

July 31, 2009

To: Interested Parties

From: Jody Herman and Doug Hess

Re: Internet Access and Voter Registration

Introduction

Despite some gains made in the 2007-2008 election cycle, it is clear that significant problems with the U.S. voter registration system persist. Disparities in demographic representation in the registered electorate remain, particularly in categories of race/ethnicity, income, educational attainment, and age.¹ These disparities are exacerbated by federal and state laws that govern voter registration systems, which often create multi-layered barriers to voter registration.²

After the historic election of November 2008, proposals to improve the U.S. voter registration system have been offered at both the federal and state level. One proposal, which has already been adopted in several states, is to allow voter registration via the internet.³ While online voter registration is a welcome new service, it is important to note that it has limitations, particularly when it comes to closing the existing demographic disparities in the voter registration rates.

One obvious limitation of online voter registration is that not all U.S. households have internet access in the home. This memo reviews available data to describe those U.S. households that do not have internet access in the home, and analyzes voter registration levels in those households based on race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, and household income. In most cases, the demographic groups that are already less likely to be registered are also the least likely to have internet access in the home.

Data

Data for this memo come from the Nielsen report “An Overview of Home Internet Access in the U.S.” and the November 2008 Current Population Survey. The Nielsen report, released in December 2008, provides internet access data from two Nielsen surveys: the Home Technology phone survey (3rd quarter, 2008) and the 2008 Nielsen Claritas Convergence Audit survey. In addition, the Nielsen report summarizes internet access data from a sample of local metered markets. This sample comes from fifty-six of the largest Nielsen markets in the U.S., which represent 70 percent of all U.S. households.⁴

The Nielsen report does not include data to assess the voter-eligibility of respondents; therefore some Nielsen respondents may not be U.S. citizens, or may be ineligible to vote for other reasons. It is possible that this may skew the Nielsen data toward less internet access than if only voter-eligible respondents were included in their surveys. Voter registration data come from the November 2008 Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement. The data were recoded to correspond with demographic categories presented in the Nielsen study.

Findings

In the United States as a whole, 71 percent of the voter-eligible population is registered to vote. According to Nielsen's National People Meter, 73.9 percent of U.S. panel homes have internet access. However, internet access in the home varies by household income, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and age. The table on the following page presents internet access and voter registration rates for those demographic categories.

- In both **income and educational attainment**, the groups least likely to have internet access in the home are also the least likely to be registered to vote. Only 36 percent of those with no high school degrees report having internet access at home, which is 41 percentage points lower than all respondents. Only 50 percent of voter-eligible citizens in this category are registered to vote, which is 21 percentage points lower than all voter-eligible citizens.
- Similarly, respondents in the **lowest income category** are the least likely of all income categories to have internet access in the home (41 percent), and are also the least likely of all income categories to be registered to vote (65 percent).
- In the **race/ethnicity categories**, Black and Latino respondents are much less likely to have internet access in the home than all respondents, with 63 percent of households in each group reporting internet access in the home. While the percentage of voter-eligible Blacks who are registered to vote is only slightly smaller than the percentage of the voter-eligible U.S. population who are registered, voter-eligible Latinos are registered at a rate 12 points lower than the voter-eligible U.S. population. Therefore, Latinos simultaneously have low registration rates and a low rate of internet access in the home.

There are some demographic categories that do not follow the trends described above, however.

- **Asian-Americans** are the least likely of the represented racial/ethnic groups presented to be registered to vote (55 percent), yet have the highest rate of internet access in that group (87 percent).
- The age categories overall show the reverse trend of the educational attainment and income categories. Out of all age categories, those in the **youngest age group** are the most likely to have internet access (88 percent), yet are the least likely to be registered (63 percent). The **oldest age category** is the least likely to have internet access (60 percent), but the most likely to be registered (77 percent).

Conclusions

Overall, Nielsen respondents who are Black, Latino, have only a high school diploma or less education, are 55 or older, or make \$50,000 or less annually are less likely than all respondents to have internet access in the home. With the exception of those 55 and older, these demographic groups are also less likely to be registered to vote than the voter-eligible U.S. population.

An additional problem is that online voter registration systems that require an online registrant to have an existing signature in a state database—such as in a driver's license database and/or state voter registration database—will further limit the accessibility of an online voter registration system to disadvantaged groups.

While online voter registration may well have a positive impact on increasing participation, the groups most in need of improved registration opportunities are, unfortunately, the very people least likely to have access to this convenience at home.

Internet Access & Voter Registration by Selected Demographic Categories, 2008

Demographic Categories	Have Internet Access at Home	Registered of VEP
ALL	77%	71%
Race/Ethnicity^a		
White	-	73%
Black	63%	70%
Hispanic	63%	59%
Asian	87%	55%
Age^b		
18-34	88%	63%
35-44	86%	70%
45-54	81%	74%
55-64	76%	77%
65+	60%	77%
Educational Attainment^a		
Some High School	36%	50%
High School graduate	63%	64%
Some college	80%	75%
College graduate	92%	83%
Household Income^a		
Under \$25,000	41%	65%
\$25,000-\$49,999	70%	72%
\$50,000-\$74,999	87%	78%
\$75,000-\$99,999	93%	82%
\$100,000-\$124,999 ^c	96%	-
\$100,000-\$150,999 ^c	-	84%
\$125,000+ ^c	97%	-
\$150,000+ ^c	-	86%

^a Data and categories come from Nielsen's 56 Local Metered Market sample. Nielsen categories for race/ethnicity do not include a separate category for White respondents.

^b Data and categories come from the 2008 Nielsen Claritas Convergence Audit.

^c CPS categories differ from Nielsen categories for the highest income categories.

Sources for Internet Access: Nielsen's 56 Local Metered Market sample and the 2008 Nielsen Claritas Convergence Audit, both reported in Nielsen's "An Overview of Home Internet Access in the U.S., December 2008" available at <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/overview-of-home-internet-access-in-the-us-jan-6.pdf>. Calculations by Project Vote.

Source for Voter Registration: CPS November 2008; calculations by Project Vote.

Notes

- ¹ For more information on disparities in the electorate, see *Representational Bias in the 2006 Electorate* by Douglas R. Hess, available online at www.projectvote.org.
- ² For an historical analysis of voter registration laws in the United States, see Dayna L. Cunningham's "Who are to be the electors? A reflection on the history of voter registration in the United States," *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 1991. [9 *Yale L. & Pol'y Rev.* 370]
- ³ According to progressivestates.org, both Arizona and Washington have implemented online voter registration programs, while Colorado, Indiana, and Utah have all recently passed online voter registration.
- ⁴ See Nielsen's report, "An Overview of Home Internet Access in the U.S.," page 5, for a more detailed description of the metered sample and its limitations. Nielsen states that the respondents tend to be more urban, affluent, educated, and racially and ethnically diverse than the general U.S. population. However, Nielsen's trend findings were consistent across all three datasets.

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, legal services, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies are not prevented from registering and voting.

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