



Project Vote is the leading technical assistance and direct service provider to the voter engagement and civic participation community. Since its founding in 1982, Project Vote has provided professional training, management, evaluation and technical services on a broad continuum of key issues related to voter engagement and voter participation activities in low-income and minority communities.

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ENSURING INTEGRITY IN VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVES

In recent years, voter registration drives by third party organizations have been very successful at registering millions of new voters and broadening the electorate, especially among low income and minority people. Project Vote and its local partners alone registered 1.14 million voters in 2003-2004.

While a democracy’s health is dependent on participation by all its citizens, these successful voter registration efforts have prompted a backlash among those who are not interested in bringing more voters into the political process. This backlash has exploited a very small number of instances in which individuals filled out false applications to accuse voter registration organizations of perpetuating widespread “voter fraud” and to drive the enactment of new and unnecessarily strict laws regulating voter registration and voting itself. It is essential in this climate for community organizations and other “third party” voter registration and voter engagement organizations to run tightly managed voter registration drives. In order to keep the focus on bringing new voters into the political process, drives must emphasize quality control and maintain the integrity of the voter registration system. This policy brief lays out the key elements of achieving this goal.

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Ensuring Integrity in Voter Registration Drives

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Why Quality Control Systems are Essential

Voter registration organizations have a responsibility both to the voter and to the registration process to ensure that voter registration applications are filled out completely and accurately. New voters need to be assured that they are registered and elections departments need to be assured that applications from your organization adhere to policy and practice. When these two things occur, new voters are brought into the electorate.

Defining Voter Registration Fraud

Voter registration fraud occurs when a canvasser fills out false information on a voter registration application in order to avoid doing the hard work of canvassing. Voter registration fraud does not result in any voter's right to vote being taken away, and it is almost without fail an isolated act committed by someone with no intention of attempting to vote using a false registration. It does, however, waste the valuable time of local elections officials who, during elections, are under tremendous pressure to process a high volume of voter registration cards in a very short time with scarce resources and inadequate staffing. Further, accusations of "voter fraud" can be used to disrupt your program and besmirch your organization's reputation. It therefore demands that a serious quality control program be implemented as you set up your voter registration program.

A Strong Quality Control Team

It is strongly suggested that voter registration organizations recruit and train a separate team of volunteers or employees to perform quality control checks on the voter registration applications. The Quality Control team should take each batch of cards through two phases of quality control – the initial phase to check that cards are filled out completely and accurately, and a second phase to call a sample. However, before cards reach this stage of the quality control process, there must first be a system that allows the managers of the program to know which voters and verify the information on the card. The volunteer or employee gathered which application.

Setting Up A System To Track Each Card

Tying Cards To Employees Or Volunteers

The first step in the quality control process is to ensure that applications can be traced back to the volunteer or employee who helped the applicant complete it. All volunteers or employees must initial each application card that they get in the field. However, some jurisdictions do not allow notations or other changes to be made on a voter registration application, so check with election officials before instructing staff to initial completed applications. Organizations should also find out whether volunteers are allowed to fill out applications for voters or whether all the handwriting on the card must be that of the applicant's.

Batch Cover Sheets

The second part of this initial process is for each volunteer or employee to fill out a cover sheet for the applications he or she collected that day. Project Vote refers to these sheets as "Batch Cover Sheets."

These batch cover sheet should have space for, at a minimum, the date, the number of cards in the batch, and the registration worker's name. Additional helpful information could include the name of the field director, the type of site the worker was at that day, total hours worked, total hours that were spent out in field, the number of cards with email addresses, and the number with phone numbers.

Batch cover sheets stay with the voter registration applications at all times as the applications make their way through the quality control process. There should be a space at the bottom of the batch cover sheet for the quality control workers who verify the cards to fill in information once they finish checking the batch.

Checking Cards and Calling New Voters

Once cards have been processed for tracking, they should go through a two-step process to ensure accuracy and authenticity. In the initial inspection phase, Quality Control workers should conduct a visual check of all the cards for incomplete or fraudulent information. Workers should check that



the handwriting is legible the birthday is complete and that the person is old enough to register. They should also count the number of applications that include phone numbers, and if the number is lower than average, subject that batch to stricter examination. Quality Control workers should examine the signatures on the applications throughout the batch to make sure that the handwriting is not similar. Both lack of phone numbers and similar signatures are indications of possible fraud by the worker or volunteer.

In the phone verification phase of quality control, workers should call through a random sample of applications in each batch, congratulating the applicants on their decisions to register to vote and verifying that the information on their cards is correct. They should continue to make phone calls until the information on a minimum of 20% of the applications is verified. Often organizations choose to continue calling until they reach a higher percentage of applicants.

After both phases are completed, Quality Control workers should initial each batch cover sheet to indicate that the batch was visually inspected and called. They should also fill in the total number of cards in the batch and the number of applications in the batch that were verified with a telephone call. Workers should fill out a nightly tally sheet that summarizes their verification work, giving the field director or whoever manages the program quick feedback on the overall quality of their team's work. This will enable the manager to spot any volunteers or employees who are turning in incomplete or fraudulent cards immediately.

Photocopying Voter Registration Applications

Once original cards have completed the Quality Control process, they should be photocopied, if local laws allow, and then submitted to the appropriate election official. Where state law allows, it is extremely helpful to maintain two well-organized photocopies of all the registrations applications. One photocopy of the cards should be maintained at the organization's local office, organized by batch and

with the batch cover sheets attached. This enables the organization to look up past voter registration applications of any volunteer or employee. If the organization intends to operate a Get-Out-the-Vote program with their new registrants, a second copy of the cards can be sent for data entry to aid in the creation of phone or walk lists. Again, the second set of copies should be maintained in order with their batch cover sheets.

Emphasizing Quality Control During Training

Trainers should be very clear with volunteers and employees that there will be an emphasis on quality control. When training canvassers, field directors must emphasize the collection of phone numbers and train canvassers to explain to applicants why it is important that phone numbers are filled in. Trainers should be very clear about what constitutes a complete address, and what other fields on the application are required in order for the application to be processed.

Every volunteer or employee should be required to read and sign a policy memorandum that explains how the organization defines fraud, what its consequences are, and that the organization will aid the board of elections and law enforcement agencies in investigating and prosecuting any instances of fraud. For example, Project Vote's packet reads, "If fraud is found by us or by the board of elections we will be able to identify that you turned in the card and we will promptly turn your name and contact information over to the board of elections."

It is very important to set up a system with the volunteers or employees that rewards clean cards and sanctions incomplete or unverifiable cards. One can do this by having quality control workers deduct unverifiable or suspect cards from the worker's total each day. Field managers can use the information fed back to them from the quality control team in their group and one-on-one trainings with canvassers. The feedback from the quality control team can help field managers spot common errors and retrain workers,



and also identify problem canvassers. A good payment and promotion system takes into account quality, not just volume.

Completing the Quality Control Process by Appropriate Deadlines

Each batch of cards should go through the quality control process before submission to election officials. This process must be completed by the deadline, if any, for transmission of completed applications and, of course, by the voter registration deadline for each election. It can be difficult to move applications through the quality control process quickly during a large voter registration drive, so organizations must ensure adequate capacity to effectively implement their quality control system in order to ensure the integrity of the voter registration effort.

How to Handle Suspected Fraud

If fraud is suspected, the volunteer or employee should be suspended immediately. If the fraud is verified, the employee or volunteer should be dismissed.

Before starting a voter registration drive, each organization should ask local elections officials how to handle an instance of fraud should it occur. In many cases, local elections officials want any fraudulent cards turned in to them, in a separate pile from the completed applications, so that they can decide whether to pursue an official investigation. Voter registration organizations should comply with these local procedures, and should offer to aid elections officials in any investigations.

Building A Relationship With The Local Board Of Elections

It is very important for voter registration organizations to initiate a relationship with staff at local boards of elections before the start of their registration drives. The immediate goals in establishing this relationship are to let the staff know that the drive is starting, to let them know what the goals of the drive are, and to learn how to conduct the drive in accordance with local procedures.

Counties in the same state often enforce deputization laws differently, consider different fields on voter registration forms required, and enforce laws regarding ex-felon registration differently. It is the voter registration organizations' responsibility to learn those different procedures, and to educate themselves on the law as well, so that they are aware if an elections official is asking them to do something that is contrary to law.

By building a positive relationship with the local elections officials, voter registration organizations will be better able to deal with any problems if they arise, and the elections officials are more likely to work collaboratively with organizations to help them improve their quality control procedures if necessary. It is suggested that groups require their field managers to check in with elections staff regularly when turning in applications, so that the relationship is maintained and so that the elections staff have the opportunity to offer feedback.

Turning In Cards Regularly and Promptly

Voter registration organizations should turn in original cards at a minimum once a week during the drive, or more frequently if required by state law, and should turn cards in every day during the last two weeks before the registration deadline. It is suggested that groups use a cover sheet when turning in cards that tallies up all the batches of cards being turned in, and has a space for the elections official to initial and date, verifying that they received the cards. Project Vote refers to these cover sheets as "Submission Sheets". These submission sheets enable supervisors to verify that their organizers are turning in cards in a timely fashion.

Conclusion

By following the procedures outlined in this issue brief, voter registration organizations will increase the number of accurate and complete voter registration applications they produce and will further their goal of increasing voter participation.