



The Little Hoover Commission
Public Hearing on Voter Participation
September, 28, 2017

Written Testimony: Jen Tolentino, Rock the Vote Director of Policy & Civic Tech

Thank you for inviting Rock the Vote to participate in the Little Hoover Commission's public hearing on voter participation. I appreciate the Commission's interest in this important topic and look forward to sharing our perspective on opportunities, trends, and challenges, particularly in relation to young voters.

Since 1990, Rock the Vote has revolutionized the use of pop culture, music, art, and technology to fulfill its mission of building long-term youth political power. Since its founding, Rock the Vote has pioneered innovative ways to mobilize more young voters. During the last seven Presidential elections, Rock the Vote and its partners coordinated the largest voter registration drives for young people that added nearly 8 million new voters to the rolls. In 2016, Rock the Vote processed more than 1.7 million applications, including over 230,000 in California. Turnout for successful Rock the Vote registrants -- 60% of whom were first-time voters -- was 81% across the country and in California.

The sustained political engagement of young voters is challenging and multifaceted. Rock the Vote's approach to developing the next generation of voters aims to overcome three main challenges:

1. Policy barriers to participation, such as a lack of flexible early voting options
2. Gaps in civic education, awareness, and knowledge around the political process
3. Skepticism that elections are a meaningful way to impact important issues

My testimony will provide an overview of Rock the Vote's ongoing work to address these obstacles and recommendations for increasing young people's engagement in our democracy across California.



1. Policy barriers to participation

Across the country, many states have rolled back access to elections by implementing policies such as strict voter ID requirements or proof-of-residency, which have a particular impact on people of color, low-income individuals, students, the elderly, and those with disabilities. These are barriers that can be overcome with improved election policy, focused on ensuring every eligible voter is able to cast a ballot.

California has made significant strides to improve access, such as the implementation of pre-registration. Rock the Vote recently evaluated young people's access to democracy across the country and identified California as a Leader among the states. Our democracy is strongest when all eligible voters are empowered to participate and we applaud the steps California has taken.

Two sweeping election reform bills are now in the implementation process, California Voter's Choice Act and the New Motor Voter Act. Both are expected to significantly expand access across the state, provided implementation is handled effectively. Given Rock the Vote's ongoing work around voter registration technology in California, we have some recommendations for further improvements that would enhance that efficacy of both online voter registration (OVR) and the New Motor Voter Act.

Expanding the use of Online Voter Registration

In 2014, Rock the Vote was a key technical partner in an update to the California OVR system that enables third parties, such as Rock the Vote, to send some registrant information from third party websites to the Secretary of State's OVR website. Third parties often want to collect some information about the individuals they register so they can build a relationship and make sure the voter casts a ballot.



The screenshot shows the 'Register In California' form. It includes fields for Name (Title, First Name, Last Name, Suffix), Home Address (Address, Unit/Lot #, City, State, ZIP Code), Date of Birth, and Phone. A 'Next Step' button is at the bottom.



The screenshot shows the 'Personal Information - Voter Registration Application' form on the California Secretary of State website. It includes sections for Eligibility, Registration/pre-registration, and Personal Information. The form is pre-filled with the same information as the Rock the Vote form.

This enhancement made the voter registration process much more viable for third parties to run effective digital voter registration drives using the California OVR system by significantly reducing the amount of information a registration must re-enter once he or she is passed to the state website. In 2016, Rock the Vote's free registration tool, which can be branded and embedded on almost any website, was shared with more than 900 partners, significantly expanding the reach of California's OVR website.

Here are a few of the nonprofit and political partners that used Rock the Vote's free platform in 2016:

- Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment
- American Association of People with Disabilities
- Asian Pacific Islander American Vote (APIAVote)
- California Calls
- California Community Colleges Civic Impact Project
- California GOP
- California State Student Association
- CalPIRG
- Courage Campaign
- Headcount
- Hip Hop Caucus
- LA Youth Vote



- NAACP National Headquarters
- National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO)
- NextGen Climate California
- PICO National Network
- The Climate Reality Project
- University of California Student Association
- University of Southern California Undergraduate Student Government
- VotoLatino

Recommendations for enhancing Online Voter Registration

Unfortunately, while the data pre-population between third parties and the Secretary of State's website has been effective for online engagement, OVR remains impractical for field organizations, resulting in local registrars still receiving thousands of paper applications from voter registration drives across the state. This is for two reasons: 1) completing a form on a third party website and the official website can take applicants longer than filling out a paper application; and 2) completing the process on a state website requires constant internet connectivity, which is not always available.

Additionally, California's OVR system requires an electronic signature be pulled from the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), meaning those without a state driver's licenses or state-ID must still provide a wet signature on paper.

With the New Motor Voter Act implementation moving forward next year, we expect the volume and need for third party voter registration to fall. However, third parties have historically played a key role in engaging hard to reach communities, such as those without the required ID. The New Motor Voter Act and the current implementation of OVR are focused on eligible voters with a state-issued ID. In order to make California's registration process more accessible to all eligible voters, we recommend modifications to the OVR system that would allow approved partners to directly pass applications to the registration database -- skipping the state website -- and allowing for the submission of electronic signatures.

Recommendations for California Voter's Choice Act

The upcoming implementation of California Voter's Choice Act in pilot counties is expected to further increased access, but it must be carefully administered and effectively communicated.

- Lean on community partners, such as the Future of California Elections coalition, including Rock the Vote, to assist in public outreach and planning. Nonprofits



across the state have deep relationships with community members and are key allies in this work.

- Be open to non-traditional placement of voter centers, such as community colleges and universities, even if only available for a limited period during early voting
- Update polling place data feeds that are provided to the Voting Information Project (VIP) to include vote center information, such as location, available dates, and open times. Providing standardized data to VIP will allow companies such as Google and Facebook to easily surface official information to millions of users. Rock the Vote used VIP data in its innovative ElectionFM program, which geofenced polling locations across the country on election day and made previously unreleased music available only at the polls -- this feat would not have been possible without the data from VIP.

2. Gaps in civic education, awareness, and knowledge

Young voters often struggle to navigate the election process and rely on third parties or search engines for information, rather than seeking out official resources. Furthermore, many voters are unaware that non-federal elections are even happening, requiring additional education and outreach.

Rock the Vote strives to aggregate and disseminate important voting information, sending reminders for upcoming elections and deadlines, including all the special and municipal elections happening in 2017 across California.

Corporate Civic Responsibility program

One of the ways Rock the Vote has evolved to provide valuable voting information to young people is through its Corporate Civic Responsibility program that encourages companies with a young customer base to commit to nonpartisan civic engagement.

The program is co-chaired by two of the country's leading election officials from both sides of the aisle: California Secretary of State Alex Padilla (D) and Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman (R). Corporate Civic Responsibility partners represent a variety of industries, from retailers to production studios; from tech companies to research firms. The diversity of corporate partners reflects the opportunity to engage young people wherever they are: online, in-stores, at work, and through social media.



In 2016, Rock the Vote worked with more than 40 corporate partners to develop new and innovative civic engagement campaigns. Here are just a few examples of the most impactful campaigns last year:

- Tinder and Rock the Vote launched 'Swipe the Vote' in March of 2016, which enabled users to swipe left or right on issues and get matched with a presidential candidate. Once a match was made, Tinder encouraged users to register to vote. In October 2016, the program was relaunched to drive users to Rock the Vote's Election Center.
- Twitter built an Election Bot and promoted registration through its @Gov and @Policy handles by activating its top influencers and providing free promoted tweets for the 2016 California primary registration deadline and the 2016 general election.
- Creative Artists Agency hosted a roundtable discussion with social media influencers on how and why to engage fans in civic participation. California Secretary of State Alex Padilla was a guest speaker.
- Golden State Warriors drove fans to register to vote and produced a PSA on voting featuring Draymond Green, which was distributed online and aired on the Jumbotron during games.
- HBO launched a video series "Use Your Voice, Use Your Vote." HBO saturated its social media channels with get-out-the-vote messaging and campaign content the week leading up to the election.
- theSkimm drove its readers to register to vote and get informed via a 'Skim the Vote' mini-election center. Through this campaign, theSkimm registered more than 110,000 voters.
- American Eagle Outfitters rolled out an election-themed apparel collection with Madison Pettis and launched a major initiative to encourage employees to register and vote.
- Virgin American Airlines made it possible for fliers to register to vote from 35,000 feet. GoGo, the internet provider to Virgin and most other airlines, placed rockthevote.com and all state OVR websites on the approved list for free internet access.

Recommendations for engaging and informing young voters

Young people are increasingly mobile, making traditional outreach strategies such as direct-mail or phone calls, less effective.

- Meet young people where they are: online.
- Text messages (SMS) are more effective than email.



- Partner with third parties, such as Rock the Vote, to expand the reach of election information and messaging. For example, Rock the Vote has worked with local election officials across California to uplift needs or resources to its list, including poll worker recruitment efforts.
- To expand the reach of online information and resources -- without celebrities or corporate partners -- invest in digital ads. The most effective digital ads are deadline driven. For example, a countdown to a voter registration deadline.
- Make sure only official information is being disseminated by participating in data sharing programs, such as VIP. This also allows third parties to easily share official information, such as polling locations, ballot information, and local and state election administration contact information.

3. Overcoming skepticism

The last barrier to engaging young voters is the least tangible: overcoming skepticism and connecting electoral power to important issues. Young voters must be *moved* to vote. Reviewing turnout rates across the country, regardless of how accessible the process, voters show-up at higher rates when they feel they have a stake in the election. This is particularly challenging for state-level and municipal elections when there is less media attention and public discussion.

To overcome this barrier, Rock the Vote works to uplift authentic messengers that connect issues that matter to young people directly to elections. One example is the #WhyIVote video campaign produced in partnership with VEVO that included a series of moving, issue-based videos with leading artists. The videos addressed issues such as drug addiction, poverty, mental illness, immigration, LGBTQ rights, climate change, mass incarceration, and police brutality.

Digital local voter guides

Beyond persuasive messaging, Rock the Vote is developing the infrastructure to directly link elections to impact through issue-based digital voter guides that include video submissions from candidates. Additionally, the guides include office descriptions to provide an overview of how local elected officials can -- and do -- impact communities.

The first version was launched for the Los Angeles March 7, 2017 election in collaboration with several partners: Asian Americans Advancing Justice Los Angeles, CalPIRG, Campus Vote Project, Los Angeles Times High School Edition, United Way of Greater Los Angeles, Voto Latino, Women's March Los Angeles, and YVote.

ERIC GARCETTI ▾

What makes you the best candidate to champion young voters?



Email Candidate Tweet Candidate

ERIC GARCETTI on the Issues

Empowering Young Voters

Many young people feel their voice doesn't matter in politics. Why do you think this is, and what new ideas do you have to make local government more democratic and accessible to youth?

"We launched the landmark LA's College Promise which guarantees one year free community college tuition for all LAUSD graduates, and we have more than doubled the number of youth jobs and paid internships so that young people are better prepared for the modern economy."

Immigration

Criminal Justice Reform

Climate Change

Economy & Jobs

Education

Housing & Development

Protest Sign!

Through the pilot program, Rock the Vote is developing best practices to ensure the program's long-term sustainability, such as:

- Making the raw data open and accessible to partners to build or incorporate into their own guides
- Development of a candidate portal with an approval and editing functionality
- Utilizing open official data from VIP.

Rock the Vote is partnering with Mi Familia Vota on a digital voter guide for the Modesto election in November, and plans to offer a statewide California guide for 2018.

Recommendations

Connecting with young voters in an authentic and impactful way can be challenging, especially for partners that may not have the reach, relationships, or brand recognition.

- Connect with third parties that are producing nonpartisan civic engagement content and evaluate whether it can be shared or repurposed.
- Provide clear office descriptions that outline the office's roles and responsibilities, particularly how that office impacts the local community.
- Build on the national narratives and connect them to local issue and races.
- Provide open data via VIP, which enables Rock the Vote to build a comprehensive local voter guides without requiring the hand-collection of political geography and ballot information. The digital voter guide in Los Angeles would not have been possible without VIP data.