

# Peeking Inside the Electoral Toolbox: How Nonprofits Shape Election Results

By Heath Brown

What impact did nonprofits have on the Presidential election? Survey results supply some intriguing answers.

Last November's election had crucial consequences for many nonprofits. How did these organizations engage in the political process? What did they do to increase voter turnout? How did they enhance the chances of putting their choice for President into office? What tactics helped them serve their constituents' civic needs?

To answer these questions, let's look at one group who had an especially large stake in the election results — nonprofits that serve immigrants.

Thousands of nonprofit organizations worked to register, educate, and mobilize eligible immigrants. Their work had dramatic results. Immigrants, who usually vote at low levels, turned out in record numbers. Immigrants were credited with key votes in states like Pennsylvania, Florida, and Virginia that resulted in President Obama winning re-election.

Let's look closer at the choices nonprofits made regarding their involvement in the election. In a recent study, we queried nonprofit executives about their decisions.<sup>1</sup> Here are the results:

## To Participate, Or Not?

The first finding is that most of the nonprofits studied (58%) didn't engage in any electoral tactics at all. Their reasons for opting out? Respondents explained: "We are a purely 'cultural' group, do not get involved in politics at ALL" and "We are a 501(c)(3) purely cultural and humanitarian organization so we are specifically barred from engaging in any political activities."

Such comments indicate a basic misconception of the law. It's true that some tactics (such as endorsing candidates for office or donating money to a campaign committee) are expressly

forbidden. But many forms of electoral engagement are perfectly legal and permitted by national and state laws. A lack of understanding of legal constraints on electoral activity seems to be a barrier restricting many nonprofits from participating in elections.<sup>2</sup>

Forty-one percent of respondents did engage in at least one tactic. For these organizations, many (45%) opted just for a single tactic. Approximately a quarter used two tactics. A third used more than two tactics.

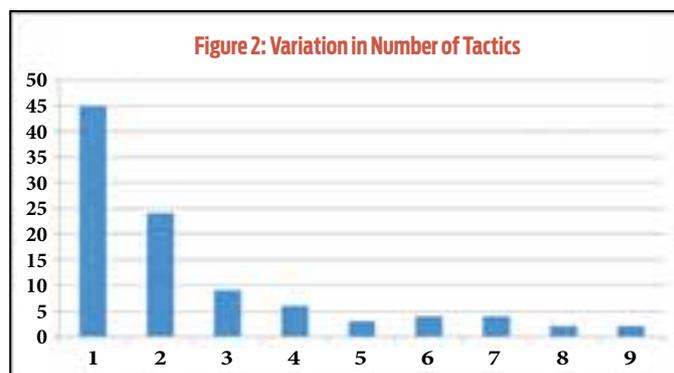
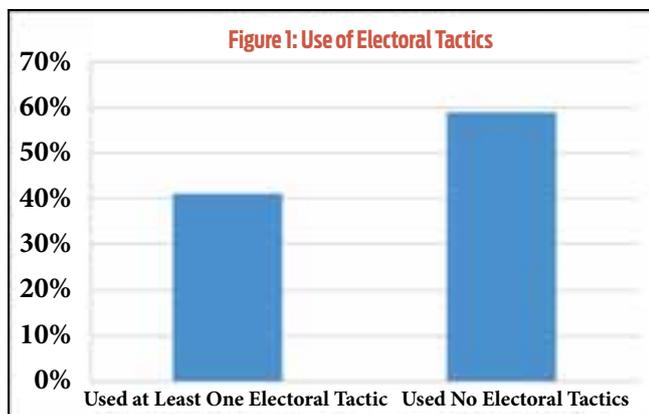
This variation reflects the underlying mission and capacity of each organization. Organizations that take on three, four, or five different tactics likely have an expressly political mission or have the staff flexibility to shift responsibilities around during election time. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

## How to Participate? The Electoral Toolbox

Figure 3 shows which electoral tactics organizations used. In summary:

**Monitoring the news** was the most-used tactic. This isn't surprising, since scrutinizing information about the election is the least time-consuming and least expensive way to become engaged in a campaign.

Keeping track of such information helps nonprofits decide which candidates to support. By listening to debates, they learn who backs issues that affect their organization. They discover whether ballot initiatives that will impact funding are likely to pass. In some ways, this knowledge permits the organization to employ other tactics, such as sharing information with the community or submitting a policy brief to a candidate.



**Voter registration and voter mobilization** were the next two most popular tactics. They were used by 18.7% and 13.7% respectively.

Interviews with executive directors reveal that these two tactics increasingly focus on sophisticated approaches to outreach. Some organizations linked to a national voter information database called the Voter Activation Network or VAN to target specific eligible voters based on factors such as:

- their propensity to vote
- their native language
- their particular ethnicity.

This is an especially useful technology for immigrant-serving nonprofits that may have constituents who aren't fluent in English. A nonprofit that employed the VAN could utilize volunteers who speak various languages to knock on people's doors and talk to them in their native language about voting.

Other nonprofits used computer-based phone banks, text messaging, and social media to reach voters. These are technologies that were largely unavailable to nonprofits in previous elections.

**Smaller percentages of nonprofits provided electoral information to the community** (10.8%), issued policy reports (8.3%), and translated voter information (6.2%). Each of these tactics may be beyond the capabilities of a small nonprofit whose mission isn't focused on civic engagement. Such tactics require a level of staffing and expertise that may preclude even an enthusiastic nonprofit.

For that reason, one might anticipate that a large number of respondents would have formed a common cause with other nonprofits that did possess electoral expertise. A surprising finding was the small number of organizations that joined an electoral coalition (8.7%) or used their Web site to share information about the campaign (2.1%). Each of these tactics is typically a cost-saver. Why so few respondents chose these inexpensive options is hard to understand, unless nonprofits were unaware of the power of these strategies.

## Where to Participate: Venue Choices

Nonprofit leaders who participated in at least one political tactic also had to decide where to focus their efforts. Nearly half (45%) focused at the national level. Around a quarter (23%) focused at the local level. Smaller percentages focused at the state level (10%) or had no focus at all (22%). (See Figure 4.)

Where to focus is really a choice of preference and ambition. The choice also relates to which voters the group is seeking to mobilize. Savvy executive directors must assess which electoral venue will spark an interest in the community and which venue relates most strongly to the organization's mission.

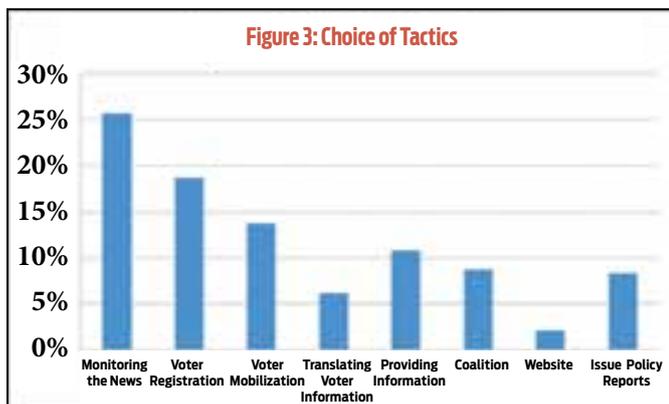


Figure 4: Electoral Venue Choice

<b>Local Focus</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>State Focus</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>National Focus</b>	<b>45%</b>
<b>No Focus</b>	<b>22%</b>

## Take Aways for Nonprofit Leaders

As these results make clear, electoral engagement doesn't mean just one thing. There's a wealth of tactics available, and the leader needs to identify organizational assets that correspond to each electoral tactic. For organizations invested in technology, Web site tactics might make the most sense. If the organization has a strong history of data collection, then providing policy recommendations to political candidates might be more feasible. Building on organizational strengths makes electoral engagement less daunting and more viable.

Executive directors who eschew politics face a different choice. If they continue to remain detached from electoral work, they should do so with full information about the rules and regulations. Deciding not to participate because of a false fear that registering voters or translating campaign material is prohibited by law is misguided.

Many groups, such as Nonprofit Vote ([nonprofitvote.org](http://nonprofitvote.org)), provide information to nonprofit leaders about the political process. Electoral work may not be right for every nonprofit organization, but choices should be based on full, not partial, information. 

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<sup>1</sup>An original survey of 1,200 nonprofit organizations in six states (Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina) was fielded during the fall of 2012. The nonprofits focused on arts, health, business, and political matters, but all had an over-arching focus on a particular immigrant community or immigrants in general. The survey questionnaire queried the executive directors about their missions, their electoral tactics, and the focus of those tactics. The results presented here are based on a 22% response rate.

<sup>2</sup>For guidance on what political activities are permitted, see "Your Political Resource Kit" below.

## Your Political Resource Kit

To clarify which activities are prohibited for your organization and which are encouraged, see these articles at [NonprofitWorld.org/members](http://NonprofitWorld.org/members):

**Political Activity: A Primer for Nonprofits** (Vol. 30, No. 4)

**How to Lobby without Breaking the Law** (Vol. 14, No. 5)

**Where to Find Free Legal Assistance** (Vol. 26, No. 2)

**Ready to Erupt: How Can Coalitions Avert Conflict?** (Vol. 16, No. 4)