The Graduate School of Political Management

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

**The Tech Sector and Civic Responsibility:
Online Approaches to Election Day 2016**

An Edited Transcript of a Panel Discussion held at the City View Room, GWU Elliott School of International Affairs, Washington DC, October 3, 2016 by the GSPM Center for Political Management.

Preface

For an election to run properly, three things must occur: 1) everyone who wants to vote and is eligible to vote can do so, 2) the votes are counted accurately, and 3) a heavy majority of people in the jurisdiction must believe that 1 and 2 on the whole occurred.

Civic tech, as defined here, consists of activities by corporations, governments, and non-profit organizations to help achieve these goals in a non-partisan manner through innovative uses of the latest technological affordances. Civic tech initiatives and programs operate amid legitimate and illegitimate partisan political activity, aimed at a population on whom much of the burden falls to navigate their individual ways through the process of registration and voting. In 2012, there were 222 million voting eligible citizens in the United States; 153 million of them (71%) registered, and 130 million (59%) voted.

Improving the election process through the application of civic tech is an exciting and challenging exercise in collaborative entrepreneurship. However, public trust in the election process declined from 2004 to 2012, when only 31 percent of Americans (and 21 percent of Republicans) believed "the votes across the country were accurately counted, according to Pew Research surveys. This year, the challenges are unusually steep, especially regarding the third criterion, that of credibility. Republican nominee Donald J. Trump's assertions that the election will be "rigged" may have brought it lower this year --although it is also possible that critical reactions to his remarks may result in an positive net effect. Six in ten Republicans told a recent survey organization they believed illegal immigrants vote. Another found that "Fewer than half (43%) of the public say they have a great deal of confidence that their vote will be counted accurately."

Panel Participants

On October 3, 2016 the GSPM's research and public forum arm, the Center for Political Management, convened representatives from civic tech to discuss what they are doing this year to facilitate the election process. National Voter Registration Day had just taken place on September 27; early voting had begun in five states.

The panelists were:

Dave Barmore, Senior Public Policy Associate at Uber Technologies. (DB)

Amanda Faulkner, Manager of Public Policy at Twitter. (AF)

Dave Leichtman, Democratic Advisor for Campaign Tech Services at Microsoft. (DL)

Crystal Patterson, Government and Politics Outreach Manager atFacebook. (CP)

Ramya Raghavan, Google Elections Team. (RR)

Mike Ward, TurboVote Program Director, DemocracyWorks. (MW)

A supplemental interview was conducted on October 14 with Amy Cohen (AC), co-founder of the Center for Election Innovation and Research, who attended the discussion and was acknowledged by panelists for the relevance of her work.

Key Take-Aways

- The existence of a voting information software application and a knowledge community consisting of people such as our panelists and election officials throughout the country, who update, share, and publicize its contents, makes it easier for citizens to participate in elections, through both direct and assisted access. Many people don't actively search for information about voting and registration, so initiatives to place it in front of them while they are online doing other things are valuable. In short: **the civic tech push helps compensate for weaknesses in citizen pulls for election information.**

- The panelists said that **political parties, advocacy groups, and citizens themselves should take the lead in looking out for election irregularities.** They don't think it is the role of civic tech to monitor the voting process. However, since they increasingly provide legal information and connections to authorities, **it is easier and more effective for citizens to watch out and speak up than ever before.** As Amy Cohen pointed out:

  > "If you are curious about how machines are prepared for an election, you can watch how it's done from the comfort of your home. In some places you can watch ballots being counted via livestream if you can't be there in person. If you have an issue or a question, you can contact your state or local election official on Facebook or Twitter if you don't want to call or stop by. Election officials are doing everything they can to make the process transparent, to make sure that voters can have confidence in the results, and tech and social media plays a big role in that."

- Panelists thought their **companies protect personally identifiable information**, but that **many Americans would be surprised to learn that the contents of voter files are public information**.

- **The spread of online voting registration has been a great civic tech success in the last eight years. A project ahead involves constructing and maintaining a complete online directory of candidates for every elective office in the United States.**

Michael Cornfield (MC)
Associate Professor
Research Director, Center for Political Management

The Transcript

[Editor's insertions are in brackets.] (Parenthetical remarks indicate a short digression by the speaker.) The panelists were afforded an opportunity to review the transcript and revise, extend, and remove their remarks.

Introductions

MC: Let's open by having each of the panelists describe what their organization is doing to assist voters in the run up to the 2016 general election.

RR: We have lots of partners on our Google Civic Information API [Application Program Interface] and would love to partner with more. So we will be making that into a customizable widget for people to drop on their site. [A slide Ms. Raghavan provided appears at the end of this report.]

MC: Amy Cohen, since you used to manage the Voting Information Project could you briefly fill us in on it?

AC: VIP works with state and local governments to collect, standardize, and qa [quality assure] polling place, early vote, and ballot information for distribution to the public, primarily through the Google API, which is open, so that anyone can take this information and make it available to their audiences.

MW: Our history at Democracy Works has been mostly working with college campuses. We have 175 college partners this year. But what we've found different in this 2016 cycle is that, in addition to this higher education network is a corporate network and a non-profit network. This is the first cycle in which corporations have been interested in voter engagement, which I think is genuinely very interesting. Our network of corporations and non-profits is called the TurboVote Challenge; we've got fifty members. And to have a knowledge community (including people on this panel) where we're talking about how different companies can reach different people, including how to engage them in this election, has been really exciting for me. And I think it is just genuinely new, I don't think that anyone has ever had a pro-active network of corporate and non-profit to reach out and engage people.

We're also the contractors on the Voting Information Project so we work with Google and Pew on that as well.

MC: Mike could you give a couple of examples of what your partners are doing?

MW: Starbucks held a National Voter Registration Day information event with Common in Queens. They printed up sleeves encouraging people to vote, which could be the largest

paper-based voter engagement effort in the history of the United States. They also are activating their employees via their partner channels. And then Univision has an unbelievably robust voter education campaign. They've got a bunch of tech built around TurboVote, including a text number that connects you to an automated woman who helps get you through this election basically. They've also got call centers, they're working with community partners, they are pushing things through all of their media channels. Truly outstanding.

AF: In the ten years that Twitter has been around it's become a natural place for people to go to talk about the election, to talk about engaging civically. This election, this go-round, we've really tried to harness that. One of our initiatives is the gov Twitter account, @gov, which talks about our engagement, follows the debates, and helps government entities use Twitter in the most effective way possible. We have created a tool through the @gov account where you can DM it and a very kind helper will respond to you with information about your polling place, a sample ballot and other helpful information to prepare you for election day. The other thing that we have done is that through a partnership with Bloomberg we are livestreaming the (four fall) debates in such a way that you can look through the Twitter stream about those events at the same time that you are watching. Those are our main initiatives for getting people engaged.

DL: At Microsoft we have concentrated on voter registration. We don't do polling location; why get into that when someone else is doing it well. We have partnered with Rock the Vote and if you go to Bing you can get information on how to register, where to register, we've tried to put that out front and center as much as possible. A lot of the effort at our company has focused on civic participation generally. For instance, last week and moving forward on the debates we have a partnership with PBS, watchthedebates.org, where all the debates historically can be found. You can interact with them via Microsoft Pulse, thumbs-up thumbs-down and see how other people are interacting with them as well. We've done this with other media partners, CNN, MSNBC, around the State of the Union addresses. We've tended to focus on aspects of civic participation where we think Microsoft can enable the process better. Back on February 1st we powered the Iowa Caucuses, that was huge, basically enabling everyone in Iowa to report results out, owning the process so it would run better, so that democracy functions as best it can.

DB: I can't speak to what we at Uber did four years ago. I wasn't working there and we were a different company back in 2012. We were operating as a black car limo service in the dozens of cities where we operated around the world. A bit of history: in 2010 we launched our app and in 2013 we entered into the ridesharing world. Our first city was San Francisco and then quickly we launched Seattle and New York. Today we operate in more than 450 cities and 75 countries around the world. Hyper-growth. I started working with city councils and state legislators educating them about ridesharing, and with riders and drivers to get them involved in our legislative campaigns. So now putting on my federal affairs hat and diving into how we can engage with our millions of riders and drivers in the US educating them about voter registration, and it's been talked about for some time how we could get involved in get out the vote efforts. In Saudi Arabia we offered free rides to women to get to the polls, they were just allowed the right to vote in December (2015) and the team there partnered with a local group. [For a report

on this subject, see this GSPM Working Paper.] In Colombia just yesterday, we offered free rides for the historic peace treaty referendum.

We had an internal group meet and discuss how we wanted to approach this upcoming election season. We thought two of the most impactful ways we could do this would be to educate riders and drivers on voter registration, we have email addresses of millions of people; closer to election day we will be introducing an in-app feature that allows people to locate their polling place and request a ride there. Our first go at a national play. Look forward to incorporating other features into the Uber experience for future elections to make it more seamless for voters, for instance who's on the ballot.

CP: Facebook is a completely different product in the sense of what we have to offer from four years ago. We had "I Voted" election megaphone as we call it on our site in 2012 but since then we've upped our ante on elections and civic engagement. We think of Facebook as the new town hall. Our motto is "connecting the world" and civic engagement is an important piece of that. We now have a civic engagement team that specifically builds tools so that people can communicate with elected officials and candidates and making it easier to find information about those people on Facebook. One of their first priorities because we've been trying for years to help lift up other folks who've been working on voter registration (eg Rock the Vote). Any group that wants to talk to us I will meet with them and see if we can be supportive of or provide information.

Our biggest asset is our scale. To that end, top priority was building a voter registration tool which we rolled out and was a mega-success. We heard from Secretaries of State across the country that they've had spikes and frankly during the primaries we broke some of their systems because we drove so many people to their sites. This time we were able to give them a little more heads-up so they were ready when we did a four-day run last week, and it helped drive hundreds of thousands of new registrations, which was awesome. We also are launching a new tool today called the Issues Tab, both the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are filling out content; this will make it easier for voters to tell where they are in terms of the candidates. We will be rolling this out up and down the ballot and for elected officials, we just want people to be informed and also engaged in the process. So we are trying to build tools that scale and are also non-partisan so that everyone who wants to be a candidate or an elected official has a way to communicate with the public.

Peer Influence and Social Proofs

MC: In 2010 a social science research team found that Get Out the Vote (GOTV) messages delivered to Facebook users boosted participation in the election, from information-seeking and self-expression to actual turnout. Not only did recipients of the messages increase their own participation, but it also rose among their friends and friends of their friends: a three-degrees-of-influence effect.

Are you continuing or accelerating the social aspect of what you do (not just the informational), and are any of the rest of you trying to make this a social occasion where frankly you are playing on guilt and shame and perhaps the reverse, enthusiasm, but you are engaging emotions by showing people their friends. Did I get that basically right?

CP: Yes. Except the guilt and shame part. (Audience laughter.) We like to think of it as positive social pressure. I think a lot of people are working on trying to make voting a fun and positive experience as it should be, it doesn't cost anything and there are lots of ways to try to convince people to do different things on FB and this is one of them. On our voter registration module you could either learn how to register or share that you registered to your point, you are showing your friends that you are active. Yeah, we think that's a good thing.

MC: Anyone else trying to engage with positive incentives, social experience?

RR: There's no social proof around registration as there is with voting, so we printed a bunch of digital stickers. If you shared the Google Doodle we would tweet back at you with a fun gift with some pop culture references; we also sent them out physically and we heard from college campuses that the one that ran out the fastest was a "Stranger Things" reference that said "I registered because Barb [a nerdy character in the sci-fi series] could not." Gives people social proof and a social badge that they want to share with their friends.

AF: Once you've gone through the process of registering via the @gov account, which takes under two minutes you are able to share with your followers that you have registered. Also, who doesn't love emojis, a little podium pops up when you use the hashtag #IRegistered.

Trust in the Process, Transparency...and Voting Booth Selfies

MC: Polls tell us that large numbers of Americans believe that elections are not run on the level. There is a lot of distrust of organizations and institutions, and voting is one of those institutions; this year the stakes seem even higher. How are you going to cover your reputation and stay neutral and positive, as I know you all are, in the face of a great deal of suspicion among your users that this process is rigged?

DL: So the Russians like to mess with us, right, and the Russians aren't messing with us in order to leak the DNC's emails, that's not an interesting or government-changing thing. They are doing it in order to sow distrust and lack of confidence in our electoral process. So it is important that we build confidence in the process and the best way that someone can have it is to participate in the process. Because if you are involved in the process you can't say it's rigged.

This is one of the things that aggravated me about the Sanders folks who are newly involved in the process like coming to state conventions in an uproar. Well, you are here at the convention, you are the system. You don't get to complain anymore, you have to fix it. I think a lot of

people write this off as theater but voter protection is a critical aspect of what both parties do. The Democrats have had a fairly active voter protection system for the last three cycles, called LBJ, Lawyers Bound for Justice, it's beautiful. Microsoft actually partnered with the DNC last year to rebuild LBJ and give it a more robust platform; it was used in VA and NJ last year and a lot of the primaries this year. You know, basically by having lawyers monitor in the style of international election monitoring. If you go to the poll and you have a problem and you see that someone is there to help you it helps instill faith in the process to have people available to jump on problems and fix them. And honestly there aren't that many problems historically.

CP: We are very data-driven at Facebook. And we are very interested in finding more non-partisan ways to have more people participate and we also want them to be really informed and hopefully they will find facts to help them understand how the process works. I would encourage everyone here worried about rigging or conspiracy theories to make snopes.com your best friend. The data does not support the theory that there is a huge conspiracy to keep people from voting.

As far as Facebook is concerned we want everyone to feel they have a voice in the election and to show up at the voting booth, whichever side of the divide they are on, and hopefully their friends will do the same. I agree with Dave that people being part of the system such as it is is the best way to create trust in the system. If you've got skin in the game you're going to be a lot more interested in making sure the votes are counted.

MC: We now live in a "See something, say something" society. Suppose you go and vote and you see something that sparks your suspicion. Can we go to your sites and be connected to the proper authorities? Is that something that you do or would consider doing as a way of reinforcing trust?

AF: This is the perfect place for Twitter to jump in because our platform has really increased transparency. That phrase "See something, say something" has been running through my head with all the talk about elections being rigged. Our platforms give people the capacity to get the word out positive or negative, and that is powerful. For someone to walk into a precinct and be able to tweet out what they saw, that is something that can increase transparency and spark coverage in some cases. While the US might not always be able to prevent Russian hacking, our users have the power to get the message out about something going on.

MC: We've had examples of denial of service to one party or another as they attempt to get out the vote.

CP: And it's not our platform getting the word out, it's our users. A friend of mine works at a firm, direct mail and was getting out notifications to register as part of a mail drop, people still had to fill it out themselves, and one of the local county officials got angry about it and announced on Twitter he was throwing out all the registration forms. She immediately called the local authorities. We do work with people at places like the DNC to help amplify resources. Also search has come a long way for all of our platforms and this is helpful because you can enter

terms like "voter suppression." People's eyes glaze over when I mention it because search is not sexy but I think it underpins all the work we do connecting people to the right places.

DL: The parties control a lot of the process leading up to the general, especially around the caucuses. (If we all did primaries maybe we would be more democratic and we would all be happier.) One of the reasons Microsoft worked on the Iowa Caucuses was because the parties actually came to us and said "Can you help us? We have a trust problem from the last cycle." The Republican Party of Iowa actually got it wrong in 2012; they announced the wrong winner. That goes a long way toward destroying trust in the process, right? So, helping the parties do a better job in running their own processes has been critical to this.

MC: But then how do you get the message out to all the voters that you are, in fact, doing this?

DL: Enabling our partners to get their word out is more important, right? You asked earlier whether we should be doing a reporting interface; no, the parties should be doing that. We should make it so simple through search that someone can come to Bing and type "Report election fraud" and immediately be given the right tool to report where they are because search has come a long way. [The burden from there] has to be on the parties.

MW: Agreed. As a non-profit sitting here, if I were to advise that any one for-profit should take ownership then it would put them in the wrong position; it has to come from the people. And the way we're trying to enable that sort of thing is to be a clearinghouse to point people in the right direction; we field things from users and companies and so we are the center node in a network to make sure people get the right tools, the right information, the right partnerships.

DB: I'll chime in here. It's not directly related to the presidential race but it's somewhat applicable on the whole issue around trust and transparency. Never did I think I'd spend a lot of time studying local taxi laws but I have seen a lot of ordinances in my time and some of these laws have been created decades ago and when we come in and say they need to be updated in the time of smartphones. One of the things I have found most encouraging and redeeming is seeing the feedback we get when we go out with these email campaigns is hearing from drivers and riders how this technology has improved their lives: a single mother of three now able to take her kids to day care and make her hearings on time, wheelchair accessible [vehicles available] to help people get around their city.

In South Florida for instance we had a long fought debate with the Broward County commission and they proposed a set of very onerous regulations. We had to pull out after they went into effect. We went out to all of our riders and said let your voice be heard to the county commission on why you value our service and they were heard and told us that now that they saw how their voices mattered they thought their vote would matter too. They saw how involvement on this issue intimately affected their day to day lives and now know that their vote counts and want to get engaged. If that can spark some inspiration in getting involved more broadly it's really an incredible thing.

RR: Somewhat related to this idea of rules and regulations, I know that filming near polling places there's a certain amount of feet that you have to be away before you can whip out your SnapChat or YouTube or whatever. It's interesting that in the smartphone age we still have a lot of these rules. In 2008 we did run a campaign with PBS NewsHour called "Video Your Vote" where we asked people to upload their voting experience and part of that was around election protection making sure that voters felt safe and that there was documentation of funny business. But also to share excitement from the polls and that sort of thing. I would agree with others and say that stuff is most powerful when it comes from users and NGOs and news outlets. But I think our platforms can be great places for that type of content to resurface.

DL: There was a big case before the First Court of Appeals in NH last week I think that could throw out the ban on selfies at the voting booth.

CP: At Facebook all of our tools are free along with our pretty cheap ads, so we try to give these organizations the tools they need to tell the story. As a former campaign operative I think that's part of closing the deal that you have to see things through to election day and get your people out to vote and make sure they know what to do on these issues, which we were doing in the dinosaur age before all these platforms existed, using telephones and clipboards and things like that. Hopefully we've made it a lot easier with the tools we have. Also I'll be curious to see if our live streaming tool comes into play. We've seen people using it to shine a light on other issues we have in our society. Since we've launched it we've seen it used in ways we were not expecting, but I would not be surprised to see people going live by polling locations if they see crazy stuff happening.

Data Privacy

MC: Data privacy. Are there special procedures pertaining to data containing civic and political information that govern what you keep and what you make available through your analytic divisions to advertisers, clients, and marketers? Is it put in a separate category if I shared the fact that I voted, or I got suspicious and uploaded a video? All of that data that could be put into the special category, what happens to it according to the standard procedures of your companies?

CP: We have as much protection on data as we possibly can while still having the site useful. The one thing that might be of interest is that for advertisers we've created some buckets to dice up the political spectrum where we think people might fall based on their engagement with the platform. With our news feed we kind of take signals from actions people take on Facebook that indicate what they might like and what they don't want to see, that's why some people you see a lot from on your feed and some people you don't see much of at all. People you see a lot of, you probably clicked "like," or commented on that topic even if it was from someone you find annoying that's why it keeps showing up. Signals like that help us get a sense of where you fall on the spectrum so if you're posting a lot on pro-gun and stuff we think you tend to be on the right side of the spectrum, if you're posting pro-choice we might think you are on the left. And

again that's to make sure we're showing you content you are interested in. We don't sell [personally identifiable] information like that to advertisers. An advertiser will say you know we'd like to target people who are interested in gun legislation in whatever state and we will take that [request] and try to match that up to the people who would be interested.

MC: So it would be double-blinded?

CP: Yeah.

AF: Any of the data that is around political speech, First Amendment protected speech, it's the most important type of speech and that's going to be protected at the highest levels from a data collection perspective. For us at Twitter, similar to Facebook, the ads are going to be targeted based on your behavior on the platform. So if you are following Donald Trump, if you are following a bunch of Republicans, it's probably safe to assume that you identify with that. Maybe you don't –maybe your reason for following is that you're just keeping an eye on the opposition, but for us it's very much based on your behavior on the platform, that's the type of ad you're going to see. But it's never individualized and never associated with a name or anything like that.

DL: I think that we all on the panel probably handle data in a similar manner, with appropriate protections of privacy in place. I think after this election once the smoke clears, how everyone else handles this kind of data is actually going to be a really big deal. If I can claim a loose political need I can go to VA State Board of Elections right now and get the voter registration file for $300. There's practically no protections in our voter registration data. And granted, it's not all that interesting, it's names, phone numbers, addresses, but the fact that that civic data point (of my registration) is available is not generally known; that I can go out and buy it as a private citizen is disturbing. The procedures for data handling that are in place [are wanting]; if you handle SSNs you are beholden to federal regulations, if you handle medical records there are regulations you have to follow. There's nothing if you handle civic data, basically. You can do whatever you want.

MW: I guess pretty much everyone in this room knows this, but the voter file is public and that would be a surprise to a lot of voters. I agree that everyone up here is treating [the data] with the right sensitivity, but even the need for a loose reason to access the voter file is arguable. Anyone could get a national voter file if they just worked at it for a short amount of time. That's just public information.

CP: I think the basic obstacle is the cost and that's not very much.

The Last Mile

MC: Let's go to the audience for questions and comments.

Patrick Stoddart: The company I co-founded, Phone2Action, has built a "check your voter registration/find your polling place" tool leveraging a lot of the data sources you guys have talked about. My question has to do with something that I noticed when we were building our tool. We can put together as many initiatives as we can and make it as easy as possible for people to get going, but at the end of the day for the thirty-odd states that allow online voter registration you're still dropping them off at the state's web site and hoping [they complete the process]. Are you aware of any initiatives at the Secretary of State level to make the last mile of that process easier. VA and PA have voter registration APIs, I know. (Panelists: yes they are live.) How does voter skepticism play into this?

CP: The Secretaries of States love online voter registration because it shows results and it allows them to show their state legislatures a pressure point to modernize. The states that don't have online are going to be more and more left behind, it's going to be embarrassing for them to show the numbers they have versus the states that do have it. I think the dream scenario is that one day we won't have to worry about this because people will be automatically registered when they are 18 and meet the requirements and we won't have this rigamarole.

MC: And in some states there is not only a rigamarole there is an expense because you have to print out the form and mail it back.

MW: There is absolutely a trend towards more online engagement between the Secretary of State and the voter. I expect that will continue. Online registration has grown from something like 12 to 30 states in just the last four years and that's pretty impressive considering that you're talking about state governments. We're working with state governments on the APIs you are talking about. Hearing from voters is really the best way to get Secretaries of States to move, and so we try to get them to see that voters are really engaging with your platforms and this tech.

RR: There was a 2014 Census Bureau report that outlined all the reasons people give for not voting. And the top one, 28% of people, said they were too busy. Making the flow easier so people can't use that as an excuse is interesting, and then how do we systematically tackle the rest of the [reasons/excuses]. You probably can't do anything about "I was sick" but still…

DL: You have to have that last mile piece, but your [advocacy] clients are probably the people who want to own that data and that process, because just handing them off to the states is insufficient, you can't follow up with them if you do that. In VA you can tag a reg code onto it so that the people who pass registrants off get the data back, but that's a brand new concept and honestly there's this funny problem in the cycle of development where the election cycle comes up and people say, "Ah, we need to do this." and they start in January, and then delays, and problems, and they roll out their stuff in August, and by the time it's the end of August and they've rolled it out to the organizations that might leverage it from a consumer end, it's too late to build stuff, so a lot of these Secretaries of State, having just launched their APIs, it's not going to be worthwhile this election cycle, it's going to be next election cycle when it becomes useful.

DB: We released a new product in July called Uber Central. It's still in its infancy but I think over time it can become more of a tool that campaigns can use. Companies and organizations can now dispatch rides through one mobile dashboard. With an Uber Central account you can arrange for multiple rides concurrently. I'm sure it's a life saver for a lot of schedulers as well. We have a couple of corporate pilot partners, Nordstrom, MedStar Health, we're working with the VA to see if it can be a tool to help veterans get to their appointments. When we rolled this out I thought it would be a really incredible tool for campaigns to use during early voting, getting folks to the polls on election day, to help with their canvassers as they are going door to door. We pitched it to both the Clinton and the Trump camps and coordinated campaign efforts here in DC, it's available in any city in which Uber operates, there are groups that are interested and I'm excited to see how it plays out.

DL: Amy Cohen and I were just at a launch party for Audience Partners (an addressable advertising company) Voter Drive service. They are approaching it from an advertising perspective so if you want to advertise with Audience Partners you can advertise free rides and use the VIP.

DB: We are working with them as well, they are using promo codes and pitching this to organizations which can tell their membership bases you can get a free ride.

Voter ID Laws and other Controversies

Jonathan McGee: Given what's going on in North Carolina and other states, have there been any efforts with respect to [controversies involving the state and changes in voter ID laws thrown into the courts]? Broader than that, impediments put in the way of groups, to inform people about that, too.

DB: Last week we sent out an email to our riders and drivers letting them know it was National Voter Registration Day, giving them all the tools they need so they can make their voice heard on election day. In addition to that, we're also giving our staff that run what we call our Greenlight Hubs, which are driver partner support centers, there are about 30 of them around the country. This is a place where drivers can come if they have questions they can meet one on one with staff there. We will be providing staff with the resources for their particular state on how to register to vote and having them ask drivers if they are registered, so adding that into the existing processes such that we can make sure that people are informed and they know how to vote, so that come election day they are registered and they can have the seamless experience of getting to the polls.

CP: I spend a lot of time working with our partners and by partners I mean people who have pages that we work with on a regular basis about strategy just so they get their audience built up enough so that when we have information [of this kind] we can get it to them. When I started doing campaigns it was pretty standard about a month before an election on a Sunday for someone to go put flyers on windshields with the wrong day printed there. It's a lot harder to do

that now with the Internet and Facebook and Twitter and the tools that are available. It's a lot easier for people to check on their own if they are not sure, and also to get information from their friends if they are not sure. It's hard because your feed depends on the people you are used to following, but the nice thing about this election is there is a ton of information flying around for people who are not normally up to speed about politics. This is true for everyone up here, we try to provide this information free and up front to make it easy as possible for people to share it. We're all private corporations and so we need to be careful about how we're engaging on this stuff because we do want to shine a light and make it easier for people to engage but we also don't want to be owners of this process and be seen as responsible for something that really isn't in our hands. There's a fine line here but we do think that by trying to create more transparency and making it easier for people to share information we're helping to move the ball forward.

DL: I will actually give props to Google for information about how you vote. VA Dems sued on the photo ID laws and lost. We lost, it sucks. (I work with VA Dems as well as Microsoft.) So the best thing we can do is put the information out there: "No, really, you need a photo ID to vote. Take the photo ID with you when you go." When you have it there, when Google provides that information, that's critical. We (Microsoft) and the others on the stage are not the ones filing the lawsuits.

Back to the Last Mile

Questioner: A question for Uber. My understanding is you can book a ride one-way. So when grandma is left at the polling station and she doesn't really do very well with the phone, how is she going to get back home and how long is it going to be?

DB: Like I said, Central is still in its infancy, and so I'm learning along with everyone else how we use this for get out the vote purposes. But one thing that is really unique about it is that as a rider who is using whatever ride is being provided by Central you don't have to have a smartphone. As an admin you can type in "Rider does not have a smartphone they will be waiting for you at this specified time on their front porch please look for them," they can personalize it for that ride. And I hope in the case of that grandmother who's in a wheelchair they can also figure out a ride back to their home after they're done voting. It could all be coordinated through that Central account as well.

Questioner: what if I'm an individual booking for my grandmother? Is there a way I can make it seamless to get the ride back?

DB: Yes, as of now you could request a ride for someone, you can pre-arrange a ride now, in a dozen cities you can set a time in advance for that ride to take place. I hear you in saying we need to make that a more seamless experience. When they are done voting they could [if they do have a smart phone] text you and say "I'm ready to be picked up" and drop their pin to whatever the polling location is, and request a wheelchair-accessible ride back as well.

Trending Topics, Siloed Information, and Trolls

Questioner: how do you set the trending topics?

CP: It's by your behavior, so if you live in Georgia and are interested in politics you're going to get that and not Sheboygan. I love to use Sheboygan as my example city; it's fun to say. Right now it's customized somewhat to the person using it. But if you click through you can see a comprehensive list of what's trending nationally.

Unknown: how do you think that affects the siloing of information that people see? (I'm sure you get this question all the time.) Is it increasing partisanship? Can your platform serve as a way for us to produce some type of civil discourse? I feel that a lot of my friends and I are becoming siloed into what I want to see. Which is fine, but seeing more information makes someone a richer person.

CP: I don't think we are increasing the silos. I think we show people information in accord with how they order their lives, what they choose to spend time with and engage with. We try to make it easier for people to disengage and not get into any fights, you can choose to unfollow somebody. I have a few friends who have taken that action just because it is campaign season. I'm from a small town in northeast Ohio and there's a ton of people who don't agree with me politically who I went to high school with and who I'm still friends with and want to see updates from and they post things and I'm like, how are we from the same place? And I have to remind myself it's a good thing I'm seeing their stuff because it's pulling me out of my happiest little liberal bubble in DC and this isn't necessarily the real world. But I have to consciously choose that and it's really hard because it makes me stressed out, it makes me angry. But we try to give people as much control as they can have themselves. We also, you know, news publishers use Facebook a lot so we try to make it easy for people to connect with news organizations and get information from them and there are a lot of studies that say that people get their news from Facebook. At the end of the day we try to give people who use Facebook as much choice as possible and the ability to shape what they see in their feed. If their feed is super-polarized, that's the choices they've made.

AF: Twitter is a completely open platform, so you choose every account that you follow specifically. I will say from my personal perspective that it's sometimes unfortunate that people sort of go to their corners when we're talking politics. Based on who they choose to follow they may become more and more ingrained in whatever their own political leanings are. That's something that's a larger societal issue, something that has been the case for a long time that people want to be reinforced. So it's their prerogative if they choose to do that. But from a Twitter perspective we've made a very specific choice to make sure that if you come to our platform you have the ability to decide who you follow and who you choose to engage with.

CP: I think it is the nature of the Internet that people are nasty to each other because they don't have to put their name and face on it. On Facebook they have to do both, at a minimum you have to have a real name on your profile. That helps somewhat, and also on Facebook at least (I don't know about the other platforms) people get tired of the trolls. They tend to push those people out over time. It takes a while; people get off on the attention. But there is some kind of self-policing that goes on which I think is good and the more we can make the Internet less anonymous the more civil the discourse will become.

Unknown: Just a follow-up, I saw an article that said that 7% of the people on social media unfollow people because of their political views. But have the social media people up there on the panel ever considered a feature that enables people to suppress just politically related content?

AF: Again, we want to make it possible for you to personalize and choose the people that you are following. Twitter is never going to use an algorithm that suppresses political speech. But if you have a friend who's being particularly annoying you can mute that friend and instantly eliminate that person's tweets from your timeline without fully blocking them. It's a temporary thing; you can unmute them right after November 8, when things will hopefully go back to being fairly civil.

CP: The way our feed works, if you are engaging with a particular thing for a while and it becomes annoying, stop doing that and in a day or two it will go away. We do that by topic, too. You may notice your feed is heavy with certain things; mine is like politics, celebrity gossip and animal videos, but if I stopped for a day or two those things would start to filter out. We try to give people controls that are overt and also a little more passive. With Donald Trump it's kind of hard because he seems to be ubiquitous but the less you engage with stuff, a topic, or Hillary, the less you are going to see of it.

Eva Liland, GSPM: do you target Americans abroad? I had such a difficult time [with the voting process] when living in Norway.

MW: It is very difficult to engage with overseas voters. There are a number of non-profits that do that; mine is not one of them. It is certainly a system that could be improved.

Unknown: I work with an organization that tries to get this information out to college students, we tend not to hear back from them when they do have problems. Are any of you starting to see feedback when you provide this information?

[Unidentified panelist]: We did a ton of research to find out what are the pain points in the voting process. We check the logs, we look at user feedback. A lot of that is technical feedback but some is substantive such as this was inaccurate information, it would be helpful to get this type of information, and some of that is easier to get than others. Google is better positioned to provide and maybe an NGO or third party could fill gaps better. But there definitely is a feedback loop that we are looking at. That said, if you're hearing stuff on the ground we're

really interested. We may not be able to tweak things fully for this cycle but for the future we want to make this as easy as possible for people.

CP: We work with partners all the time and talk with the Secretaries of State, so during the primaries we got the feedback that more of a heads-up would have been great because they weren't prepared for the onslaught that they got in registration. We were mindful of that when we rolled it out for the general election.

Interview with Amy Cohen October 14, 2016.

Ms. Cohen is the Director of Operations and Co-Founder of the Center for Election Innovation & Research. Previously, she was an officer with the elections program at the Pew Charitable Trusts where she managed the Voting Information Project (VIP).

The Story and the State of Voting Information

MC: Tell me the story of the Voting Information Project.

AC: I don't work there anymore, but briefly, it is a project to put election information online. That seems like it should be really easy –polling locations, ballot information– but it's not. It started in 2008 when Google was looking at its search history and realized that searches [for election information] went through the roof and at the same time there was research that found that people were looking for information online but couldn't find it, or if they did find it they couldn't trust what they found; they didn't know if it was current, or who collected it.

VIP works very closely with the states to collect this information and standardize it. Pew funds VIP for now with Democracy Works doing all the data collection and standardization, and Google provides the technical backbone, the Google Civic Information API. The API is on all the time, so even though everyone is paying attention now for November, in 2016 so far VIP provided information for 65 or 70 elections: primary elections, statewide when they weren't on the same day as the presidential primaries, and also local elections such as school boards, a special election in Rhode Island in January, all up and down the ballot because it's important that voters have a place to go to find what they need regardless of the size of the election. People need access to information all the time and were having trouble finding it, and that's the hole VIP filled.

MC: Correct me if I'm wrong, but there is no directory, a rolling directory, of all of the candidates in all of the elections in the United States.

AC: Yep.

MC: Where are we with that, does this intersect at all with that?

AC: Yes and no in terms of the intersection. The challenge with creating that kind of directory in terms of election dates and who and what is on the ballot is that election administration in the United States is so incredibly decentralized which is what also makes it very challenging to hack. There are states that are top-down, where elections are run out of the Secretary of State's office and counties and localities are administering elections at the instruction of the state for the most part. And then there are states that are bottom-up, where the counties are administering elections and passing information along to the state. And then even in both of those there are elections that the counties don't run, that individual cities run.

This is common in places such as California and Texas which are highly decentralized. The city of West Hollywood CA, for example, has its own elections. They don't have to tell the county [of Los Angeles]; they often do, but they don't have to, and so therefore the county doesn't necessarily know that it's happening, why would the county tell the state, and so on. It makes it very difficult to collect that information. The result is that there usually isn't one place in one state where you can go to get it.

The same is true in top-down states like Minnesota, where almost every election is run out of the Secretary of State's office but there are some city-wide elections that they have nothing to do with and they don't want to have anything to do with it because there are already so many elections. That's part of the challenge with creating a directory of election dates and ballot information. There aren't just 51 places to go.

MC: Let alone putting that information in one format for a digital file.

AC: Right. There are 9,000 or 10,000 election jurisdictions in the country. But I don't think that figure includes some of the cities that run their own elections.

MC: The West Hollywoods.

AC: Exactly. We're making progress. There are organizations such as TurboVote, they have an API of election dates. There are a lot of other organizations doing work collecting ballot information for some of these hyper-local races. But I think we are a long way from having all election information for all places all the time because there are just so many elections. We need to keep trying, though.

MC: Back to 2008.

AC: Right, Google built the API. They and VIP provided online information for about nine states and Los Angeles County, which you could argue is its own state. About a million people accessed information just about where is my polling place and just for November 2008. It has

grown exponentially. Now this November anybody in any state will be able to find their information through the Google Civic information API.

MC: Compare progress in registration and voting information.

AC: Online registration is one of the great innovations in terms of where we are right now. In 2008 there were 2 states and now we're at 32 states and DC. In the world of election administration that's superfast. Voting equipment is old and systems are legacy systems so this is a lightning change. It is more cost-efficient for the states, it's more in line with what voters' expectations are, and it is a much better experience for both the administrators and the voters. We've come a really long way on the online voter registration front.

One big difference between online voter registration and VIP is that VIP is not a government entity, it's a national third-party organization coming in and saying, "Adopt this standard and work with us because this is what voters are clamoring for," whereas online voter registration often comes from within the state organically, though in-state third party groups have been important advocates for OVR in many states.

Pushing and Pulling Information

MC: So now making people aware of these resources. Besides the online companies that we brought to the panel, how else can people find out that they can find out? And also, does VIP and the civic information API include information about the laws that apply to elections such as how far partisans must stand from the polling place?

AC: That's not part of VIP's data set but I believe it's something that Google adds. Google supplements the information in the API so that they can answer the questions that people want them to answer.

Regarding how do people know how to look for this: there was a panel survey in 2014 where we surveyed the same people every month for nine months including immediately after the election. We did this because election administrators were saying, "You need to tell us when people are listening!" We were hoping to find that sweet spot of when to send out information so that people know it's from the government and they pay attention. What we found, surprisingly or maybe not surprisingly, was that there is no sweet spot. We also learned that regardless of the topic for the most part voters have a hard time differentiating what's coming from government and what's coming from candidates. It a federal election there is so much outreach and so much mail, it all blends together.

What was most interesting to me, though, was that one of the questions people were asked every month was "Did you search for election information?" Even in the wave of the panel asking about the time right before the election, less than half the people were actively searching for election information. People don't do it. But it still says to me that people want and expect

accurate information; they just aren't looking for it. That makes the corporate civic efforts this year all the more important. People are going to Starbucks and to Facebook and Snapchat and all these other things anyway and just because they aren't actively searching doesn't mean they aren't going to look at it when it is put in front of their face.

MC: So the reminder or the cue matters.

AC: It matters a lot. We can see that in the results of the Facebook voter registration push that they did for National Voter Registration Day (NVRD). Their reminder went live on the 23rd [of September] and they did it for four days and Google's NVRD Doodle reminder went up on the 26th and if you look at the data you can see that the big spike happened from Facebook. There were results from Google as well but the bigger result from Facebook says to me the value of the push instead of the pull. If you put it in front of people they will take advantage of it. You can see this again closer to voter registration deadlines: when Facebook and Google did reminders, states saw record levels of online voter registration transactions.

Putting the information where people are is incredibly important. If you're going to expect somebody to look for it, the chances are they're just not going to do it. But in the next couple weeks as we get closer to November 8th you're going to see companies via social or on their own platforms start to push the reminders to find your polling location, make sure you know where you're going, things like that.

I really like the shift to the corporate civic responsibility mode. It's not a brand new trend, but this year with the TurboVote Challenge it's been taken to the nth degree. For a long time it felt like Google and Facebook were the only ones in the game, Google especially, and now it has really blown up and that's great.

MC: Who created National Voter Registration Day?

AC: The Bus Federation did that. TurboVote is a standalone c 3.

MC: What else should we be aware of?

Citizens and Election Administrators: a Two-Way Channel

AC: One of the biggest advantages with civic tech and social media is that not just that it affords voters easy access to information and to reporting complaints to election protection, it also gives election officials the opportunity to communicate more effectively with their voters in a variety of different ways. The LA County Clerk and Recorder is on Twitter himself on Election Day responding to things he sees voters saying, you know, this polling station is crazy and he gets on the phone with the voters and the poll workers. It goes both ways. Coming back around to the security point, a lot of election officials are using social media to get their message out with respect to what they are doing around election security. Maybe you don't have time to go down

to your county clerk's office to watch the logic and accuracy test for your election equipment, but a lot of them are streaming it on Periscope or Facebook Live, and you can watch it.

MC: Are they really? Wow.

AC: Yeah. I know that a lot of election administration can feel very opaque to voters. But election administrators take it seriously and they especially take security seriously. And making sure that voters have this opportunity to see these windows into the process is important and goes a long way toward building confidence in the system when one of our candidates is trying to rattle that.

MC: Yeah, and trust has never been high on this and so he's speaking to a half-converted audience.

AC: Exactly, when you ask people after an election do you think your voted was counted it's very related to your party [and the outcome]. If you're a Democrat [and a Democrat wins] you're more likely to say yes, but if you're a Republican you're more likely to say no.

I don't think Google, Facebook, and Twitter always realize how election administrators are using their tools to make sure that the lines of communication go both ways. I'm a voter too, I understand that a lot of this is confusing and it feels like it changes all the time. But civic tech gives us more access to the entire process: not just registration and voter-specific information, but the mechanics of the entire voting process. If you are curious about how machines are prepared for an election, you can watch how it's done from the comfort of your home. In some places you can watch ballots being counted via livestream if you can't be there in person. If you have an issue or a question, you can contact your state or local election official on Facebook or Twitter if you don't want to call or stop by. Election officials are doing everything they can to make the process transparent, to make sure that voters can have confidence in the results, and tech and social media plays a big role in that.

Parties, Data Sharing, and Other Nations

MC: What is the proper role of the parties in all of this?

AC: I don't know.

MC: Maybe that's another conference. Let's narrow it to how accessible the voter interactive data with the civic tech interfaces is to the parties, what use do the parties make of it?

AC: Parties might be using the voter registration platforms build by some of the civic tech organizations out there. But I know that TurboVote, Rock the Vote, Vote.org are not sharing data with the parties, they are all non-partisan. My understanding is that their data sharing policies are strictly for academic research purposes.

MC: That would seem to be a best practice worth mentioning in italics. Same goes for political consultants and government/public affairs offices?

AC: Yeah, the big three [non-profits engaged in non-partisan voter registration] only use their data internally for analysis and experimentation and they're not making it otherwise available.

MC: Do you know whether anything like this goes on in other countries?

AC: I know that the Google Civic Information API is used in other countries to provide polling location. I know that they work a lot in India, in countries in Africa. Google also does a lot with election night results both domestically and internationally. Canada is another country where they use the Civic Information API. I know that FB turns on their megaphone in other countries with election stuff. But I don't know about the civic tech atmosphere in other countries.

MC: Tell me about your new venture.

AC: We are continuing to work on how technology can be used to solve election administration issues, working with states and local governments and the federal government as well. A common data format is a huge issue. It's not just one system that runs an election, again, why it is so difficult to hack an election. In an individual county it's four, five, sometimes more different systems, and they're often not speaking the same language. We're working with the National Institute of Standards and Technology there's a move toward a common data format in elections. It has been bubbling under the surface for a really long time and now that the Election Assistance Commission has energy and commissioners and staff again it's gotten a lot more momentum. That's something we feel strongly about because that impacts everything.

We continue to work on voter registration best practices, data integration within states across state agencies, Motor Voter plus. States are starting to improve the way DMVs and election agencies talk to each other and share information. It's sort of slow going. We also recognize that there are other social service agencies involved and we're working along that front. We are encouraging states to participate in ERIC, the Electronic Registration Information Center, which is a data sharing consortium of 20 states and DC right now. It's completely voluntary but states pay to participate. They share their voter registration lists and DMV data. States get back data about voters who have moved across state lines, died, duplicate records, newly eligible but unregistered voters which you can only get from the DMV because most voters have contact with their DMV.

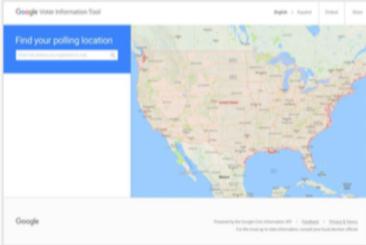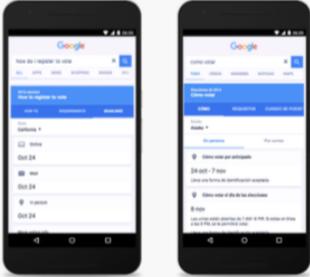MC: Today is my son's 16th birthday as it happens.

AC: Well congratulations. In ERIC the states are required to do the list maintenance activities and also to reach out to unregistered citizens to give them the opportunity to vote, and states with online voter registration encourage them to do it online because that is the most cost- and time-efficient for most people.

And then the biggest pillar of our work is going to be on voter turnout, and how we can work with state and local governments and also companies to improve voter turnout for all elections in a completely non-partisan way. The research that is done on this is often election specific and we want to figure out how to turn people into voters.

MC: So there's a big academic literature on this.

AC: Yes, but a lot of it is driven by a particular candidate or issue. We work closely with state and local governments and many of them have come to us and said they want to figure out how to make materials they are already legally required to send out more effective in terms of getting people to actually cast ballots. Right now we are planning our research agenda for the next one to two years.

Appendix: Slide provided by Ramya Raghavan, Google Elections Team.