



How Nonprofits Can Boost Immigrant Voter Turnout

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On Election Day in 2012, immigrant citizen voters turned out in record numbers. In states such as Pennsylvania, Florida, and Virginia, voters from various immigrant backgrounds were credited with crucial contributions to President Barack Obama's margin of reelection victory. But surges of voting by eligible immigrants did not happen automatically. In addition to volunteers for the Obama campaign and other groups like unions, thousands of nonprofit organizations worked tirelessly to register, educate, and mobilize eligible immigrants. Without these efforts, eligible immigrants might not have participated in such an impressive fashion, because new citizens have historically voted at relatively low levels.

Given the vital role that nonprofits play in delivering social services to help immigrants become fully a part of American society, it is worth asking how many of them also worked to boost voter turnout in 2012. For groups that got involved, what approaches did they use to help immigrants become fully engaged American citizens?

A New Study of Immigrant-Serving Nonprofits

To explore these matters, I conducted a fall 2012 survey of 1,200 nonprofit organizations operating in six states: Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina. The nonprofits surveyed had varied missions focused on the arts, health, business, and politics, but all aimed to serve a particular immigrant community or immigrants in general. The executive director of each organization was asked about their mission and the specific tactics their group used if it got involved in the 2012 election.

Twenty-two percent of the groups contacted responded to the survey, and a clear majority of those who responded (58.9%) said they were *not* involved in the 2012 election. "We are a purely 'cultural' group," explained one executive, "not involved in politics at ALL." Another said "we are a... purely cultural and humanitarian organization so we are specifically barred from engaging in any political activities." Actually, even though endorsing candidates or giving money to campaigns are types of activities ruled out by national and state laws covering nonprofit organizations, other election-related activities are perfectly legal. Failure to grasp such legal nuances is one reason many nonprofits stay out of elections altogether.

However, forty-one percent of the responding groups said that they were engaged during the 2012 election. How? The survey asked respondents to check off one or more of five possible tactics: monitoring campaign news, registering voters, mobilizing voters, providing information to the community, and joining an electoral coalition. Forty-five percent of the groups reporting involvement in the election used just one tactic, while a third used three or more tactics. Organizations that engaged in multiple activities either had an expressly political mission or enough staff flexibility to allow a temporary redeployment of resources during election season.

The Electoral Toolbox

Survey results provide an interesting overview of specific efforts undertaken by electorally engaged nonprofits:

- About a quarter of the groups said they monitored information and news about the 2012 campaign. This was the simplest and least expensive tactic on the survey list, something many immigrant-serving groups could choose to do without diverting from non-political missions.
- Only small percentages of groups (ten percent or fewer in each instance) reported activities such as providing election information, issuing policy reports, or providing voter information translated into immigrant languages. These activities may simply require a level of staffing and expertise not available to most immigrant-serving nonprofits whose missions are not focused on civic engagement.

- Voter registration and voter mobilization were relatively frequently used tactics, employed by about 19% and 14% of the groups, respectively.

Interviews with dozens of executive directors revealed that immigrant-serving nonprofit organizations often used quite sophisticated approaches to do voter outreach. Some organizations linked to a national voter information database called the Voter Activation Network to target eligible voters based on their previous propensity to vote, native languages, and particular ethnicities. This Network is an especially useful technology for immigrant-serving nonprofits with many constituents not fluent in English. Using the Network, some nonprofits were able to deploy volunteers fluent in various languages to knock on the doors of potential voters and speak with them in their native language about registering or voting on Election Day. Nonprofits also used computer-based phone banks, text messaging, and social media to reach immigrant voters. Most of these technologies were not available in previous election cycles.

Because many immigrant-serving nonprofits have minimal resources, I anticipated that many would band together with other groups to enhance election resources. But, surprisingly, just a small percentage (8.7%) of survey respondents said they took part in any electoral coalition. In addition, only two percent of the groups said they used their web site to share information. Coalitions and web sharing would seem to be inexpensive ways to engage in election-related endeavors, so future research needs to probe why these tactics seem to be rarely used.

Take-Aways for Nonprofit Leaders

For executive directors interested in electoral engagement, this survey shows the variety of possible tactics and underlines that investments in web technology allow nonprofits to use the national database of voters. Survey results suggest, as well, that organizations able to handle data could prepare to disseminate policy ideas and election information next time. For nonprofits that have not gotten involved, the survey revealed a clear need for better information about legal options. As organizations such as Nonprofit Vote can explain to nonprofit groups, registering and informing voters are perfectly legal activities for them. Such work may not be right for every immigrant-serving organization, but choices should be based on full and accurate information.

Read more in Heath Brown, “The Voice of Immigrant-Serving Nonprofits in the 2012 Election.” *Nonprofit Quarterly* (March 2013).