



## Methods for Direct Service Non-Profits to Enhance Voter Turnout

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## 1. Methods for Direct Service Non-Profits to Enhance Voter Turnout

Two basic things are required for democracy to work in an efficient and effective way that benefits the majority of a country's population. For one, citizens have to go to the polls and vote, and citizens have to be educated about the issues that they are voting on. Therefore, caring citizens are expected to ask or at least question, what it takes for people to vote in an election and care about the meaning and consequences of the election results. In doing so, the basic underlying question of this paper is what can be done to enhance voter turnout. The mobilisation of voters, as well as registration and other services, is commonly left to non-profit organisations. This paper aims to answer the question, what effect direct service non-profit voter engagement has upon voter turnout in order to determine what works successfully and consistently in mobilising constituents. Little is published on the role of direct service non-profits, meaning non-profits that come into direct contact with the individuals they serve, in mobilising voters, even though they are uniquely positioned to engage potential voters.

Since declaring independence from the British in 1776, America has been a self-professed democracy, elected representatives making decisions and acting on behalf of all citizens. In the words of one of America's founding fathers, James Wilson, a democratic government is a "government in which the people retain the supreme power, and exercise it either collectively or by representation" (Elliot 1896, p.455). Though this federal system of elected representation and majority rule was set up to ensure the long-term stability of the American political system, it allows for only very limited, indirect public participation by the country's citizens through voting (Nabatchi 2005, p.51). Voting is, therefore, a key opportunity for citizens' voices to be heard.

Given the importance of voting to America's political system, startlingly low voter turnout rates have generated concern across the country. According to the National Census Bureau, only 62% of Americans voted in the last presidential election, and in the 2014 midterm elections<sup>1</sup>, only 42% of Americans voted. In fact, 2014 represents the lowest total voter turnout rate ever recorded by the Census Bureau (United States Department of Commerce 2014). The situation is equally bleak when viewed

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<sup>1</sup> Midterm elections are elections that take place two years after the Presidential election, in the middle of the President's four-year term.

from an international perspective. A recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center<sup>2</sup> reported that America's voter turnout is significantly lower than other developed nations around the world.

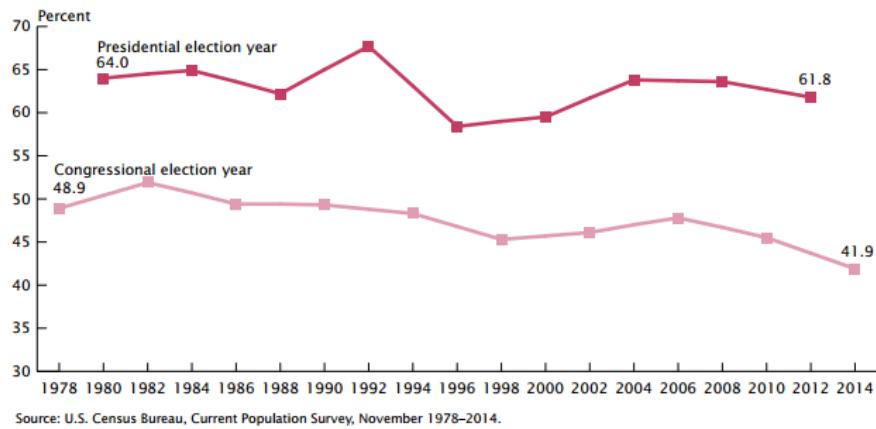


Figure 1: Voting Rates in Congressional and Presidential Elections: 1978 to 2014  
(File 2015, 4)

Figure 1 above illustrates that aggregate voter turnout has declined over the past several decades. Voting rates have declined in both congressional and presidential elections from 1978 to 2014, voting rates for congressional elections being consistently lower than for presidential elections. This is not unexpected as presidential campaigns are well funded and garner significant media attention. In addition, the position of President of the United States is a commonly understood role. In 2014, the US Census Bureau recorded the lowest overall turnout rate since data collection began in 1978 (Leighley 2014, p.5).

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center is a Washington DC based nonpartisan American think tank that generates reports on social issues and demographic trends (Krogstad 2014).

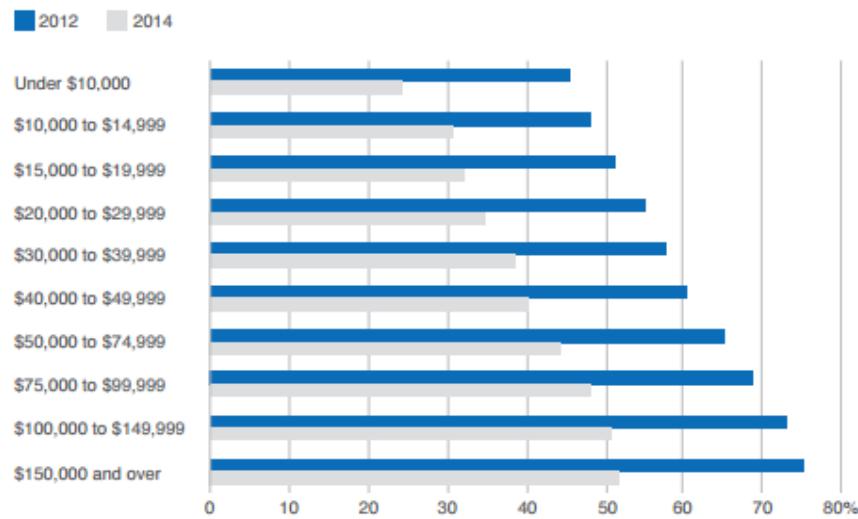


Figure 2: Percent Voting by Family Income Bracket in 2012 and 2014 (McElwee 2015)

Figure 2 above shows that from 2012-2014, voter turnout across every income bracket dropped, but voter turnout among poorer citizens dropped by a much larger percentage. Voter turnout in the lowest income bracket declined by 47% from 2012-2014, yet turnout in the highest income bracket declined by 31%. Moreover, 53% of citizens earning above \$150,000 voted, while less than 1 in 4 of those individuals earning less than \$10,000 voted. Voting is also different across different ethnic groups, and traditionally disadvantaged ethnic groups generally display lower voter turnout rates than other groups (Leighley, 2014, 1-20), displayed in Table 1.

Race and Hispanic origin	Total Population (in thousands)	Total Citizen Population (in thousands)	Percent registered (Total)	Percent voted (Total)
Total	239,874	219,941	59.3	38.5
White alone	189,331	175,909	61.3	40.3
White non-Hispanic alone	156,438	153,750	66.9	45.0
Black alone	29,668	27,908	59.7	37.3
Asian alone	13,495	9,504	34.4	19.1
Hispanic (of any race)	36,802	25,092	34.9	18.4

Table 1: Census Bureau Voting Data by Race (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2014)

Direct service nonprofits, are uniquely suited for improving voter turnout. According to the Pew Research Center, citizens' trust in the government and public institutions

is at an all-time low (Pew Research Center 2013). Research shows that the nonprofit sector, on the other hand, is one of the few sectors that citizens would like to have more influence in government and politics (*PACs* 2012). Does direct nonprofit engagement increase voter turnout among underrepresented groups, given that the sector is also a much larger player in the American economy than most assume; there are over 1.5 million nonprofits registered with the Internal Revenue Service, and the sector represents 5.4% of the entire country's gross domestic product (McKeever 2014). The very nature of nonprofit organizations is to serve underrepresented groups, thus nonprofits have been described as the "sleeping giants of democracy;" the organizations' unique access to underserved and underrepresented groups puts them in the position to effectively mobilize eligible voters that don't typically turn up at the polls (Rongitsch 2008). Furthermore, extensive research has been published confirming the effectiveness of in-person interaction in regards to voter engagement. Simply put, an eligible voter is more likely to vote if they have an interaction with another person around the topic of voting, rather it be a voting reminder, voter registration, or some other voter engagement activity. Direct service nonprofits' business models are centered around this kind of in-person contact, thus direct service nonprofit activities will be the primary focus. As a form of knowledge sharing, this paper will also cover what nonprofits contribute to each other in order to successfully and consistently mobilize their constituents.

## 2. Direct Service Nonprofits Importance

The phrase "direct service" refers to all human service nonprofits, nonprofits that directly serve their constituents. Examples of human service nonprofits include youth development organizations, affordable housing agencies, and health clinics. Direct Service Non Profit organizations play an incredibly important part in the US economy and US society. Approximately 1.44 million nonprofits were registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2012. In terms of their impact on the U.S. economy, nonprofits contributed \$887.3 billion in 2012, representing 5.4 % of America's overall gross domestic product (McKeever 2014). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nonprofits across the nation employ more than 11.4 million people; therefore, the nonprofit sector employs 10.3% of the American workforce (Bureau of Labor

Statistics 2016). In terms of volunteers, it is estimated that 62.6 million adults volunteered at least once in 2013.

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## 2.1 Legal Parameters

Nonprofit political engagement efforts are a hotly debated topic among those in the field. Opponents of this kind of work tend to argue that any political activity, including nonpartisan voter engagement, is polarizing in a negative sense. Advocates of voter engagement work by nonprofits tend to argue that voter engagement further supports and empowers the constituents that nonprofits were created to serve. The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits published a guide for nonprofit staff and board members on principles and practices for nonprofit excellence. This guide is referenced widely throughout the sector as the industry standard for principles and practices. *The Principles and Practices for Nonprofit Excellence* (p. 5) states that nonprofit organizations “enrich quality of life, epitomize the highest societal values, and strengthen democracy.” Page 11 of the same document further elaborates:

To the highest extent possible, nonprofit organizations should educate their community, provide opportunities to deliberate and engage their constituents in advocacy activities in order to achieve their mission.

In addition to this, many state nonprofit associations make similar assertions on their websites, claiming that voter engagement is vital to creating and sustaining effective community solutions.

Though opinions around what nonprofits should do in regards to voter engagement vary, the law clearly defines what nonprofits legally can and can't do. In 2006, the Internal Revenue Service issued Rule 78-248, 1978-1, which states the guidelines for section 501(c)(3) organizations in regards to civil engagement around political activities. By outlining what activities are permissible, the IRS has affirmed that 501(c)(3) organizations can conduct voter engagement as long as all activities are kept nonpartisan (Internal Revenue Service 2016). This means that nonprofits can:

- Conduct or promote voter registration
- Host or co-sponsor a community forum

- Distribute nonpartisan sample ballots
- Continue issue advocacy during elections
- Educate voters on the voting process
- Encourage staff to serve as poll workers or translators
- Educate the candidates on the issues
- Support or oppose a ballot measure
- Organize get out the vote activities
- Encourage and remind people to vote
- Rent mailing lists and/or facilities to other organizations, legislators, and candidates
- Form an 501(c)(4) organizing body to coordinate voter mobilization efforts

Several of these strategies will be considered in the recommendations to nonprofits made at the end of this paper.

In addition to these legally permissible activities, any agency that provides services under any state public assistance program is required by law to offer voter registration. These agencies must provide voter registration forms, offer to provide registration assistance, and accept and return completed registration forms to the proper election officials (Nonprofit VOTE 2016).

The IRS tax code highlights the difference between nonprofit participation in political campaigns, which is permitted, and nonprofit intervention, which is strictly prohibited. Intervention includes any and all activities that either favor or oppose one or more candidates in a political campaign. Said another way, all 501(c)(3) nonprofit engagement activities must be nonpartisan. This nonpartisan requirement sets direct service nonprofit voting activities apart from the majority of government led and private initiatives to increase voter turnout. In addition to this, leaders of a nonprofit organization may not make partisan statements on behalf, or as a representative of, their organizations. Federal tax law further states that while nonprofits may take a public stance on any public policy issue, they are not allowed to expressly tie a particular issue to a candidate. The latter represents a political intervention. In summary, nonprofits cannot engage (Staples, 2016, 422) in the following activities:

- Endorse specific candidates
- Make campaign contributions
- Make expenditures on behalf of candidates
- Restrict rental of their mailing lists and facilities
- Ask candidates to sign promises on any issue

- Publish or communicate anything that in any way favors or opposes a candidate

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## 2.2 Current Non-Profit Voter Engagement Work

The only national organization aimed at expanding and deepening nonprofits' voter engagement work is Nonprofit VOTE, a nonprofit founded in 2005 with the stated mission of partnering with nonprofits throughout America to help them engage their constituents around voting. Nonprofit VOTE serves as the largest source of nonpartisan resources to "help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services (Nonprofit VOTE 2016)." A handful of somewhat similar organizations exist at the state level, though these groups typically target one specific demographic group rather than seeking to engage the entirety of the state's eligible voter population. Several state nonprofit associations additionally post voter resources for the nonprofits in their state to access. These resources typically include a list of permissible activities and information on voting regulations for that state.

Prior to 2008, nonprofits and for-profits alike were implementing various mobilization efforts based on intuition rather than data. In 2008, researchers Green and Gerber published a series of experimental results, though studies featured in their work are not specific to nonprofits, all of the experiments take a nonpartisan approach. This work contributed three key findings to voter engagement research. First, to mobilize voters, one must make the eligible voter feel like they are wanted at the polls. The study likened voter mobilization efforts to inviting someone to a dinner party, the more personal the invitation, the more likely the individual will show up. Furthermore, in-person invites receive the best response, followed by phone calls. Mailed invitations aren't typically very effective. Second, the study found that maintaining an individual's motivation to vote represents an important link to turnout. Calling back or reminding someone who has previously expressed an interest and intention to vote is an incredibly effective tactic. A final point, many nonvoters will vote if they feel that others are watching their actions. The strongest experimental effects were observed when potential voters were reminded that voting is, in fact, a matter of public record (Gerber and Green 2008). Overall, voting

behavior is influenced, in large part, by one's social environment. This means that providing social inducements to vote tends to influence turnout.

### 3. Research on Voter Engagement

Only two nonprofit voter engagement projects have published data on the effects of their activities on turnout. Though the two field studies presented here are instrumental to testing whether or not voter engagement by direct service nonprofits is effective in increasing turnout, there are a few key limitations in terms of geographic representation and statistic robustness. Both studies also show a lack of randomization in constituting the experimental group. The reason behind this is that the field studies were conducted in a way that wouldn't impose undue hardship on the organizations or their constituents (LeRoux 2012, 15). The figures below summarize output data from the study.

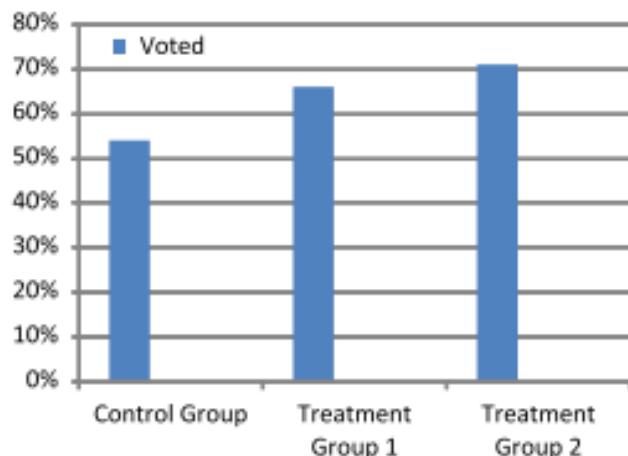


Figure 3: Percentage of Voter Turnout by Treatment Group (LeRoux 2012, 11)

The figure shows that respondents in both treatment groups illustrated higher voter turnout rates than those individuals in the control group. 54% of individuals in the control group voted, while 66% of the individuals in treatment group 1 voted, and 71% of the individuals in treatment group 2 voted. This data shows that individuals who receive registration assistance are more likely to vote than those in the control group, and the individuals who receive registration assistance and a voting reminder are even more likely to vote. As the clients of these nonprofits are low-income, the results implicitly show the impact of voter registration and voting reminders on an

underrepresented group of citizens. In fact, income “functions as a constant in this analysis, as the sample is comprised of persons living near or below the poverty line (LeRoux 2012, 12).” Drs. LeRoux and Krawczyk determined that the difference in the voter turnout rates was statistically significant (LeRoux 2012, 11). Voter engagement contacts, both registration and voting reminders, showed a positive and statistically significant effect on voter turnout. Their research showed that for each voter engagement contact, the probability that the individual contacted will vote increased by 11.1%. In addition, the research showed that voter registration assistance and voting reminders, have a bigger affect on voter turnout than either education or age, and mixed evidence of a relationship between voting and race; the probability of a constituent voting increases by 31.5% if the individual is Black. The study does not show a statistically significant decrease or increase in voting probability when the constituent is Hispanic (LeRoux, 2012, 12-13).

The study also revealed that nonprofit voter assistance contacts have a greater impact on the likelihood of voting than any other demographic factor including age, gender, or education; the constituents’ probability of voting will increase proportionally with the level of voter engagement undertaken by the nonprofit organization. The study further found that receiving a voter registration contact increased an individual’s probability of voting by 11.9 percentage points. Receiving a voting reminder had an even larger effect on whether or not someone voted. Receiving a voting reminder increased the probability of someone voting by 15.6 percentage points. The figure below shows these findings in more detail.

Other voter engagement activities, namely giving constituents sample ballots, providing information on candidate forums, answering voting questions, and other voter assistance/education had no statistical effect on constituents’ propensity to vote (LeRoux 2012, 14).

The study by Nonprofit VOTE in 2015 analyzed human service nonprofits across the nation, tracking their voter engagement activities and reporting out on the resulting impact on voter turnout. Building on their 2012 report, Nonprofit VOTE conducted a field study in 2014 intended to track direct service nonprofit voter engagement activities and their impact on voter turnout. The study tracked 28,881 individuals who

registered to vote or signed a voter pledge across 129 nonprofits in nine different states. The participating nonprofits included community health centers, family service agencies, community development groups, and multi-service organizations. Using demographic and voting history data, Nonprofit VOTE was able to determine who the nonprofits reached and at what rate those contacted turned out to vote in the 2014 midterm elections (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 2).

In addition, the study revealed that nonprofits do in fact touch demographic groups that have historically low voter turnout and are unlikely to be reached by political campaigns. The below figure illustrates the likelihood of a nonprofit constituent being Latino, low income, or black.

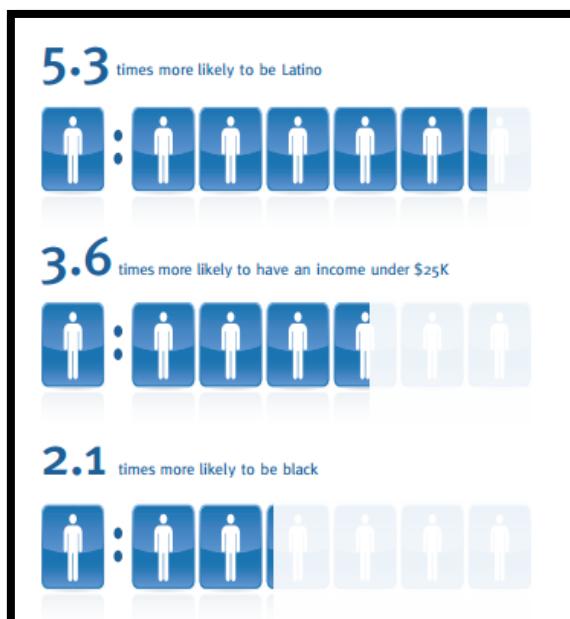


Figure 4: Nonprofit Constituent Demographics (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 5)

The above figure shows the demographic composition of nonprofit voters as compared to all registered voters in the study states. The study defines nonprofit voters as the “individuals contacted by a nonprofit to register to vote or sign a pledge to vote and were registered to vote at the time of the 2014 general election (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 4). Nonprofit voters were 5.3 times more likely to be Latino, 3.6 times more likely to have an income under \$25,000, and 2.1 times more likely to be black. This finding is critical as it confirms an underlying assumption of the paper that nonprofits reach underrepresented groups.

The study also found that voter turnout was higher among nonprofit voters across race/ethnicity and all income levels, having the largest impact on the lowest-income voters.

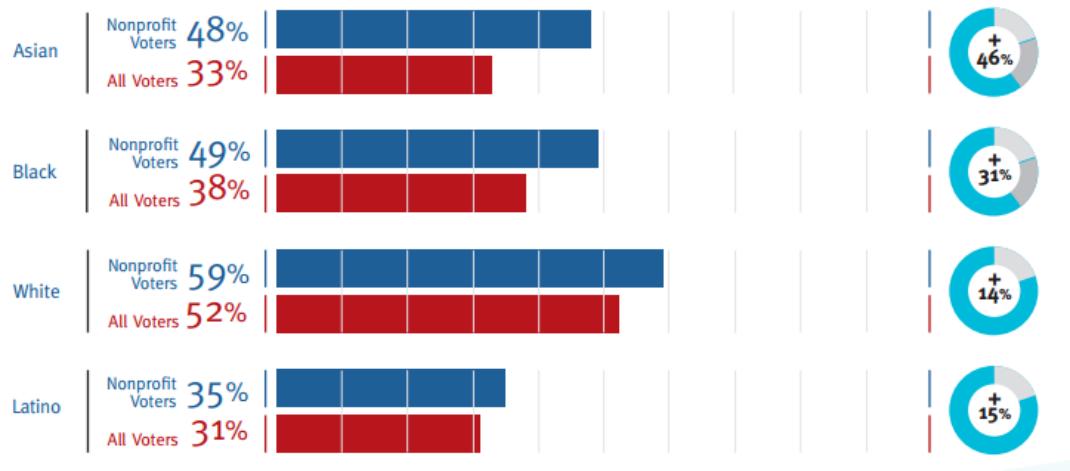


Figure 5: Turnout Rate By Race/Ethnicity (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 7)

The above figure shows that turnout rate among nonprofit voters as compared to the overall voting population; nonprofit voter turnout rate was higher across all races/ethnicities. Black nonprofit voters' turnout rate was 49% compared to a 38% average turnout rate for other Black voters. Latino nonprofit voters had a turnout rate of 35% compared to a 31% average turnout rate for other Latinos. Though non-Hispanic white nonprofit voters also voted at a higher rate, the increase among Blacks and Asians was more than twice as high as it was among whites. The lower Latino turnout is attributed to the fact that a majority of Latinos reached were also younger, and younger citizens are much less likely to vote than older individuals (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 7). The study also reported the turnout rate by income.

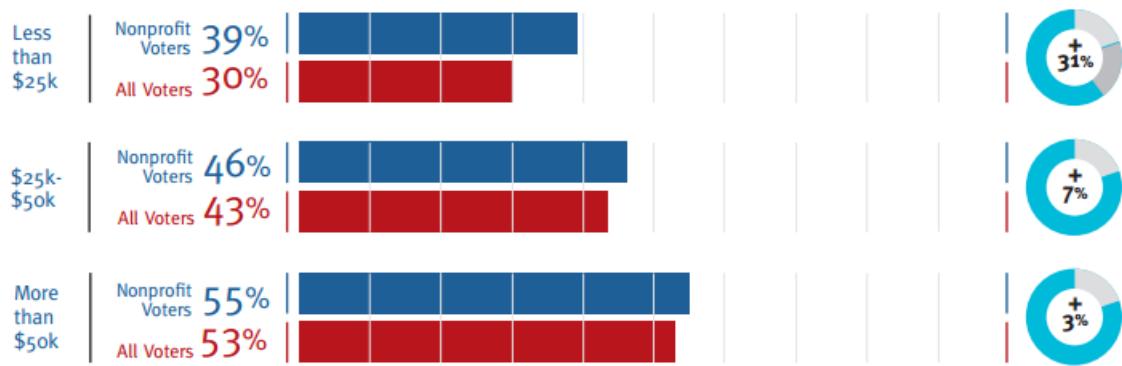


Figure 6: Turnout Rate By Income (*Engaging New Voters 2015*, 8)

The figure above shows that the lowest-income nonprofit voters, those individuals making less than \$25,000 a year, saw the highest increase in turnout as compared to other voters in the study states. The disproportion in turnout between the highest and lowest income citizens fell to a gap of only 16 points as compared to a gap of 23 points among all registered voters.

Though further research is needed to replicate these findings, the results of these two field studies confirm the hypothesis that direct nonprofit voter engagement increases voter turnout among underrepresented groups. These field study findings suggest that direct service nonprofits can in fact help correct disparities in political participation rates by increasing voter turnout among individuals who are traditionally less likely to vote. This finding has important implications for nonprofit employees and funders. Nonprofits that are interested in institutionalizing voter engagement activities within their organizations can be assured that these efforts are worth pursuing, as there is a real impact on voter turnout made. Furthermore, funders can be confident that there will be a “return on investment” on their contributions in the form of higher voter turnout among underrepresented groups, as nonprofits disproportionately reach those least likely to vote. Though a number of voter engagement activities were used in these field studies to engage constituents, voter registration and voting pledges were two simple and effective strategies used by every direct service nonprofit analyzed. Another implicit finding of this field analysis is the necessity of partnerships to conduct this work. In both of the field studies analyzed, the direct service nonprofits were partnered with at least one other

organization, whether it be a nonprofit state association, a university or another direct service nonprofit.

Now that this research has confirmed the hypothesis that voter engagement activities by nonprofits increases voter turnout, expert interviews were conducted to address the secondary research question – what are nonprofits doing to successfully and consistently mobilize their constituents? For the purposes of this research, every state nonprofit association was contacted. Of those contacted, only 5 associations responded, and of these, only one contact was willing to be interviewed. In addition, 86 direct service organizations engaging in voter mobilization activities were contacted. These organizations were a randomized subset of the organizations listed as 2012 and/or 2014 Nonprofit VOTE partners. Of these, only 13 responded.

There were a number of common themes that came out of the eleven interviews. First and foremost, all of the interviewees acknowledged that not enough research was being conducted on nonprofits' voter engagement work in particular. One of the reasons for this was, broadly, lack of funding for this work. All of the interviewees from direct service nonprofits noted that securing funding for direct service voter engagement work can be challenging but that increased funding would allow them to better conduct these activities. Alberto Morales (Personal Interview 2016), Project Coordinator at Advocacy Alliance Center of Texas, argued "With a larger budget, we could dedicate more monies to hiring more staff, really market the organization, and purchase more tools and resources that could streamline our process and make our efforts more effective." Other interviewees echoed these sentiments, arguing lack of money and human resources to conduct the work also contributed to the lack of data collection. Interestingly, interviewees from Nonprofit VOTE and Community Votes, two organizations established solely for the purposes of partnering with direct service nonprofits around voter engagement work, expressed that there was funding available for this work and noted that their organizations had secured such funding.

Across the board, simplicity was stressed as a necessary characteristic of an effective voter mobilization strategy. Otherwise, interviewees claimed, the activities would overwhelm the organization. When asked about the potential use of technology in these efforts, none of the interviewees thought that technology had a role apart from data collection. Furthermore, the vast majority of interviewees highlighted that a

nonprofit's culture was the most critical component contributing to the success or failure of these engagement efforts. If the organization had a culture of advocacy and there was staff/leadership buy-in, the organization was markedly more effective in engaging their constituents. In all cases, the organizations had partnered with another organization in order to conduct this work effectively. The interviews provided real world insights into why nonprofit constituents typically don't vote. Interviewees noted the following reasons:

- Language barriers and lack of literacy
- Lack of a photo ID
- Constituent recently moved or homeless
- Previously incarcerated individuals mistakenly assuming their criminal background keeps them from voting
- Lack of transportation to the polls
- Not knowing their polling location

Future studies should include interviews with the constituents themselves, focusing on why they don't vote and what organizations could do to encourage them to participate. In addition to lack of funding, interviewees consistently claimed to have experienced one or more of the following common challenges in conducting this work:

- Low capacity of existing resources to do extra work
- High turnover of key staff members
- Staff feeling disempowered themselves and thus discouraged from conducting this work for their constituents
- Negative stigma around the political nature of voter engagement work
- Complicated electoral process and state by state variation in voting laws hard to understand

## 4. Recommendations for Non-Profits

Analyzing all research and collected viewpoints on enhancing voter turnout by direct non-profits, the following is a collection of points that will enable the non-profits to be more effective and efficient in achieving their goals. The goal is to not provide a starting point, but a clear overview for non-profit leadership.

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### 4.1 Employment of Partnerships

Low on money, staff, and time, a crucial component of successful voter engagement is the kind of partnership(s) the nonprofit has created to implement and sustain the work. The first field study explored the results of two university professors partnering with nonprofits to test, collect data on, and analyze agency-based voter engagement strategies. The Michigan State Nonprofit Association was also a partner in this study (LeRoux 2012). For the second field study, Nonprofit VOTE partnered with 129 nonprofits to conduct and document the efforts of a nationwide study (*Engaging New Voters* 2015). In fact, every expert interviewee mentioned that their efforts were a result of some form of partnership. This confirms the findings of the 2012 Nonprofit VOTE report stating that having partnerships was a key component of successful voter engagement. For example, some organizations partnered with other nonprofits to provide joint nonpartisan registration training to staff and volunteers. Other times, nonprofits partnered with other organizing groups that provided state-specific voting information and/or ready-made materials. For local nonprofits, partnering with national organizations provides access to a broader range of information and materials. For a national nonprofit, partnering with local community based organizations helps provide a depth of insight around the populations the efforts are looking to mobilize (*Can Nonprofits Increase Voting* 2013). Partnerships, especially with larger nonprofit organizations, private companies, and foundations, can also be a way of accessing funding for voter engagement activities. The Voter Engagement Evaluation Project mentioned throughout this paper found that funders are likely to consider using national, regional, and state-based organizations as intermediaries both to provide additional capacity to the nonprofits and to funnel grant money to a variety of nonprofits across an area (Proteus Fund 2006). This insight will inform the organizing model that will be introduced later in this chapter. Others reported that even the act of partnering with another organization promoted a sense of accountability around the work; nonprofits are more likely to promote and sustain their voter engagement work if encouraged to do so by their peers.

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#### 4.2 Employment of Competition

Many of the expert interviewees mentioned that competition was used to promote enthusiastic voter engagement. Nonprofit partners or various sites of a single nonprofit would compete to see who could register more voters; in many

instances, this friendly competition created a game-like element to voter engagement, staff at one nonprofit or one site wanting to “win” even if there were no prizes to be awarded. This finding is consistent with the Gerber and Green get-out-the-vote research claiming that voting behavior and attitudes toward voting are heavily influenced by one’s social environment. If organizations use competition to increase enthusiasm around these activities, both among their staff and among their constituents, it is likely that a greater percentage of individuals engaged will turn out to vote (Gerber and Green 2008). Furthermore, it can be extrapolated that nonprofits themselves might be more likely to adopt voter engagement activities if peer organizations are conducting such activities. One of the first questions posed by the majority of potential interviewees over the course of this research process was “what other nonprofits are doing this work?” and/or “are other nonprofits participating in this particular research paper?” These questions and other research findings on the subject imply a network effect; the more nonprofits that participate in these activities, the more likely new nonprofits will be to join in on voter engagement work, and competition appears to be an effective way to encourage this participation.

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#### 4.3 Collect and Share Results of Voter Engagement

Publicly available quantitative data on this topic is difficult to locate. Often, collected data is never published. Even more likely is that the data collection organization did not comprehensively document and track data around the voter engagement activities. There are many stated reasons for this. Without funding or extra human resources devoted specifically for this work, existing staff is consistently stretched for capacity and unable to spend additional time documenting their activities. In most states, the law requires that voter registration forms must be turned in to the appropriate state agency within five days, and no photocopies of the document can be made. As a result, nonprofit staff have to manually copy the details of every individual that registers with them in order to keep a complete voter registration record. In addition to this, in order to determine the turnout rate of those individuals that the organization helped register, staff have to compare the organization’s voter registration list to state voter files. These administrative tasks are extremely time intensive, thus are often not prioritized ahead

of activities and programs related directly to a nonprofit's core mission. Furthermore, if the efforts are spearheaded by one individual, and the individual leaves the organization, there can be a knowledge loss that occurs, and organization-wide enthusiasm for the work can wane significantly. Organizations are further wary about sharing any of their constituents' personal data; even sharing scrubbed, summarized data sets raised concerns around voter protection and privacy with several of the nonprofits that were contacted for this research. Past quantitative data, qualitative lessons learned were rarely documented, information around what is being done across the sector often shared through word of mouth.

Despite all of these practical challenges and confidentiality concerns, collecting and sharing the results of voter engagement efforts helps to advance this area of research, encourages funding for this work, and allows nonprofit organizations to learn from one another. Lack of data collection and sharing limits the opportunities that organizations have to learn from each other and build more effective voter engagement strategies from one election to the next. Limited data also represents a real obstacle for academic researchers; researchers face a huge challenge when it comes to data collection, thus a significant portion of time is spent trying to understand what has already been done instead of building on an existing frameworks and generating more effective solutions. Nonprofit coalitions, nonprofit associations, and national organizing bodies should make data sharing a priority going forward to help build the case for impactful funding and increase the effectiveness of direct service voter engagement activities.

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#### 4.4 Use Volunteers

Nonprofits across the nation successfully conducting engagement activities often use volunteers to support this work. In fact, several nonprofit organizations relied almost exclusively on trained volunteers to plan and implement their voter engagement strategies. Given the limited capacity of staff, volunteers served as key resources to move this work forward. Findings from the Voter Engagement Evaluation Project stated that through a number of community-based organizations, volunteers succeeded in engaging constituents more effectively than even paid canvassers given their familiarity with the constituents and the way in which they convey their message to

these individuals (Proteus Fund 2006). In her interview, Rebecca Gorrell, Director of Education & Leadership Development at Community Resource Center, mentioned that volunteers sourced directly from the constituent group served had the potential to be more effective than typical volunteers. In both the 2012 and 2014 Nonprofit VOTE reports, participating nonprofits reported that volunteers helped run voter registration activities, set up candidate forums, promoted voter education initiatives, and distributed nonpartisan marketing materials to advance awareness of upcoming elections (*Can Nonprofits Increase Voting 2013*).

When it comes to volunteers, it is a common complaint in the nonprofit sector that having to coordinate and/or supervise the volunteers is often a bigger hassle than the benefit the organization receives from their service. Though voter registration assistance requires nonpartisan training, voter engagement activities can be a structured, year-round way for volunteers to get and stay involved. Using competition and allowing the volunteers to co-create the voter engagement strategy helps keep these activities interesting and the volunteers committed to long-term support.

One source of untapped volunteer power, according to several of the individuals interviewed for this paper, are students from universities and high schools in the area. Students in both high school and college are often required to complete a certain number of service hours before they are allowed to graduate. Furthermore, bachelor's and master's degrees in many social work and public policy programs require that students complete internships in their area of study. Nonprofits could use these student resources in numerous ways including but not limited to helping with voter registration drives, collecting data on voter engagement activities, matching voter registration lists to voter files in order to track turnout, promoting the organization's activities on social media, creating nonpartisan marketing materials and educating fellow students on the importance of voting. In the upcoming elections, one of the nonprofits interviewed for this paper, Neighborhood Centers, was planning on also implementing a mentorship program, where each volunteer and staff member would be matched with an eligible voter to mentor them on the importance of civic participation for an extended period of time. The idea works off the assumption that prolonged, personal engagement with another human being will help instil the importance of political participation and create a habit of consistent voting for both individuals.

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#### 4.5 Integrate Voter Engagement into Existing Activities

Every nonprofit that was reached for comment noted the importance of integrating voter engagement activities into the existing activities of the organization. In fact, a 2012 study reported that an agency-based voter engagement approach is advantageous because the nonprofit organizations can integrate voter engagement work into their day-to-day activities (Rongitsch 2008, 15). A common strategy among nonprofits doing voter engagement work is to integrate their efforts into their intake process. For example, at health clinics, voter registration would take place when the patients check-in. Other nonprofits have voter registration taking place at the front-desk or wherever the nonprofit's employees or volunteers first interact with constituents. The simpler the voter engagement strategy and the less disruptive it is to the organization's day-to-day work, the more likely the efforts will be sustained over time. Nonprofits should consider the ways in which they interact with their constituents and tailor a voter engagement strategy that incorporates registration and voting reminders into the organization's already existing personal interactions with their constituents.

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#### 4.6 Use Technology as a Support Tool

Though technology is an often sought after solution due to its potential scalability and, in many cases, its affordability, existing research argues that given the realities of the nonprofit sector, new technologies should only be used to enhance in-person agency-based strategies (Proteus Fund 2006). This conclusion was confirmed by the expert interviews conducted for the purposes of this research; none of the experts interviewed saw technology as a viable engagement strategy, only as a tool to capture data around in-person contacts made by the organization. Furthermore, most nonprofit groups are new to voter engagement work and lack the prerequisite technology and sophistication to incorporate technological solutions into the design of their engagement strategy. This technology gap contributes to the challenge that nonprofits face in meeting funders' various accountability standards, as the organizations don't have the technological support to help them track accomplishments or changing needs over time. Potential technological supplements to in-person agency-based voter engagement work that should be considered by direct service nonprofits include shared online databases for efficient management of voter engagement initiatives, online

recruitment of volunteers, and website/mobile information sharing (Proteus Fund 2006).

Social media in particular represents a unique opportunity for nonprofits to increase the effectiveness of their voter engagement work. As part of an ongoing 15 part series on nonprofits and voter engagement by the Stanford Social Innovation Review, IDEO, the innovative human centered design company, wrote an article on the importance of a human centered approach to voter engagement. Human centered design is a methodology of problem solving where a solution is designed based on the end-users experience with the product/service. This article found that individuals are quick to share political opinions via social media and that this social media behavior could be leveraged to effectively mobilize potential voters; once individuals experience their peers' enthusiasm for voting, they are more likely to participate themselves. Social media can create an online sense of community, a sensation that is argued to increase eligible voters' motivation to vote (Lydon 2016). This reaffirms the assertion by Gerber and Green that individuals are more likely to vote when they are part of a social environment where peers discuss their voting behaviors (Gerber and Green 2008). Furthermore, the social media platform Facebook has a number of ways for nonprofits to engage constituents around voter engagement online, including an "I voted" button that the organization can post on their page and share with their followers (Facebook 2010). Social media represents a free and easy way for direct service nonprofits to supplement their in-person activities.

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#### 4.7 Host Candidate Forums

In addition to voter registration and voting reminders, candidate forums are an effective way of educating the community and bringing visibility to an upcoming election (Berbano, Personal Interview 2016). Several interviewees mentioned the effectiveness of candidate forums in increasing voter turnout and altering attitudes regarding the importance of voting. For example, Neighborhood Centers, a large nonprofit out of Houston Texas, used candidate forums to engage and educate constituents. The organization partnered with another nonprofit in the city to host a candidate forum which served as a meet and greet between candidates and the citizens. These events were framed as community events rather than partisan political events

(Fraga, Personal Interview 2016). It is often argued that the interaction between eligible voters and candidates helps potential voters more tangibly experience the importance of elected officials. A common complaint among individuals that don't turn out to vote is that they have no relationship to the elected officials and feel extremely far removed from the electoral process. Hosting an event to foster direct correspondence between candidates and members of the community arguably helps to address the apathy and disempowerment many eligible voters feel. Though powerful in their potential impact, candidate forums also require a good deal of time and effort to organize. In 2014, Nonprofit VOTE published a handbook on how to host a candidate forum. Best practices, according to this report, include:

- Start planning early (i.e., 4-5 months prior to the event)
- Have a marketing and public relations strategy to drive participation
- Engage various media outlets to ensure coverage of the event
- Include non-English speaking materials in the overall marketing strategy
- Provide clear instruction to the candidates, nonprofit staff, volunteers, and community members on what to expect from the event and how they should participate
- When possible, partner with other organizations to bring more visibility to the event and share tasks

In the end, hosting a successful candidate forum hinges on adequate planning. Community turn out is the key to a successful event, thus the outreach and promotion of the event must be prioritized (*A Nonprofit's Guide to Hosting a Candidate Forum*).

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#### 4.8 Try Tabling

Tabling, having registration activities and information presented on a table, is a simple yet effective strategy that nonprofits can use to engage constituents. In fact, the majority of nonprofits that participated in the 2014 Nonprofit VOTE project reported that tabling was the single most successful strategy they used to engage individuals that came into their organization. 69% of the organizations in that report tabled in their lobby or around their front desk (*Engaging New Voters* 2015, 19). Several of the nonprofits interviewed for this paper had included tabling in their voter registration

efforts. Though tabling is a simple solution, active tabling, where staff and volunteers canvass actively from a central location, requires some skill. Strategies for successful active tabling include:

- Being proactive about engaging people
- Using food or other free items to draw people to the table
- Tabling during the weeks leading up to registration deadlines, early voting periods, and on Election Day
- Prioritizing tabling during heavy traffic flow and peak business hours

While very simple in thought and execution, tabling can be a highly effective strategy in engaging nonprofit constituents (Nonprofit VOTE 2016).

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#### 4.9 Conduct Voter Engagement Year Round

Most of the nonprofits contacted for this research are conducting voter engagement year-round. In fact, those nonprofits that weren't able to sustain this work had approached voter engagement as a once-a-year project. There are a number of reasons for this. First, in order for voter engagement to become part of the organization's culture, the activities have to be integrated into business as usual. Staff buy-in is consistently noted as a key reason behind an organization's success or failure in conducting voter engagement work, and culture often sets the tone for universal buy-in. Second, as staff turnover in the nonprofit sector tends to be high, it is necessary to build an infrastructure around voter engagement so that there are no key person dependencies; voter engagement should be set up so that no matter which individual were to leave the organization, the voting engagement activities would continue. Third, in addition to federal elections, there are also state and local elections. In fact, due to the many layers of local, state and federal elections, Americans have more opportunities to vote each decade than Germans will have in their lifetimes. Whether running for administrative, judicial or administrative posts, thousands of Americans run for an elected office each year (Green 2008). In order to increase turnout for all of these elections, organizations have to have an ongoing system of activities in place. In addition to the activities themselves, experts claim that funding for this work should be year-round in order to maintain coordination of efforts, expand efforts to reach new groups, and to continue to strengthen the relationships being built with constituents, clients, and nonprofit partners (Proteus Fund 2006).

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#### 4.10 Voter Education

Voter education is a key component to achieving both the short and long-term goals of voter engagement work. Education efforts should not only involve constituents, but staff and volunteers should also be included. Beyond the required nonpartisan registration training that is required of any individual assisting others with registration, staff and volunteers are themselves often uninformed on the overall electoral process and/or their state's specific laws.

One key area of voter education involves understanding one's state regulations. The laws around voting vary state by state, so in order to effectively design and implement a voter engagement strategy, nonprofits must be well informed of the regulations governing their state. Several resources, including the National Conference of State Legislatures, Nonprofit VOTE, and the NYU Brennan Center of Justice, include detailed information on state specific voting regulations on their websites, so nonprofits interested in conducting voter engagement work should first gather this information. Some key differences by state include the type of identification required, the ability to register online, and rules around third party submission of registration forms (Nonprofit VOTE 2016).

In addition to state voting rules, staff and volunteers often share their constituents' sentiment that voting in general doesn't matter or that their individual vote won't count. This concept appears to be rooted in both distrust in the government and a lack of understanding around the basics of the electoral process. For example, founder of Community Votes, Louisa Hackett, shared an experience she had with a staff member at an affordable housing agency in NYC. Though the individual had been tasked with supporting the organization's voter engagement work, she did not know what a primary election was. This is not a unique tale; this lack of understanding is a consequence of having little civic education in the American public education system. Students aren't educated on the electoral process or civic engagement as a grander concept, so when it comes time to get involved with this work, individuals often don't know where to start.

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#### 4.11 Iterate Efforts for Better Results

Many of the nonprofit organizations contacted for this research had changed the way they conducted voter engagement work over time, learning from the results of each year and tailoring their efforts based on their findings. All organizations started with voter registration in their first year, many then piloting other strategies such as candidate forums, civic participation workshops and Election Day parties in subsequent election cycles. In order to increase the impact of their efforts, nonprofits should take a step back from their engagement work after each election and discuss with their partners what worked and what could be improved. Incorporating lessons learned and soliciting insights consistently, and from the constituents themselves will allow direct service nonprofits to engage voters more effectively.

When considering nonpartisan strategies specific to direct service nonprofits, Nonprofit VOTE is the primary resource to explore. Their list of published nonprofit voter engagement strategies is the most comprehensive in the field. These common engagement strategies include:

- Getting leadership buy-in
- Getting staff buy-in
- Providing effective nonpartisan training to staff and volunteers
- Integrating voter activities into daily processes
- Establishing partnerships when possible
- Providing personalized messaging to constituents
- Using competitions to fuel turnout

Obtaining staff and leadership buy-in is crucial to the effectiveness of any strategy pursued by a nonprofit. Without this support, sustainable voter mobilization strategies will not be possible. Training is another critical strategy to effectively engage constituents. Training must be delivered to any nonprofit staff that will be providing assistance with registration. In addition to this, nonpartisan training is strongly suggested for all staff, as staying nonpartisan is an important legal requirement and guideline that should not be violated due to lack of proper education around permissible activities. Integrating voter activities into daily processes is especially important for the success of such activities in a direct service nonprofit environment. Nonprofit staff are typically stretched to capacity due to high demand for their services and minimal resources at their disposal, so in order to make voter mobilization a

consistent activity, it should fit into an employee's existing daily routine without requiring a significant amount of additional time or energy. Establishing partnerships can help alleviate some of the challenges presented by limited capacity and help nonprofit partners reach a larger potential voter base. Furthermore, reiterating a finding presented by Donald Green and Alan Gerber in 2008, personalizing the messaging is also crucial to the message's effectiveness (Gerber and Green 2008). Last, competition tends to fuel voter turnout. This last insight is related to another Green and Gerber finding which argued that voting behavior is related to one's social environment, and individuals are more likely to vote when they feel some sort of social pressure around the action. Across the board, Nonprofit VOTE emphasizes a need to customize an organization's voter mobilization strategy to best fit their constituents, and voter registration and voting reminders tend to serve as the foundation of all voter engagement strategies (Nonprofit VOTE 2016).

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