

October 25, 2020

Mr. Stephen Engelberg, Editor-In-Chief
ProPublica
155 Avenue of the America
Thirteenth Floor
New York, NY 10013

Sent Via Email: Stephen.Engelberg@ProPublica.org

Dear Mr. Engelberg:

ProPublica's recent article on the Voter Participation Center and Center for Voter Information contains multiple factual inaccuracies and shows an overall misunderstanding of the state of voting in the United States and the important work that we do. The piece overstates the significance of a relatively small number of errors common to any organization sending tens of millions of pieces of mail each year, gives undue credence to election officials who are not aggressively registering voters or providing them access to voting by mail, and ignores the failure of election officials to maintain modern voting infrastructure resulting in the current poor state of voting in this country. Further, the article generally fails to recognize the inherent difficulties of registering voters in a balkanized election system, particularly in the middle of an unprecedented global pandemic, and does not attempt to understand the work necessary to reach hard-to-register voters.

In a pandemic, VPC's and CVI's vote-by-mail programs, early vote in-person programs, and get-out-the-vote programs are designed to provide voters important information they need to vote safely as part of the November 3 election.

Significant Factual and Contextual Inaccuracies

- The Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information have registered more than 5.6 million people in the lifetime of the organizations. Your article states that, "this year, election offices have received almost 5.6 million vote-by-mail applications from CVI."
- The Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information have helped generate more than 5 million vote-by-mail applications this year.

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- Your article discusses work done by a separate organization named Civitech yet makes no clarification that Civitech is not the Voter Participation Center nor is it part of the Center for Voter Information.
- Your article states:

“In an Aug. 25 email to an attorney for CVI, Dearing pleaded with the group: ‘PLEASE DO NOT send paper applications to voters in Kentucky. In doing so you would create large amounts of voter confusion and generate a large volume of duplicate applications that would have the potential of doing very real harm to this system.’

“Instead of paper applications, Dearing suggested directing residents to the state’s online portal, where they can both register to vote and request mail-in ballots. The same services are also available over the phone. Dearing’s office also sent 500,000 postcards to unregistered voters earlier this year directing them to the online portal.

“Nevertheless, CVI began mailing letters and application forms to Kentuckians in September. Dearing’s office was jammed with calls, including many from longtime voters who worried they had somehow been removed from the rolls.”

In fact, after VPC and CVI received the email from Mr. Dearing asking us not to mail vote-by-mail applications into Kentucky, our attorney and our staff held a call with Mr. Dearing. As a result of that call, we conceded to his request and made the decision not to mail any vote-by-mail applications into Kentucky. We did discuss mailing voter registration applications into Kentucky with Mr. Dearing, and he did not object. Subsequent to that call, we mailed voter registration applications, but not vote-by-mail applications. Had your reporters raised this matter with us, we would have happily explained the situation. In hindsight, it is fair to ask if Mr. Dearing’s request not to send vote-by-mail applications into Kentucky was an effort to suppress votes.

Regarding the Kentucky online portal you reference, there is no examination in your article of voters that do not have access to, or understanding of, online portals. Many of the people that the Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information are attempting to bring into the electoral system have not found an easy way to register to vote or engage in our democracy. The elitist assumption that all people have access to and an interest in using an online portal, expressed by Mr. Dearing and uncritically repeated by your reporters, in fact demonstrates one of the very reasons why VPC and CVI exist. By providing voter registration applications, vote-by-mail applications, and get-out-the-vote information in the mail, and by running digital ads on multiple popular platforms, VPC and CVI are working to ensure voting-eligible people can engage in our democracy--no matter their individual circumstances.

- Your article states: In September, Kentucky’s Republican secretary of state, Michael Adams, released a statement calling the CVI mailers a “scam.” Your article does not reference the [90% drop off in voter registration in Kentucky this year](#) that necessitated a voter registration program

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by outside groups in the first place. In contrast, VPC and CVI have helped with over 30,000 voter registration applications in Kentucky this election cycle.

- Your article states: “CVI’s clients include progressive groups like NextGen America, the youth voting organization founded by billionaire and former Democratic presidential nominee Tom Steyer.” As a non-profit organization we do not have clients. We work with partners in the effort to register and turn out voters, but we have no vendor/client relationship with any of them.
- Your article states: “In April, election officials from a little over half of Florida’s counties signed a letter asking their secretary of state and attorney general to either take legal action against CVI or speak out publicly against its mailers, which the letter referred to as ‘a deceptive enterprise’ that will “carpet bomb Floridians with more voter registration deception this month.”

There is no mention in your article of the abysmal state of voter registration data in Florida or the responsibility Florida officials bear for failing to address it. [Before the pandemic, only 62.7 percent of all voting-eligible Floridians were registered, versus 66.9 percent of Americans, US Census records show. For people of color, unmarried women and young people, the figures are even lower: 57.7 percent registered to vote in Florida versus 61.2 percent nationally.](#) VPC and CVI have helped with 271,398 voter registrations in Florida this cycle alone.

- Your article states: “Several state and local election officials said that they have asked CVI to use more up-to-date voter lists and make it clearer that its letters do not come from the government. CVI said its mailers include disclaimers that it is not a government organization.” CVI’s mailings clearly state that the organization is a non-governmental, nonprofit organization. They also include instructions on how to unsubscribe and encourage those who have already registered to vote or requested an absentee ballot to discard the mailing. This information was included in sample mailers shared with your reporters.
- Your article readily accepts the claims of election officials regarding mistakes from outside organizations, but does not address any of the mistakes created by election officials themselves this cycle. We provided your reporters with a list of more than a dozen significant errors that state election officials created this year in mailing absentee-ballot requests and voter-registration forms to voters, but the authors ignored this important issue. They also ignored a [study](#) by a leading academic in Florida showing that Florida’s voter file has a 17 percent error rate.
- Your article states: “As states ramp up mail-in voting, CVI and other direct-mail groups across the country are causing friction by tackling responsibilities that traditionally belong to the government: the sending of ballot applications and other election-related materials.”

As a factual matter, the work of registering and turning out voters has been done for decades by [third party organizations](#). For example, much of the work done by the [late Congressman John Lewis as a young man revolved around registering voters](#). Third party organizations fill this gap because too many election officials - some because of benign neglect, some because of outright

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hostility toward people voting, some because of lack of resources and funding - have failed to do so.

ProPublica's failure to understand this reality, which has been extensively documented by media outlets less skeptical of election officials' excuses than ProPublica, is the fundamental flaw that permeates your article. Given the widespread reporting this election cycle of election officials, legislatures and state governments making affirmative decisions not to send out vote-by-mail applications and other voter information in the middle of a global pandemic, I am frankly stunned by ProPublica's refusal to recognize why some election officials continue to object to our work to encourage more Americans to participate in their democracy.

Limited Understanding of Voting During Covid-19

Aside from a passing reference once in your narrative, and a quote from me, your article lacks a sufficient discussion of the impacts of COVID-19 on voting. The end of the primary election season saw changing election dates, changing election rules, and an increased focus on safe ways to vote and voting options. However, your article does not meaningfully address the increase in the work of the Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information to ensure that voters have safe options to register and vote in a pandemic.

In many jurisdictions, traditional voter registration methods have been curtailed or closed, including departments of motor vehicles, high schools, and person-to-person voter engagement programs. Your article makes no mention of these challenges and the work CVI and VPC did to fill the voids.

For example, your article states "...Donald Green, a professor of political science at Columbia University, has found that a face-to-face conversation with a canvasser or volunteer is usually much more effective than direct mail." How many "face-to-face" conversations with a canvasser are taking place in states with COVID-19 lockdowns? Again, there is no mention of the difficulties of face-to-face engagements with voters in a pandemic. Mail-based programs like ours offer a safe and reliable solution.

Understanding the Work of the Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information

As stated above, your article uncritically accepts the position of election officials without accurately presenting the work of the Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information. The article completely misses the overwhelming success of our work in engaging historically underrepresented voters in our democracy, why it has been more critical than ever in this unprecedented election cycle, and the fact that it has been found by independent academics to be effective. Despite ProPublica's misleading portrayal, the Voter Participation Center and Center for Voter Information have registered 1.5 million voters this election cycle. Our work this cycle has had the largest impact - when measured by voters reached and registered to vote - of any organization working in this space. As the nation's only high-volume voter registration organizations, this has mattered this year more than ever.

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Without our efforts, as COVID-19 forced traditional in-person registration locations and voter engagement efforts to shut down or scale back, millions of people - especially those who have historically been disenfranchised - would have been unable to vote and make their voices heard. This year, we scaled up our proven efforts to fill gaps caused by the pandemic, sending tens of millions of mailings to voting-eligible citizens across the country.

- Our vote-by-mail programs consistently increase turnout. Attached is a study finding that CVI's approach to vote-by-mail is highly effective at increasing turnout in a normal, non-pandemic election. Our response rates this year amid the pandemic are also higher than ever before. We provided your reporters with the names and contact information for leading academics who could validate our success rate, but ProPublica declined to contact them.
 - *(Attached is a paper by Chris Mann and Genny Mayhew from 2010, finding our approach to VBM highly effective at increasing turnout in a normal, non-pandemic election)*
- CVI tested its vote-by-mail programs in the 2020 primary to understand what effect the organization is having in a pandemic. This programming substantially increased turnout in all the elections where it distributed mailings. This included Georgia and Iowa, where it tested whether the organization sending vote-by-mail materials to voters who also receive one official absentee ballot application is additive, and it was. It is also noteworthy that [Georgia](#) did not send out statewide vote-by-mail applications in the general election, making CVI's efforts even more critical.

This cycle, in addition to helping 1.5 million people register to vote, we have:

- Generated more than 5 million vote-by-mail applications;
- Helped over 50,000 people apply online to vote-by-mail;
- Enabled over 300,000 online voter registrations.

VPC and CVI's work doesn't end with voter registration or vote-by-mail application. At this moment, millions of pieces of mail are being delivered to people in key states, meeting individual needs in the closing days:

- Early vote in-person for voters that are not voting by mail;
- Registration reassurance to registered voters who don't regularly vote;
- Ballot "chase" mailings to those voting by mail who have yet to return their ballot;
- Mailings to newly registered voters reminding them what their options are to vote, and to turn out to vote;
- Mailings to registered voters to encourage them to vote.

Your article fails to include critically important information related to our impact, and the context of an unprecedented election cycle where our work has been more urgently needed than ever before.

Eleven days before the 2020 election, ProPublica published an article riddled with errors and inaccuracies and lacking the vital context of this moment. Your reporting is deeply disappointing, especially from an outlet that claims to exist to hold power to account. The article leaves this reader concerned about your understanding of the actual problems voters in this country face, and who is

responsible for them.

I hope that you will append this letter to your inaccurate article so that readers may have a more full understanding of the work of the Voter Participation Center and the Center for Voter Information.

Sincerely,



Tom Lopach
President and CEO

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