August 6, 2013

**Remarks Prepared for the Presidential Commission on Election Administration
by Rock the Vote President Heather Smith**

Thank you for this opportunity to present to you today. Rock the Vote is a proud participant in the Irvine Foundation's Future of California Elections (FOCE) collaborative, so we are particularly excited to showcase our collective work bringing together elections officials, advocates, and civic organizations to make elections work better here in California.

Rock the Vote is a national non-partisan organization with a mission to educate and engage young Americans in our democracy. In the past election, Rock the Vote ran the largest non-partisan voter registration and engagement campaign in the country, working in nearly every state, registering more than a million young voters. And we register voters year-round, as more than 12,000 young citizens turn 18 each day in our country. We recognize the need to improve, update, and make our voting systems work better for young - and all Americans - and are grateful for the work the Commission is doing to further this mission. At Rock the Vote, we believe we are at a unique moment and opportunity to both improve the Election Day experience, and re-think how we all – as elections officials, non-profits, agencies, foundations, and citizens – can improve our voter systems in pursuit of this shared goal.

Promoting the administration of elections in a manner that is both efficient and inclusive, such that all eligible voters have the ability to cast a ballot, begins well before Election Day; it begins with the registration process.

It has been well documented that our current paper-based voter registration process is timely, expensive, and error-prone. In particular, the interpreting of handwriting from paper forms, the costs and typos associated with data-entry, and the inevitable deluge of forms that come at the deadline to register just as an elections office is at its busiest preparing for Election Day, create a recipe for incomplete and/or inaccurate voter rolls which in turn significantly and negatively impacts the Election Day experience.

Implementing an online voter registration system offers a solution:

- **Improving the ACCURACY of the voter files** by eliminating any errors and typos from data entry of the handwritten paper registration forms – as the user *types* his/her information, double checks it, and submits it to the state – as well as typos from data-entry in the elections office.

- **Reducing COSTS for elections offices** by eliminating data-entry of these forms, freeing up valuable and limited resources for elections offices. *(See research from The Pew Charitable Trusts elections initiative for further data.)*

With these benefits, it is no surprise – and quite promising for election administration – that many states across the country, are moving to online voter registration systems. As of today, thirteen states have live online systems, six are beginning implementation, and another handful of states are considering legislation. And support for online voter registration reaches across the aisle; these states are spread across the political spectrum.

I would like to offer the following recommendations - based on research and tests that Rock the Vote and our partners conducted in 2012 - for state election officials as they implement an online voter registration system.

The online voter registration user-facing interface is what voters will encounter. Make it simple to use and learn from, or use, the tools that others have built.

1. **Don't recreate the wheel – Leverage the technology expertise and tools that have proven track records, and create data standards at the outset.** There are open source code and models developed by Rock the Vote and others that have been tested and can be used by any state at little to no cost. This is an additional cost savings, plus it leverages the expertise of those that are front-end, user interface experts, and have product tested the tools for years. As an added benefit, using common systems can create standards tools and data format protocols for how registration data is sent to a state's backend system.

2. **Make the state user interface user-friendly.** With the widespread adoption of smart phones amongst youth, Latinos, and in lower-income communities, these users (who are the most likely to be unregistered) are accessing the Internet from a phone not a personal computer. The online voter registration interface should be mobile friendly. It should also use best practices for user experience design to ensure the most number of people who start the registration form online complete and submit it.

Technology alone doesn't register voters. If you build an online voter registration interface on a Secretary of State website, suddenly those that didn't know they had to registered by a certain date - or at all - don't go searching for the website. It is critical to engage third-party community organizations and NVRA agencies in the planning at the outset, to ensure they are promoting and using the online system most effectively.

1. **Engage a wide array of constituency organizations in the implementation process,** not just so they promote the online voter registration site, but so you are sure the site meets the needs of their communities, especially students and those with language and disability considerations.

2. **Collaborate with third-party organizations to promote the registration opportunities to their audiences and drive new registrants to the state online voter registration system.** From Universities and Colleges to community groups and non-profits, there are numerous institutions that interact with unregistered voters and have a mission, interest, or even legal obligation to offer registration to their audience. This promotion is critical and can be built into the state's online voter registration system in simple ways.

    Rock the Vote tested different models for integrating outside parties' online interfaces/tools with the State's voter registration system online in Nevada, Washington, Oregon, and California in 2012. The basic recommendation from these tests is simple:

    a. Each state should build a simple application programming interface (API) that allows outside groups to collect the data needed for voter registration and send it to the state's online system for processing the registration application.

        For example, when registering for class or updating an address for a student ID card at college, the online portal could offer the student the chance to register to vote. If the student clicks *'yes'* then (s)he is asked to provide any additional information needed for registration that has not already been entered, and that data is sent as a batch to the state's voter registration system through the API.

        Another example, an organization like Rock the Vote could collect registration data through its online portal, then send the data to the state for processing. This streamlines third-party

registration efforts, where they no longer handle forms but instead just collect information and send it to the states, via the API, for processing.

b. In some cases, if the agency, institution or organization is not able to change their online portals to add these additional questions and capture all the needed registration data, then a second option should also be available: a webpage where any user who started their form outside of the state website lands, their information is pre-populated with anything they previously entered and they are given the chance to fill in any remaining questions, double check, and submit. If this option is used, research has shown higher completion rates when the user completes as much information as possible on the original website and does not have to re-key any information a second time on the state website.

These are technologically simple and inexpensive solutions that could lead to the promotion and increased use of the online registration programs by potential voters through the efforts of outside partners.

It also eliminates the paper-forms that these organizations would otherwise submit. For example, in 2008, Rock the Vote had nearly 2,250,000 potential voters complete a voter registration form on its website. These paper forms were then printed by the applicant and mailed into the state to be sorted, sent to the appropriate county, and data-entered by the elections office. With the option to submit applicants' data to the state through the options described above, these applications can be sent to the state electronically and those paper forms eliminated!

And, perhaps most importantly for the participation of these potential voters, this integration allows third-party organization to build voter registration into their online platforms, create interfaces that are best suited for their audiences, and track who is starting the registration process on their tools in order to follow up and provide voter education and mobilization information.

A detailed white-paper on best practices for state online voter registration features, available 3rd-party tools, and even sample code for user interfaces and third-party APIs that can be utilized be states will be completed this fall.

California, the Future of California Election coalition, and Online Voter Registration: A Case Study

In California, our Future of California Elections collaborative is working closely with the Secretary of State's office, providing regular input into the implementation and the re-development of the state's online registration interface, testing the tools, and promoting online registration.

Our initial work in California showed very promising results in 2012 towards both improving the quality of the voter rolls and giving more voters the opportunity to cast a ballot.

The state passed an online voter registration law and set up its system just weeks before the voter registration deadline in 2012. During that window, Rock the Vote and its partners submitted about 100,000 registrations through the Rock the Vote 3rd-party online registration tool that was connected to the state's voter registration interface. **More than 96% of those applicants ended up on the voter rolls, compared to 68% that made it on the rolls when they had to print and mail their form after completing it online.**

Statewide in 2012, according to the Secretary of State's office, 60% of all registrations in the state came online proving easy adoption of this new system by voters. This was especially true for young voters as

46% of the registrants were under the age of 30, and 68% of those ages 25-29 who registered to vote did so online. Initial analysis of these registrants has also found that:

- **Online registrants turned out to vote at significantly higher levels than non-online registrants** - 78% versus 70.2%. (UC Davis Center for Regional Change; The California Civic Engagement Project, March 2013)

- **Younger online registrants voted at rates close to those of the rest of the electorate**, which is a huge increase from the traditional 10-point gap. (UC Davis Center for Regional Change; The California Civic Engagement Project, March 2013)

- For Latinas/os and Whites, **significant majorities of online registrants came from the low and middle- income areas**. Among **Asian American online registrants, a near majority also lived in these lower-income census tracts.** "This strongly suggests that online registration is not simply being used by affluent, already likely voters, but rather that it was less affluent eligible voters who most took advantage of opportunity to register online." (UC Berkeley Center for Latino Policy Research, March 2013)

The online voter registration system in CA, while successful, was set up quickly and under deadline and did not meet the needs of many voters. While we were very grateful that it was in place for the 2012 elections, we all knew it was less than perfect. The state is now re-building their tool, this time with the input of our FOCE organizations, with a clear plan for third-party integration, and using lessons learned to build a cleaner, user-friendly system that is mobile-friendly, available in many languages and is more accessible to those with disabilities. We share our lessons above from this experience, in the hopes that other states start where CA left off, rather than having to re-learn these same lessons.

The impact of OVR on the emerging – and unregistered – electorate and the cost and efficiency benefits for the state, make online registration systems implemented with community organization input and outreach opportunities built in a must-do best practice for Election Administration in the United States.