

NONPROFITS WORKING TO INCREASE VOTER REGISTRATION NUMBERS IN PENNSYLVANIA, ESPECIALLY FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR, ALREADY FACED CHALLENGES BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. BUT THE GROUPS ARE PRESSING AHEAD TO REGISTER MORE RESIDENTS AND TO CONVINCING THEM THAT THEIR VOTES COUNT.
BY JEFFERY FRASER

CIVIC duty

Some 900,000 people of color in Pennsylvania risk not having their voices heard this fall, when the nation elects a president, simply because they haven't registered to vote. That's a significant loss of influence in a state with a handsome bounty of 20 Electoral College votes that could help determine the outcome of a presidential election.

Pennsylvania voter registration rolls reveal wide racial disparities, with people of color and immigrants much less likely to be registered than whites.

In Allegheny County, where 70 percent of the voting-age population is registered, only 53 percent of people of color have taken that step so they can vote in November. And that, by far, is the highest percentage among southwestern Pennsylvania counties. In several, the low numbers are stunning.

Only 16 percent of voter-aged people of color in Washington County are registered. In Fayette, it's only 18 percent; in Westmoreland, it's 22 percent. And in Armstrong County, the registration rate among people of color is a paltry 6 percent, according to an analysis of U.S. Census and other data used by voter registration programs in Pennsylvania.

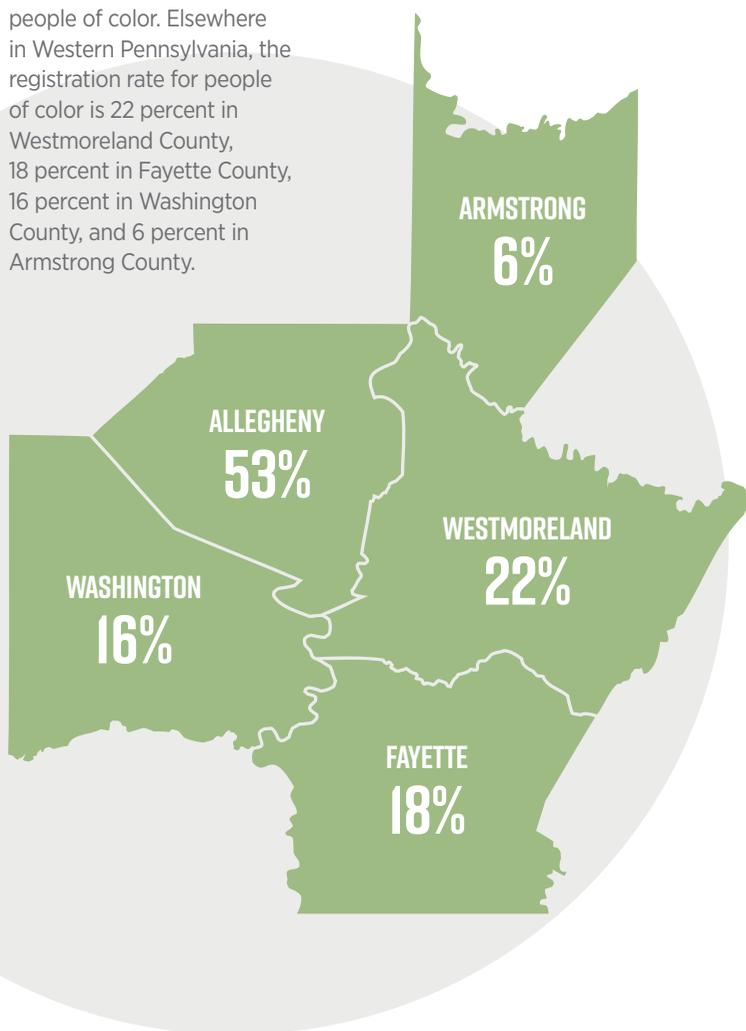
Such numbers made it clear that the nonprofits trying to boost them faced an uphill battle coming into the presidential election year. Then came the coronavirus pandemic and, with it, social distancing restrictions that raise the possibility they'll have to wage their campaigns without some of their most effective tools for engaging unregistered voters.



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RACIAL DISPARITIES

People of color and immigrants are much less likely to be registered to vote in Pennsylvania than white people. In Allegheny County, 70 percent of the voting-age population is registered compared to 53 percent of people of color. Elsewhere in Western Pennsylvania, the registration rate for people of color is 22 percent in Westmoreland County, 18 percent in Fayette County, 16 percent in Washington County, and 6 percent in Armstrong County.



Most were scrambling to adapt tactics as the rescheduled spring primary election approached. But some were buoyed, at least for the moment, by observations that the pandemic, with its tendency to hit vulnerable populations the hardest, is doing some of the work of convincing unregistered voters of the urgency of having a voice in what is unfolding.

Before COVID-19 reached U.S. shores, registering those underrepresented in Pennsylvania's voter registration rolls was conceived as a campaign relying on in-person canvassing, digital outreach and, to some

extent, mail by Pennsylvania Voice. The partnership of some three dozen community nonprofits works to expand the role of communities of color in the democratic processes and is supported by The Heinz Endowments.

The coalition's goal is to add 200,000 people of color to the registration rolls by the November general election, a still-reasonable target in a "multi-year campaign to make sure they're registered to vote at the same level as the general population," said Erin Casey, Pennsylvania Voice executive director.

One of the partners, Pittsburgh United, has done registration drives since 2012, when it was organized as a coalition of labor, faith, community and environmental organizations. As with many nonprofits, canvassing is a go-to strategy. Canvassing high-traffic places from farmers markets to college campuses allows them to reach dozens if not hundreds of people in a single day and to do so with the warmth of a friendly face, rather than a voice on the phone or the text of an email or direct-mail flyer.

"All of those in-person methods are not available to us right now and it's really tough," said Executive Director Jennifer Rafanan Kennedy. "And we don't know what the post-COVID psychology of the electorate will be.

"Will people want to open their door, even when social distancing is relaxed? Will they want to touch a tablet or clipboard? We're all trying to figure out different ways to meet people where they are."

The work also involves making sure registration data is up to date for those already on the rolls. Moving from one address to another is not uncommon among young people, low-income residents and others. Failing to update their registration to reflect those changes can lead to problems, particularly this year, when Pennsylvanians are able to vote by mail for the first time.

Recent reforms to Pennsylvania's election process have been helpful. The state, for example, adopted online voter registration in 2015. The system not only proved to be effective in helping to get underrepresented populations registered, but it led nonprofits to more aggressively use technologies, such as tablets, to register people that they expect will pay dividends this year.

"We've found that significantly more people who use tablet registration versus paper registration are added to the rolls," Ms. Casey said.

Nonprofits are able to scour robust Voter Activation Network data for unregistered voting-aged people of color and other groups, as well as their contact information. But how they use that information is changing, as they explore different non-contact strategies involving phone calls, texting, social media, mail and relationships.

One approach, which builds on the concept that people respond best to those they trust, involves recruiting those they register to urge their friends and family to register. Social media advertising encouraging people to register and directing them to instructions are planned. Virtual phone banks are being deployed.

"This momentous crisis is accelerating the creativity around reaching people in digital

spaces because we don't have other choices," Ms. Kennedy said. "And that's going to be something that informs our work in years to come."

Many organizations doing registration drives began the year helping similar populations take the 2020 Census. In some respects, their census work became a test bed for non-contact engagement strategies they hope to refine and use in their registration efforts, which, for most, accelerated after the primary election.

Some community organizations reported unexpected but encouraging developments during the pandemic, including advocacy groups doing work other than census or voter registration.

Penn Environment caught an unexpected glimmer of hope when the region was under stay-at-home orders. The advocacy organization, with support from the Endowments, is trying to mobilize young people, people of color and others to sign petitions, call or write public officials, and take other actions to help defend the environmental integrity of the state.

"More people are answering the phone," said Ashleigh Deemer, deputy director. "For years, we've seen declining rates of people answering the phone. But that's changing right now. The rate of people answering our calls is improving, and we're generating a lot of calls to legislators.

"We were nervous about that, wondering if people wanted to hear about anything other than COVID-19 right now. Would we be seen as insensitive for focusing on something that isn't that? But people seem happy to talk about something else."

Sliding the primary back to June afforded nonprofits doing voter registration drives some time to test new outreach ideas. Pennsylvania Voice members began shifting

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to non-contact tactics in May that they hope will be pandemic-resistant, with plans to evaluate them and deploy the most effective ones during the runup to the general election.

The pandemic that is complicating voter registration drives in underrepresented communities is at the same time worsening the inequity and hardship those communities face. Nonprofits believe that realization may help inspire more people to register to vote so their voices will be heard in November.

"What we're finding through the census work is that people are understanding there are actions they can take to change outcomes over time," Ms. Casey said. "I expect we'll hear the same when doing registration — that voting is a way for them to feel empowered at a moment when many people don't feel they have much power over what is happening around them." ^h

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