# ENGAGING NEW VOTERS

The Impact of Nonprofit Voter Outreach on Client and Community Turnout

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**Nonprofit**VOTE www.nonprofitvote.org



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#### **Research Partners**

- Grassroots Solution provided guidance on data collection, research methodology, and data weighting. Grassroots Solutions is a consulting firm dedicated to "purposeful engagement" and grounded in years of experience as practitioners in organizing. It provides two core services: engagement strategy and evaluation.
- CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at Tufts University, provided raw comparison data and assistance with the qualitative analysis. CIRCLE focuses on young people in the United States, especially those who are marginalized or disadvantaged in political life.

#### **Regional Partners**

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#### **About Nonprofit VOTE**

Nonprofit VOTE partners with America's nonprofits to help the people they serve participate and vote. We are the largest source of nonpartisan resources to help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services.





## **Executive Summary**

This study evaluates the potential of nonprofit service providers and community-based organizations to increase voting among their younger clients and constituents, while also assessing best practices for doing so. To do this, we tracked 39,000 individuals who registered to vote or signed a pledge-to-vote card at one of 122 nonprofits across nine states in the lead up to the 2016 elections. The participating nonprofits included a diverse set of community health centers, food pantries, family service agencies, multi-service organizations, community development corporations, and others.

This year's report differs from our 2014 *Engaging New Voters* report <sup>1</sup> both in its more rigorous methodology as well as its narrow focus on voters under 30 who are the most challenging to engage. We focused our analysis on 5,835 young voters that were successfully matched to the voter file across the study counties. In addition to determining who from a demographic standpoint the nonprofits reached, we used voter files to assess the rate at which those contacted turned out to vote in the November 2016 election as compared to a demographically-similar group of registered voters in the same counties.

Throughout this report, we use the term **"nonprofit voters"** to refer to people who registered to vote or signed a voter pledge card at one of the 122 nonprofits. We use the term **"comparable voters"** to refer to a demographically-similar group of registered voters from the same counties which we use for comparison (See Methodology for more).

#### Young People Engaged by Nonprofits Were

- Half as likely to be White
- 1.6 times as likely to be Black
- 2.1 times as likely to be Latino

#### **Comparing Turnout Rates**

- Overall, voter turnout among young nonprofit voters was 5.7 percentage points higher than turnout among other comparable young voters (61.0% vs. 55.4%).
- Turnout was higher among all racial groups engaged by nonprofits, with Latinos showing the largest gain.
  - Young Black nonprofit voters turned out at a rate 5.1 percentage points higher than comparable young Black voters (59.9% vs. 54.9%).

- Young Latino nonprofit voters turned out at a rate 6.0 percentage points higher than comparable young Latino voters (52.8% vs. 46.8%).
- Young White nonprofit voters also performed well, turning out at 5.5 percentage points higher than comparable young White voters (71.5% vs. 66.0%).
- Turnout was higher among both men and women engaged by nonprofits.
  - Young women engaged at nonprofits turned out at a rate 6.5 percentage points higher than comparable young women (66.7% vs. 60.2%).
  - Young men engaged at nonprofits turned out a rate 4.4 percentage points higher than comparable young men (52.3% vs. 47.9%).
- Pledge-to-vote cards were particularly effective.
  - Nonprofit voters who signed a pledge-to-vote card turned out to vote at a rate 14.1 percentage points higher than comparable registered voters.

#### **Tactics and Success Factors**

To assess best practices, we asked the 122 participating nonprofits to fill out an in-depth online survey. We also conducted interviews with several of the higher and lower-performing nonprofits. We then compared the results of the high and low-performing groups to identify factors common to more successful organizations.

- Successful agencies had high levels of support from executive and senior leadership as well as frontline staff. This level of buying into the initiative was seen across the entire organization including intake personnel, program staff, and case managers. They also were more likely to have more than 10 individuals asking people to register.
- High-performing groups started early in voter registration efforts as opposed to later in the electoral cycle. They were more likely to get started in June or July than less successful groups.
- For all respondents, getting their message out in high traffic areas proved successful. Tabling at events or in their own lobby were successful tactics in their efforts.
- National Voter Registration Day participation was also a strong indicator of success with nearly all successful groups participating.
- Successful groups were significantly more likely to provide additional voter engagement services, including providing collateral (voter guides, ballot measure informational sheets, etc.,) in addition to going literal extra miles in providing transportation to the polls.

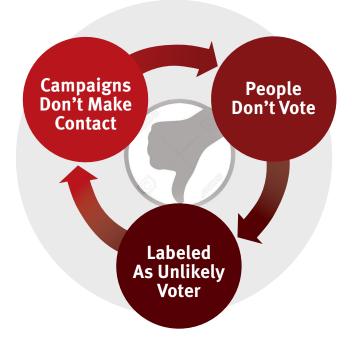




## Introduction

America's democracy is challenged by large gaps in voter participation tied to income, age, and ethnicity. Potential voters without college degrees, those with lower income, those from communities of color, and those under 30 are significantly less likely to vote than their counterparts. Debates on issues of equity, justice, the role of government, and equal opportunity are diminished without the inclusion of voices from the broader citizenry. The urgency of narrowing and ultimately closing these gaps in participation have never been more evident.

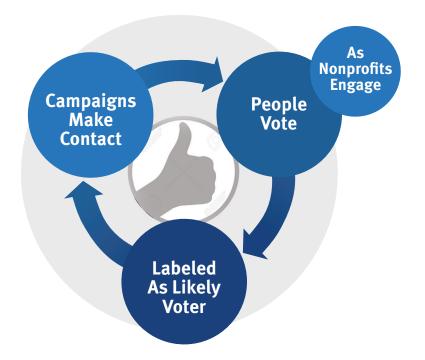
While the policy environs play a role in turnout, even the most voter-friendly states have substantial differences in voter turnout by demographics. That's because participation gaps, in large part, reflect gaps between who is and is not contacted about voting. In 2016, 64% of Latinos and 57% of Asian Americans were not contacted about voting or registering to vote.<sup>2</sup> Similar patterns hold for younger and lower-income populations.



Unfortunately, the economics of political campaigns reinforce these gaps. Campaigns are driven by an unforgiving win-or-lose deadline, so they focus their limited money and time on likely voters. That means unlikely or "low-propensity" voters are rarely contacted about elections. Not being contacted, they don't vote. And by not voting, they are labeled as *unlikely* voters. As *unlikely* voters, campaigns don't contact them and the cycle repeats itself in a self-perpetuating, negative feedback loop.

Latino Decisions Election Eve Poll http://www.latinovote2016.com/app/ and Asian American Election Eve Poll http://asianamericandecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016-Asian-American-Election-Eve-Poll-Infographic.pdf

Unlike campaigns, nonprofits are driven by a very different goal: ensuring the voices of those they serve are heard in the democratic process. Nonprofits also have a longer-term timeline. This fundamentally different goal and timeline leads to a fundamentally different outcome. As nonprofits engage the communities they serve in voting and elections, participation levels rise. As participation levels rise, people are labeled as *likely* voters and campaigns start contacting them, at which point a positive feedback loop begins to take shape. This positive feedback loop is a key factor in the habit-forming nature of voting.



As this report shows, nonprofit human service providers and community-based organizations are poised to play a significant role in narrowing these troubling gaps in mobilization and participation. They reach voters typically overlooked in the democratic process. And when they engage those communities, those in the community turn out to vote at higher levels as clearly documented in this report.

In order to narrow and, ultimately, close gaps in voter turnout, we must invest in the social infrastructure and organizational tools necessary to ensure that all are meaningfully engaged in the democratic process. We hope this report gives nonprofit leaders, and the foundations that support them, the hard evidence they need to justify making that organizational commitment.

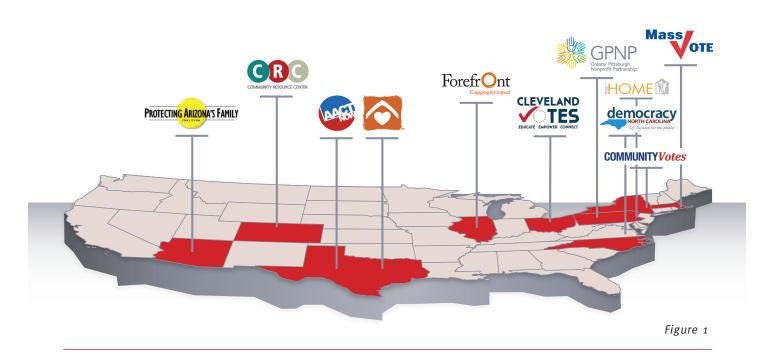




## **About the Study**

In previous editions of *Engaging New Voters* we showed that nonprofit service providers and communitybased organizations are much more likely to reach young people, lower-income, and people of color than other groups. And importantly, when they do engage those individuals through voter registration and voter pledge drives, the people turn out to vote at higher rates than their peers.

In 2016, Nonprofit VOTE – with the help of civic engagement partners across nine states – worked with 122 nonprofit human service providers and community-based organizations to run nonpartisan voter engagement drives in the weeks ahead of their state registration deadlines. Among the 122 local nonprofits were community health centers, CDCs and housing assistance groups, faith-based charity organizations, homeless shelters, general nonprofit social service agencies, and others.



In all, 39,000 people either registered to vote or signed voter pledge cards across the program. Most of these voter contacts also received some form of get-out-the-vote communication – including a combination of text messages, live phone calls, and reminder postcards – as part of the program. Unlike prior editions of *Engaging New Voters*,<sup>3</sup> this report focuses more narrowly on young voters, those under 30, who are among the most difficult to engage in voting and elections. In this report, we analyze the voting histories of young people who, with the assistance of nonprofit staff or volunteers, either registered to vote or signed a pledge-to-vote card ahead of the 2016 general election. We refer to this group **"nonprofit voters"** throughout this report.

To help ascertain our impact, we compare nonprofit voters with registered voters with similar demographic profiles from the same jurisdictions. Special care was taken to ensure an apples-to-apples comparison by controlling for race, gender, and geography. We call this group **"comparable voters"** throughout the report.

For additional details, see the Methodology section on page 18.

**Nonprofit Voters** are people who registered to vote or signed a voter pledge card at one of the 122 nonprofits.

**Comparable Voters** are a demographically-similar group of registered voters from the same study counties which we use for comparison.

**Voter Turnout** is measured in this report relative to the total number of registered voters (as opposed to *eligible* voters).

3 The "Engaging New Voters" report based on 2014 data is available at http://www.nonprofitvote.org/engaging-new-voters-2014/. The report based on 2012 data, entitled "Can Nonprofits Increase Voting Among Their Clients, Constituents, and Staff?" is available at http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2013/07/can-nonprofits-increase-voting.pdf/

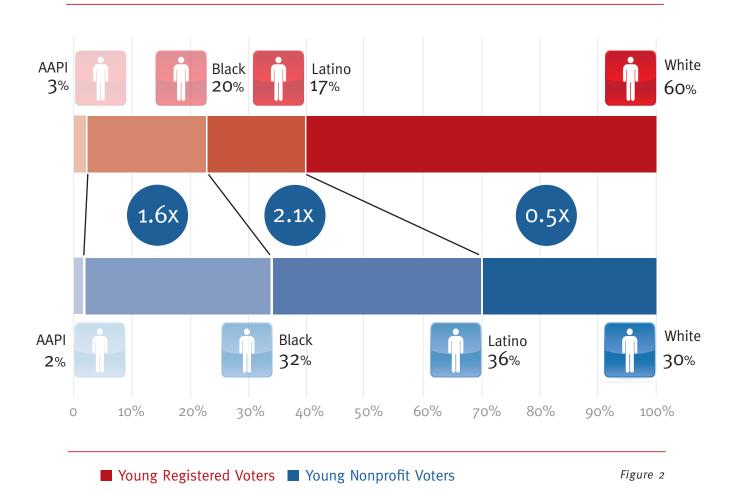




## Whom Nonprofits Reach

Nonprofits reach precisely those least likely to be contacted by political campaigns or other third-party civic engagement efforts, and who are most in need of assistance and encouragement to vote. Compared to other registered voters in the states and counties included in our analysis, nonprofit voters were much more likely to be low-income, women, young, and people of color. This is consistent with our findings from previous years.

Among the young nonprofit voters, they were **half as likely to be White, 1.6 times as likely to be Black, and 2.1 times as likely to be Latino** than young registered voters across the study counties and states (See Figure 1). As noted earlier, these are precisely the individuals who are often overlooked by partisan campaigns due to their lower voting likelihood.

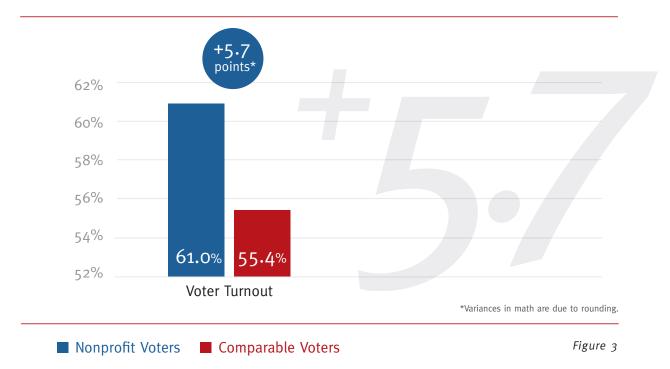


#### **COMPOSITION OF YOUNG REGISTERED VOTERS VS. NONPROFIT VOTERS**

## **Comparing Voter Turnout**

#### **Youth Turnout**

Young nonprofit voters in the study turned out at higher rates when compared to other registered young voters across gender and racial/ethnic groups. Overall, **voter turnout among young nonprofit voters was 5.7 percentage points higher than turnout among comparable registered voters** – 61.0% compared to 55.4%.<sup>4</sup>,<sup>5</sup>



#### **YOUTH TURNOUT**

While we are unable to account for all relevant factors, we did adjust for basic demographic differences as noted previously. The data suggests that registering to vote and/or taking a pledge to vote at a nonprofit at which one receives services contributes to a significant increase in voter turnout.



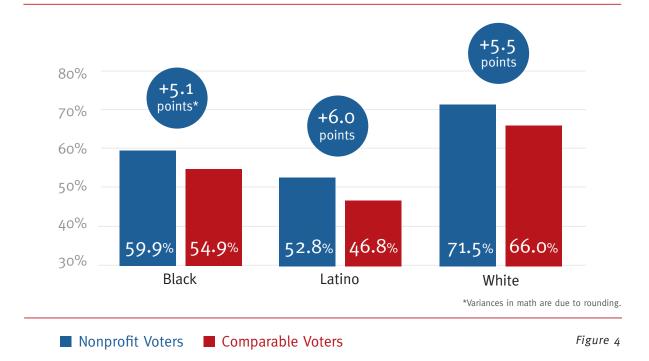
The term "young" or "youth" refers to individuals aged 18-29, unless otherwise noted.
All turnout figures represent turnout as a percentage of registered voters, not the voting eligible population.



#### Youth Turnout by Race and Ethnicity

Voter turnout was higher among young voters contacted by nonprofits across race and ethnicity.

- Young Black nonprofit voters turned out at a rate 5.1 percentage points higher than comparable young Black voters.
- Young Latino nonprofit voters turned out at a rate 6.0 percentage points higher than comparable young Latino voters.
- Young White nonprofit voters also performed well, turning out at a rate 5.5 percentage points higher than comparable young White voters.
- While the data also shows a significant increase in turnout among young Asian-American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) engaged by nonprofits, the data set was too small to document the scale of increase with any confidence.

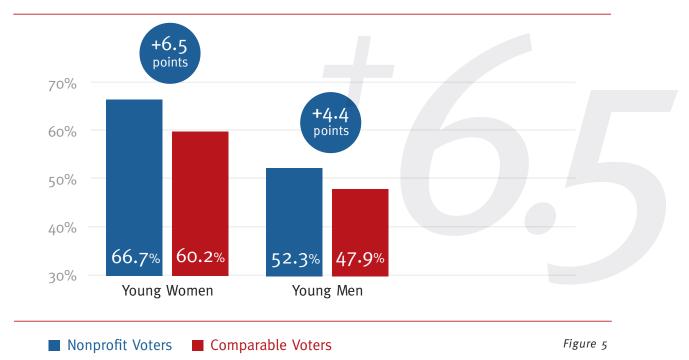


#### YOUTH TURNOUT BY RACE/ETHNICITY

## Youth Turnout by Gender

Young women turned out at a significantly higher rate than men in both the general population and within the nonprofit voters. This is a powerful pattern independent of the engagement of nonprofits.

- Both young female nonprofit voters and young men in the nonprofit cohort turned out at higher rates than did other young women and men in the same counties and states.
- Young, nonprofit female voters turned out at a rate 6.5 percentage points higher than comparable young, female voters.
- Young male nonprofit voters turned out a rate 4.4 percentage points higher than comparable young, male voters.



#### YOUTH TURNOUT BY GENDER

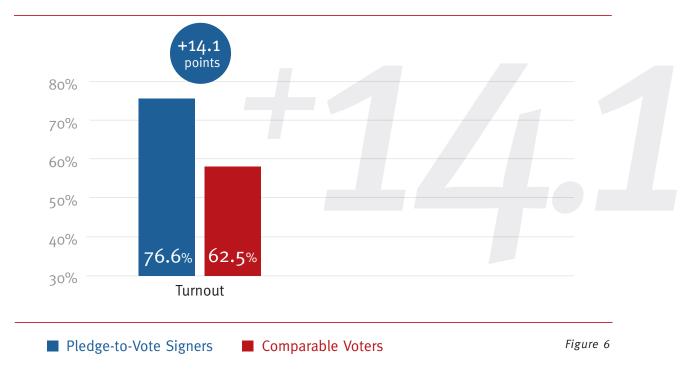




#### Using Pledge-to-Vote Cards with Already Registered Voters

Three quarters of young people in our cohort registered to vote with the assistance of a nonprofit employee or volunteer. The remaining quarter signed a pledge-to-vote card. Both groups turned out at higher rates than did other voters in the study's counties and states.

- Nonprofit voters who registered to vote at a nonprofit agency turned out to vote at a rate 2.3 percentage points higher than comparable registered voters. This gain is likely understated because we are comparing our voters with registered voters, while many voters engaged through the program would not have registered absent the nonprofit's contact, and thus would not have been able to vote at all.
- Nonprofit voters who signed a pledge-to-vote card turned out to vote at a rate 14.1 percentage points higher than other registered voters in the study's counties and states.



#### **VOTING BY NONPROFIT VOTERS WHO SIGNED PLEDGE CARDS**

Nonprofit VOTE was in the field six weeks after the November 2016 elections to collect qualitative information from participating agency staff, volunteers, and leaders on the tactics, challenges and success factors in their voter outreach activities. We administered an online survey to 122 nonprofit sites; 87 sites (71%) completed the survey. We also conducted field interviews with the state partners who coordinated the work of participating agencies in their state or metro area. Our analysis examined differences between top and bottom performers, that is agencies that made the most number of voter contacts as compared to those that made the least number of voter contacts.

#### Key Finding #1: Staff Buy-In is Important

Consistent with findings in previous years, successful groups excelled in creating buy-in and bringing in a wide array of staff to engage in voter outreach.

- High performers were, on average, 17% more likely to have high levels of support from executive and senior leadership, and more than twice as likely to have that level of support from frontline staff. When challenges were identified, agencies identified "not having buy-in from frontline staff" as the biggest challenge to success.
- High performers were almost 40% more likely to have more than 10 individuals asking people to register. More than half of low performers had five or fewer individuals asking clients to register or pledge.
- Higher performers reported more engagement from types of staff across the board, including intake personnel, program staff, and case managers. Of higher performers, nearly 88% reported program staff conducting voter outreach, versus only 67% of lower performers.

#### Key Finding #2: Partnerships Contribute to Success

Strong partnerships supported success, particularly between agencies and their state partner. State partners were expected to provide training, check-in calls, and materials to agencies. Partnerships with other local organizations also boosted performance.

- High performers were more satisfied with the level of support they received from their state partner. They were almost twice as likely to describe check-in calls as "excellent."
- Successful groups were almost 60% more likely to engage additional partners that could provide volunteers, conduct on-site voter registration on behalf of the agency, or provide other resources to support their voter registration efforts.
- For high performers, partnerships with other organizations was one of the highest-rated factors contributing to success, second only to staff buy-in.

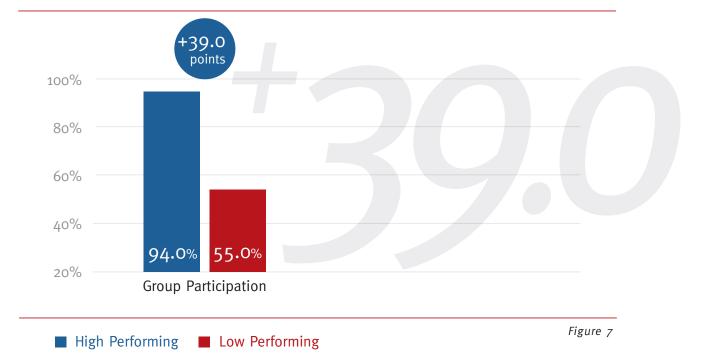




## Key Finding #3: Successful Groups Start Early

Successful organizations started early and increased efforts in the final weeks before their state's registration deadline.

- Half of organizations that met their voter engagement goals reported starting their voter engagement activities by July, with planning often beginning earlier. Organizations that started activities later in the cycle were not as likely to meet their goals.
- Most respondents said they garnered the most registrations and pledges in the months of September and October.
- Participating in National Voter Registration Day, held on the fourth Tuesday in September, was a strong indicator of success. 94% of highly successful groups participated compared to 55% of low performing groups.



## NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION DAY PARTICIPATION

#### Key Finding #4: Engage Multiple Venues and Audiences

Nearly all agencies leveraged various venues and engaged more than one audience. They ran pilot programs, evaluated, and found the venues that worked for their organization.

- Across all performers, the spaces rated as "most successful for conducting voter registration" were tabling at their own agency, at an event, and doing outreach at busy areas in their community.
- Across the board, nonprofits were most likely to target their outreach to their own clients and their families. Successful groups were also 51% more likely to target the broader community.

#### Key Finding #5: Success Leads to More Engagement and Advocacy

With strong staff buy-in and effective practices for outreach established, many agencies went further to provide their constituents with additional information and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, and the majority of all groups plan to conduct voter engagement in the future.

- Successful organizations were more likely to report they will continue voter registration, voter education, GOTV and ballot measure advocacy efforts in the future.
- Successful groups were significantly more likely to provide additional voter engagement services, including providing a voter guide, candidate questionnaire or sample ballot (55% more likely), information on ballot measures (86% more likely), and rides to the polls (20% more likely).

#### Summary:

High levels of staff enthusiasm and buy-in for voter engagement work were critical to the success of high performing groups. Additionally, these groups tended to have more staff members involved in voter outreach efforts, suggesting that these agencies were able to engage multiple staff people instead of isolating the project to only a few team members. For agencies with fewer members, it may be all the more important to leverage existing relationships and expand new partnerships to increase resources and capacity for voter outreach work.

Starting early was a major factor for success and typically gives agencies time to learn, grow, test, and refine for several weeks after initial training. Part of that early learning can include finding the most effective venues to reach potential voters, whether it is the agency's own lobby or a well-attended event.

Finally, when agencies were successful in their efforts, they were more likely to indicate that the voter engagement work would continue, and even expand to issue advocacy. This trend was evident in previous studies and suggests that voter engagement can have long lasting effects on an agency and its staff.



#### **Earlier Studies on Demographics and Impact on Voter Turnout**

Nonprofit VOTE tracked voter engagement programs in 2012 and 2014 similar to the 2016 program examined in this report. The 2012 program worked with 94 local nonprofits across seven states<sup>6</sup> while the 2014 program worked with 129 nonprofits across nine states.<sup>7</sup> With the help of our research partner, CIRCLE at Tufts University, both studies compared those engaged through nonprofits with registered voters in the same study states. Both studies showed those engaged by nonprofit service providers and CBOs were significantly more likely to be young, Black or Latino, and low-income than registered voters in the same study states. Most importantly, those engaged by nonprofits voted at significantly higher rates than other registered voters across all demographic groupings. This is the research that was expanded upon in this report with data weighting and a focus on hard-to-engage young voters.

#### **Net Registration Experiment**

Nonprofit VOTE conducted a randomized controlled experiment at 64 sites across five states in 2015 with the help of The Analyst Institute. The goal of this experiment was to assess the "net" registration rate – i.e. of those who we registered to vote, how many are truly unique voters that no one else would have reached absent our action. By comparing the half of the sites that ran registration programs with the half that did not, the study concluded that **51% of those we registered were net new registrants** that would not have registered otherwise absent our action. For comparison, two more common site-based registration programs organized at bus stops, grocery stores, and similar public venues had net registration rates in the 27% to 29% range.

#### **Cost-Per-Registrant Study**

Nonprofit VOTE worked with Grassroots Solutions in 2016 to conduct a study on how cost effective registering voters at nonprofit service providers can be compared to more conventional site-based voter registration programs at grocery stores and transit stops. We placed canvassers in the lobbies of health centers, at food pantries, and other community-based nonprofits to conduct voter registration and pledge-to-vote drives while tracking their progress for subsequent evaluation. The data from these canvassers was analyzed to estimate the throughput at 1.23 registrations per hour (This does not factor in additional pledge-to-vote cards collected at the same time). Coupled with budgetary information, the study concluded that voter registration drives at nonprofit service providers are cost-competitive with other site-based programs, especially when the higher net registration rates and ability to reach target demographics are factored in.<sup>8</sup>

8 Grassroots Solutions estimated a cost of \$25-\$28 per registration form as compared to \$23-\$26 per registration form

at other site-based programs. When the higher net registration rate is factored in, the nonprofit service provider model is notably less expensive per registrant.

<sup>6</sup> See full 2012 study at http://www.nonprofitvote.org/can-nonprofits-increase-voter-turnout-yes/

<sup>7</sup> See full 2014 study at http://www.nonprofitvote.org/engaging-new-voters-2014/

#### **Research Summary**

Through multiple studies and experiments, we have demonstrated the effectiveness of working through nonprofit service providers and community-based organizations to engage the communities they serve in voting and elections.

- Nonprofits reach a demographic often left out of the political process, including low-income voters, younger voters, and voters of color who generally receive less contact from political campaigns and vote at lower rates.
- Nonprofits reach voters few others reach. This is documented in the high net registration rates as compared to other site-based registration programs. If we don't engage the communities we as nonprofits serve, chances are no one will.
- Voter registration drives at nonprofits service providers and community-based organizations can be done cost effectively relative to other site-based programs, especially when the higher net registration and demographic reach is factored in.
- When nonprofits engage the communities they serve, those communities vote at higher rates than comparable registered voters across all demographic groupings.







We already know from a large body of evidence, including randomized controlled experiments with substantial academic rigor, that doing face-to-face voter registration and voter pledge drives in the communities where people live and work has a positive impact on voter turnout. Our purpose in providing this report is to explore the impact that nonprofits service providers and community-based organizations in particular have on the communities that they serve.

In 2016, Nonprofit VOTE worked with 11 regional partners and one municipal partner working across nine states. The regional partners recruited eight to 20 local nonprofits in their respective communities to collect both voter registrations and pledge-to-vote cards from the clients that come through their doors and other points of contact with the community. In all, 122 nonprofit human service providers and community-based organizations were part of the program, including community health centers, food pantries, affordable housing groups, and other nonprofits. 39,000 people either registered to vote or signed voter pledge cards across the program, mostly between August and October 2016. Of those, nearly 28,000 were successfully matched to the voter file for analysis. This was further narrowed to the study counties and then to young voters as noted below.

#### **Quantitative Analysis:**

This report differs from prior *Engaging New Voters* reports in two notable ways. First, it focuses more narrowly on young voters, those under 30, who are among the most difficult to engage in voting and elections. That group of young voters constituted 5,835 of the matched contacts in the study counties and states.<sup>9</sup> These records were matched to the voter files and relevant demographics and voting histories were collected for analysis. It is that group, which we refer as **"nonprofit voters,"** that is examined in this report.

The second notable difference is the weighting of data. In previous editions of Engaging New Voters, we did not attempt to weight our data to account for differences in the distribution across jurisdictions, by gender, or other factors. This creates distortions even when comparing one group of Latinos to another, as they could be of different ages, incomes. To ensure demographically-similar comparisons for this report, we calculate the voting rate of registered voters with similar demographic profiles from the same jurisdictions. We call this group "comparable voters" throughout the report.

To do the weighting, voter turnout results for *all active registered voters under 30 in the study counties* was analyzed and broken down by race, gender, and county. This gave us the actual voter turnout rate for each demographic segment of the population, i.e. young Black males in XYZ county, young Black females in XYZ county, etc. Secondly, the data set of our nonprofit voters is coded by the same race-gender-county groupings. Using this coding, we pull over the actual voting rate of the related demographic segment into each record. Once this is done, we can easily see both how our population voted, but also how active registered voters with similar demographic composition voted.

All data groupings presented in this report are composed of at least 1,000 records to ensure minimal "margins of error." It is for this reason that we are unable to present data on Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth. Though a key part of the program, the total number of AAPI youth engaged fell significantly below the 1,000 record threshold.

We understand that, without a randomized controlled experiment, we cannot account for all factors that may influence voter behavior. However, using the above method we can weight the data for race, gender, and geographic differences between our cohort and the comparison group. In doing so, we seek to provide a reasonable estimate of impact to help nonprofit leaders make informed decisions about incorporating voter engagement activities into their client and community outreach.







## **Additional Resources for Your Organization**



Interested in getting more voter registration information? Want to learn more about what you can do to engage the communities you serve? We've provided some of the best resources right here. For more visit us at nonprofitvote.org or contact us at: info@nonprofitvote.org

## Free Monthly Webinars for Nonprofits

Nonprofit VOTE hosts monthly webinars on a range of topics such as staying nonpartisan, making a plan to register voters at your nonprofit, what nonprofit staff can do, organizing candidate forums, get-out-the-vote drives, and more. Upcoming webinars are **listed here**.

## **Toolkits and Online Resources**

#### **Voter Participation Starter Kit**

A comprehensive toolkit to get you started doing voter engagement at your nonprofit http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2010/08/a-voter-participation-starter-kit.pdf/

#### **Reasons to Register to Vote**

Best way to explain to your clients the value of their vote http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2015/07/reasons-register-vote.pdf/

#### **Voter Registration Toolkit**

A quick breakdown and checklist when beginning voter registration http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2011/09/a-voter-registration-toolkit.pdf/

#### **Voting in Your State**

A handy state-by-state guide to everything you need to know about voting in the United States http://www.nonprofitvote.org/voting-in-your-state/

#### **Rules for Voting Registration Drives in Your State**

Ready to start a registration drive? Be sure you know what you can and can't do. https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org/partner-tools/rules-for-voter-registration-drives/

