in their district. Tell the candidate about how you have been impacted by the issue you're talking to them about.

**Engage on social media.** You can directly and publicly ask candidates questions by tagging their campaign accounts on social media. See more tips for using social media as a tool to engage and educate voters and candidates in the next section of this toolkit.



## SPEAKING UP:

### Speak out on social media

Voters like you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation. A great place to start is speaking out on social media. Here are some tips to get you started:

**Use a #hashtag.** Tapping into trending hashtags — #GreatLakes, #election2024, #vote, etc. — is a great way to track a conversation and follow key issues.

**Be relevant.** Hook your audience and stay relevant to candidates and others in the conversation. Use interesting facts, photos, or links. For example, link to a recent news article, refer to current events in your community, and use relatable material.

**Keep it simple.** It's great to provide interesting information, but a social media post is not an encyclopedia entry. Get to the point quickly and clearly.

**Make your ask.** Your posts should make it clear what questions you're asking and what action you want candidates to take.

**Tag candidates.** Ask candidates questions directly by tagging them in your posts by using the @ sign with their campaign handle. You typically can find candidate social media handles on their campaign website.

**Follow social media accounts that give you the information you need.** Keeping up with news outlets, issue organizations, and candidates is a great way to stay informed during election season. Understand that different accounts have different goals — from providing information to influencing opinion to winning your vote — so read with a critical eye. Find us on Instagram (@alliance4greatlakes), Facebook (Alliance for the Great Lakes), X (@A4GL), and LinkedIn (Alliance for the Great Lakes).

**Submit questions for interviews and candidate forums.** Many news outlets will announce requests for question submissions for an upcoming interview or candidate forum.

**Share your participation in a candidate forum.** If you plan to attend an event, share information about the event on social media or with friends and family. This kind of activity helps spread the word and raise awareness of election season events.



## VOTING:

### Make your voting plan

Unfortunately, voting is not as simple as just showing up to mark your ballot on Election Day. Each state has different rules around registration deadlines, voter IDs, absentee ballots, voting by mail, and more — and these rules can change from election to election. Polling places can move, and election hours can change.

Here are some ways to ensure your voice is counted in November:

**Make sure you're registered to vote.** The voter registration deadline in many states falls several weeks before Election Day. Visit our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](https://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo) and enter your address to check the status of your registration. You can easily confirm whether you are registered to vote. And, if you're not, you can easily find the information you need to register.

**If you plan to vote by mail or absentee ballot:** Double-check the rules and deadlines so you don't run into any last-minute surprises. You can learn more about the rules in your state at our Great Lakes Voter Information Center, [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](https://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo).

- **Learn how to receive a ballot.** Some states mail voters an application to sign up for voting by mail, but the applications are not the same as ballots. Other states require voters to request an absentee or mail-in ballot themselves.

## VOTE AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO VOTE

Voting is the most important way for you to have a voice in how elected officials protect our water.

Elections are sometimes very close, and every vote counts. Make sure to vote if you are a U.S. citizen, and help others in your community register and vote.



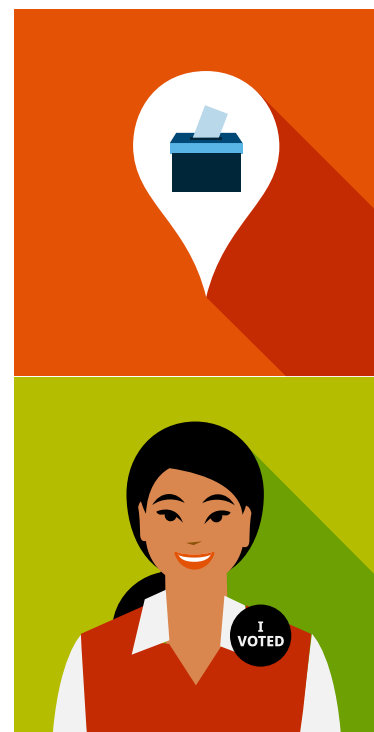
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- **Check the eligibility rules.** The rules vary for obtaining absentee ballots. Some states require specific reasons for requesting an absentee ballot, and others have “no-excuse” mail-in ballots.
- **Check the deadlines.** It’s critical to pay attention to deadlines. Some states have a deadline to request an absentee or mail-in ballot. And states have various deadlines for when ballots must be postmarked or received by election agencies.

**If you plan to vote in person:** Election Day is Tuesday, November 5, 2024. Depending on where you live, you may be able to vote in person beginning sometime in October. You can learn more at our Great Lakes Voter Information Center, [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](https://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo).

- **Learn which dates you can vote.** Learn the dates and times when early voting is available in your area. Hours for early voting may be different from the voting hours on November 5.
- **Check your polling location.** Your polling place for early voting may be different than your polling place on November 5.

**Know what to do if you face voter intimidation.** Voter intimidation is rare and unlikely, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. But if someone is trying to interfere with your right to vote, it may be a violation of federal law. [Learn what voter intimidation is, how to report it, and what to do if someone challenges your qualifications to vote.](#)



## VOTING:

### Learn about the candidates on your ballot

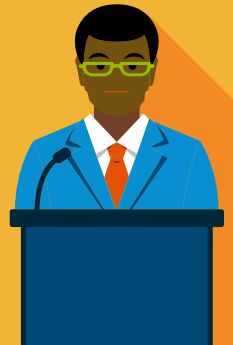
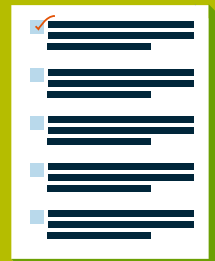
Elected officials set priorities that can lead to better protections for the lakes, or leave our waters more vulnerable to pollution. They oversee agencies that implement clean water laws and regulations. And they make budget decisions that impact the Great Lakes, drinking water, stormwater, and sewage programs.

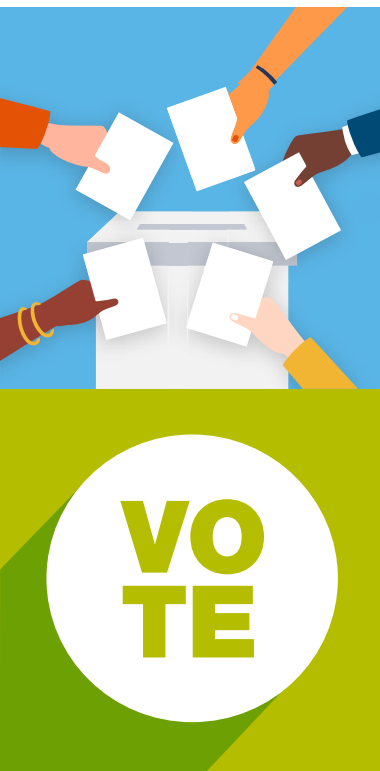
**Learn which offices are up for election.** The list of local elected offices sometimes seems incomprehensible. But understanding local offices and their role(s) can help you make informed choices on issues you care about. For instance, a city comptroller is essentially the city's chief financial officer and can have major influence over how local governments spend taxpayer dollars. Knowing the role(s) elected officials play can help you ask informed questions. You can learn which elected offices will appear on your ballot by visiting our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo).

**Learn where candidates stand on Great Lakes and water infrastructure issues.** After you have identified the issue you care about and the candidates who are seeking offices that influence that issue, find out what they would do if elected. For instance, if you are concerned about rising water and sewer bills, your local water and sewer district sets the rates, but your mayor or city council may have influence over those decisions.

Here are some ways you can learn about candidates' stances on Great Lakes and clean water issues:

- **Read answers to a nonpartisan candidate questionnaire.** Local news outlets and nonpartisan organizations sometimes create questionnaires where candidates can provide their views on important issues. Check your local newspaper or television station's website to see if the outlet has a nonpartisan candidate questionnaire.
- **Attend a nonpartisan candidate forum.** Watching a candidate debate, town hall, or other forum can be a great way to learn what candidates would do if elected. Check with groups like local media outlets, civic organizations, and chambers of commerce that regularly organize these events. Follow these groups on social media or sign up for their email lists to receive announcements about upcoming candidate forums, or get links to recordings of past forums.
- **Visit candidates' websites.** Many candidates publish issue positions on their websites. Look for website sections about environmental issues, water and sewer infrastructure, or local budgeting and permitting decisions.
- **Ask candidates directly.** If you can't find answers another way, try asking your questions through the contact form on the candidates' websites, by tagging them on social media, or by speaking with them at in-person events. Tell them why the issue is Important to you. Let them know that you live in their district and you couldn't find the answer on their websites. Make sure to ask your questions respectfully, regardless of how you feel about any candidates' political affiliation or their stances on other issues.





## VOTING:

### Encourage others to vote

Once you've made sure you're registered and ready to vote, it's equally important to make sure friends, family, and other members of your community are registered and ready, too.

**Share voting resources on social media.** Social media can be a great way to share helpful voting resources and reminders with your network.

- **Share information about the voting process.** Share links to your local voter registration and polling information websites like our Great Lakes Voter Information Center. Share reminders about deadlines for voter registration, mail-in and absentee voting, early voting, and Election Day voting hours.
- **Spread the word about nonpartisan questionnaires, candidate forums,** and other nonpartisan resources where people can learn about the candidates.
- **Celebrate events** like [National Voter Registration Day](#), [National Voter Information Week](#), [National Vote Early Day](#), and Election Day. Remind everyone you know to get out and vote!

**Participate in a voter drive.** Check with local civic organizations for information on voter drives and other kinds of assistance available for people looking to vote. Volunteer to help get members of your community registered and to the polls.

**Help your friends and family get ready to vote.** Share information with family, friends, and your community — the more people involved, the better! Share our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo), where they can check the status of their registration and find their polling locations.

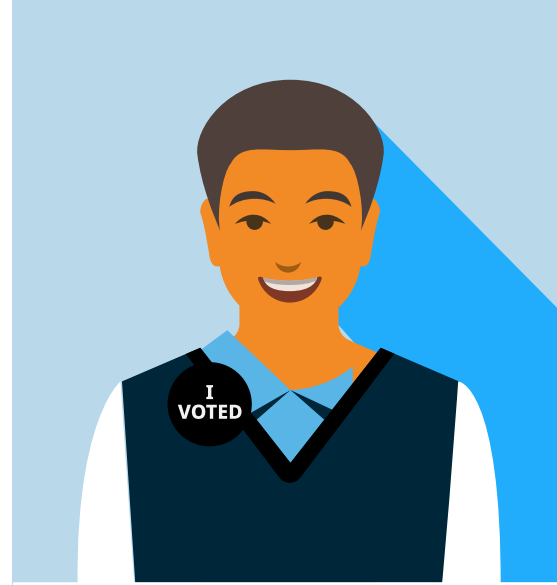


## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Elections have a big impact on our Great Lakes and the communities that rely on them. You can make a difference this election season. Show candidates that you care about the lakes and clean water. Vote, and encourage others to vote.

Let us know how it goes, and feel free to reach out anytime by emailing us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org).

Thank you for everything you do for our Great Lakes!



## REPORT BACK

If you attended a candidate forum and asked a Great Lakes question, tell us what questions you asked and how candidates responded. If you wrote a letter to the editor, got active on social media, or helped get out the vote, we're interested to hear what you learned or heard.

Share how you got involved to protect the Great Lakes this election season by emailing us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org).



## Protecting Water, Sustaining Life

The Alliance for the Great Lakes is a nonpartisan nonprofit working across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes. Learn more at [greatlakes.org](http://greatlakes.org).