



Making an impact: ACORN's Civic Engagement Programs

For more than three and half decades, the members and organizers of ACORN (the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) have actively encouraged low and moderate income Americans to participate in the democratic process as part of a community organizing strategy to empower the citizens whose voices are least often heard. In 2008, ACORN overcame strident partisan attacks to successfully complete one of the largest non-partisan civic engagement efforts in U.S. history including voter registration, the successful defense of voters' rights in several states, and person to person voter education and get out the vote programs.

Our best estimates indicate that ACORN's 2008 voter registration and get out the vote work combined with the continuing impact of ACORN's registration drives from 2004 through 2006 helped bring approximately one million voters to the polls this year.

Voter Registration

In 2008, ACORN completed the largest non-partisan voter registration drive in United States history), collecting over 1.3 million voter registration applications in low income and minority communities in 21 states. Based on research into past voter registration drives and samples of our work this year, we estimate that approximately 70% of these applicants—about 900,000—resulted in a voter successfully being placed on the voter rolls, either by registering for the first time or successfully completing a needed re-registration after a change of address.

Half of ACORN's registrants were estimated to be under 30 years old, 60-70 percent were African American, and approximately 25 percent were Latino. Since 2004, ACORN has helped nearly 3 million citizens apply to become registered voters.

ACORN's 2008 Voter Registration Application Totals

State	Voter Application Goal	Applications Collected	Estimated Successful Registrations	State	Voter Application Goal	Applications Collected	Estimated Successful Registrations
AZ	12,000	12,018	8,413	MN	38,000	43,652	30,556
CA	43,000	39,570	27,699	MO	46,000	47,362	33,153
CO	70,000	65,969	46,178	NC	28,000	26,841	18,789
CT	20,000	20,081	14,057	NM	66,000	77,432	54,202
FL	135,000	151,812	106,268	NV	78,000	87,968	61,578
GA	1,000	518	363	OH	216,500	247,335	173,135
IN	26,000	23,090	16,163	PA	155,500	153,898	107,729
KY	14,200	14,200	9,940	TX	40,400	42,695	29,887
LA	12,000	12,452	8,716	WI	32,000	31,203	21,842
MI	229,500	215,470	150,829	Total	1,263,100	1,313,566	919,496



The voter registration drive was a strictly non-partisan effort; registrations were collected without reference to party or candidates. Rather, ACORN canvassers engaged residents on issues that affect them directly, from wage increases to immigration reform, from education to affordable housing, helped them complete their voter registration applications and offered free provisional ACORN memberships as a first step in an ongoing program of civic engagement. Hundreds of thousands of young, minority, and low-income citizens registered for the first time, while hundreds of thousands of other voters updated their voter registrations.

In 2007 and 2008, ACORN implemented the most sophisticated quality-control system in the voter engagement field.

- Staff members called each applicant to verify their application information.
- Suspicious cards were flagged and election officials were alerted whenever a card appeared to be problematic.
- As required by law and legal advice, ACORN turned in all signed applications for final verification to be determined by election officials.

This extensive Quality Control process held up well in the face of politically-motivated attacks and unprecedented media scrutiny: It appears that most of the forms that Boards of Elections found to be problematic had been flagged as such by ACORN's own staff. (Whether or not a given news outlet reported this fact is another matter.)

Voter Mobilization

ACORN and its 400,000+ member families remain committed to empowering local low- and moderate-income residents by bringing them into the democratic process and ensuring that they have a say in the issues that affect them most. This work ran on several different tracks in 2008 with separate 501(c)(3)-nonpartisan 501(c)(4)-nonpartisan programs. Different programs were carried out in different locations, depending on funding availability and other factors. Adding the results of these separate contacts together, they included more than 721,000 door-knocks, and 478,000 conversations with voters in-person and on the phone.

Getting Out the Vote: The ACORN 2008 Voter Mobilization Program

Around the country, ACORN members and organizers knocked on hundreds of thousands of doors to help get traditionally disenfranchised communities—low income, minority, young, and immigrant citizens, to the polls in record numbers. The results were impressive:

2008 ACORN Non-Partisan Voter Mobilization Programs

State	Doors Knocked	Door Contacts	Phone Contacts	Total Contacts
AZ	21,413	2,671	8,643	11,314
CO	119,113	31,230	48,057	79,287
FL	167,936	46,687	63,033	109,720
MI	12,644	2,617	16,051	18,668
MN	40,260	21,624	6,778	28,402
NC	28,029	15,301	330	15,631
NM	110,533	36,870	7,110	43,980
NV	16,599	7,080	3,355	10,435
OH	123,867	41,782	3,319	45,101
PA	4,000	1,933	27,785	29,718
WA	3,809	875	907	1,782
Other			66,818	66,818
Total	648,203	208,670	252,186	460,856

(Includes contacts from the We Are America partnership, phone programs, and door-to-door non-partisan Get Out the Vote programs.)



ACORN 2008 Voter Mobilization Program: In states including Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Ohio ACORN carried out a non-partisan field program that emphasized person-to-person contact to motivate new and infrequent voters in low income, largely minority neighborhoods. The program focused on a universe of more than 225,000 voters in three categories: 1) those who participated in only one of three recent major elections; 2) inactive voters registered since 2004; and 3) citizens registered since November 2008. In the ten days leading up to Election Day, organizers working on ACORN 2008 Voter Mobilization Program made two or more attempts to knocked on 338,500 doors and had 120,600 face-to-face conversations. They also distributed more than 450,000 pieces of literature with the non-partisan 866-OUR-VOTE election hotline.

ACORN, working with partner organizations, also made thousands of **phone calls** to encourage participation in 2008.

- A national **Promise Program** successfully reached 130,842 infrequent African American voters and new registrants in 14 states and followed up with confirmation letters to many of these voters to reinforce their commitment to vote and provide useful election information.
- ACORN collaborated with Project Vote on a national **New Voters Program** that reached 47,410 newly-registered voters in 29 states with polling place information and a get out the vote method.

Using contact data gathered from our membership and voter registration campaign ACORN sent a get out the vote message to 100,258 email addresses, and text-messages to 5,000 voters who had opted-in to receive texts in Florida, Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, Nevada, Michigan, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. The email list had already been in use to recruit volunteers in the weeks leading up to the election.

We Are America Alliance: In addition to the other ACORN Voter Mobilization projects described above, ACORN worked with the We Are America Alliance (WAAA) on a non-partisan program to increase voter turn-out among on Latino, Asian, and New American communities in Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, and Washington. ACORN canvassers door-knocked in neighborhoods with high concentrations of Latino and immigrant citizens working to increase turnout among new and low-propensity voters. These door-to-door efforts made 88,000 voter contacts and were supplemented by several mail pieces that repeated the messages communicated in-person and a phone program that made more than 68,000 contacts.

Ballot initiative victories: In Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Missouri, ACORN's voter education programs (including WAAA partnerships) helped educate thousands of voters about important ballot initiatives:

- ✓ A predatory lending deregulation bill was defeated in Arizona where ACORN's We Are America Campaign canvass educated voters on the issue through door-to-door contact.
- ✓ ACORN field programs (including the WAAA partnership) helped defeat a set of anti-labor ballot initiatives and an affirmative action ban failed in Colorado.
- ✓ Citizens in **Massachusetts** defeated a tax reform amendment which would have stifled funding for education and public services. Massachusetts ACORN members conducted a series of public events to inform young people and other urban voters about the initiative.
- ✓ **Missouri** passed Proposition B, a statute that will ensure the availability of home care services to the elderly under the Medicaid program and allow for union organizing and training the state's home care workforce, with support from ACORN organizers in the signature gathering and Election Day voter education effort.



- ✓ Earlier in the year, Missouri ACORN's "Think before You Ink" campaign educated voters about Ward Connelly's anti-affirmative action initiative (the deceptively named "civil rights" initiative) that did not receive the needed signatures to get on the ballot.

Issue Advocacy and Voter Education

While many of ACORN's field programs focused strictly on encouraging voter participation in traditionally disenfranchised communities, ACORN members also know from long experience that election years represent a crucial opportunity to press legislators for positive action on the issues that affect our families. In Colorado, Minnesota, and New Mexico, ACORN conducted large-scale programs, to educate voters around issues including predatory lending, jobs, and other economic justice issues. In each of these states, ACORN organized door to door voter education canvasses, which were developed, funded and managed separately from other non-partisan Get Out the Vote efforts.

**ACORN Voter Education Programs -
Voter Contacts**

Knocks	Contacts
20,000	8,675
49,790	7,027
3,713	1,640
73,503	17,342

These person-to-person voter education programs reached well beyond ACORN's base in low income neighborhoods contacting tens of thousands of voters regarding the voting records of their elected officials. Canvassers and follow-up mailings urged voters to contact Congressional leaders to urge them to change policies that fueled predatory lending and contributed to the financial crisis.

Election Protection

Not the least of ACORN's work this year was standing up for the very right to vote for low income and minority citizens. Distorted, partisan attacks on ACORN's voter registration work led to a wave of media attention, racist messages, and death threats directed at ACORN's offices. ACORN members worked in a multitude of forums to rebut these charges and expose voter suppression schemes which often lay behind them, from local events with new voters to the organization's first-ever television commercial. ACORN won election-protection victories on a number of fronts.

- In New Mexico, ACORN joined the ACLU and other partners and filed suit to stop partisan operatives from intimidating minority voters in direct violation of the Voting Rights Act.
- In Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth Court in Harrisburg ruled in favor of ACORN, denying the GOP's attempt to stop voter mobilization in the state.
- ACORN played a part in other 2008 voting rights victories in AZ, FL, GA, MD, MO, and OH, which blocked voter caging schemes, won better enforcement of the NVRA, or protected the right of all citizens to register and vote.

Changing the American electorate: estimating the impact of our work

The 2008 Election year saw a dramatic increase in participation by young and minority voters. A preliminary assessment published by Project Vote finds that:

[V]otes cast by Americans of color in 2008 increased by 21 percent from 2004, based on a review of exit polling and preliminary administrative data. Votes cast by Americans ages 18-29 increased by 9 percent. Votes cast by whites in 2008 declined slightly compared to 2004. Overall, the available data indicate that the composition of the 2008 voting population was markedly different from 2004, even though the overall numbers



of voters who cast ballots did not increase significantly.¹

A range of factors including a historic Presidential race increased turnout. But years of voter registration drives and grassroots get out the vote efforts by ACORN and other civic groups also played a role in creating an electorate that has begun to look more like the American populous.

ACORN and its partners are committed to studying the impact of their work as closely as possible. Analysis of large-scale studies is underway to determine the effectiveness of various kinds of phone calls to new voters and door knocking to low propensity voters. In the area of voter registration, ACORN and Project Vote are working with databases and voting experts to quantify more precisely than ever before the number of voters who successfully register and subsequently vote as the result of its voter registration drives (versus the number of applications which are duplicates, incomplete, or otherwise fail to result in a successful registration.) Using the best available research and samples of our work to date as a guide, however, we are able to make reasonable estimates about the impact of our work.

Based on research into past voter registration drives and samples of our work this year, we estimate that approximately 70% of these applicants—about 917,000—resulted in a voter successfully being placed on the voter rolls, either by registering for the first time or successfully completing a needed re-registration after a change of address.

Further, we estimate which include the voters who remain on the rolls as the result of registration drives ACORN conducted from 2004-2006 **bring the total to 1,573,000 voters on the rolls by Election Day 2008,**² Research by Polimetrix also indicates that historically, 60% of those registered by civic engagement groups vote. If that assumption holds true, then **944,000 additional voters went to the polls in 2008** as a direct result of ACORN's voter registration drives.

Again using the best available research, and including only those programs in which we can clearly document the numerical impact, we estimate that several separate, non-partisan get out the vote programs in which ACORN was involved made a total of about **469,500 voter turn-out contacts** in person or by phone and **moved 48,900 voters who would otherwise have stayed home to the polls on Election Day.**³ (Some local programs are not included in this total. These estimates also do not include the impact of other ongoing voter contact work which is difficult to quantify: email communications, ongoing contact with new voters by ACORN community organizers, or voters who remained on the rolls because of ACORN voting rights work.)

All told, at the end of an inspiring and often difficult year, ACORN's members are proud that their efforts succeeded in making the American electorate more reflective of the American public by helping to move approximately **one million young, low to moderate income, new citizen, and African American and Latino voters to the polls on Election Day 2008.**

¹ "Minority Voting Surged in 2008 Election, According to Project Vote Analysis," November 25, 2008 www.projectvote.org.

² Our estimates are based on Newman and Associates analysis of research conducted by Polimetrix. They assume: of voter registration applications turned in, about 70% result in the successful addition of a new voter to the rolls, either adding a new voter register, or helping a voter who had moved update his or her registration. The projections above also assume that 50% of our successful registrants remain on the rolls from 2004 and two thirds remain on the rolls from 2006.

³ The assumptions behind these programs come from the following sources: Analyst Institute research indicating a 10.5% impact on voter turn-out from face to face voter contact and a 4.5% impact from a live, interactive phone call. A separate study of a the 2007 pilot of the Promise Program (which combines phone and mail) by Women's Voice Vote's Vote, which showed a 15% impact among voters who committed to vote. Finally a study by the USPIRG New Voter Project showed a 4.2% impact on turn-out from texts.



Estimated Impact of ACORN Civic Engagement Work, November 4, 2008

State	2008 Apps.	2006 Apps.	2004 Apps.	Total ACORN VR Apps	Total Est. VR Apps on Rolls 11/08*	Est. Votes from VR	GOTV Contacts	Est. Votes from GOTV	TOTAL Est. New Votes
AR			34,077	34,077	11,927	7,156	1,101	50	7,206
AZ	12,018	3,214	77,040	92,272	36,884	22,130	11,314	669	22,799
CA	39,570	3,125	38,402	81,097	42,605	25,563	1,741	78	25,641
CO	65,969	10,286	29,997	106,252	61,501	36,901	68,720	5,483	42,384
CT	20,081	1,079	4,370	25,530	16,092	9,655			9,655
DE			8,300	8,300	2,905	1,743			1,743
FL	151,812	20,665	210,700	383,177	189,705	113,823	100,180	12,393	126,216
GA			22,102	22,102	7,736	4,641	2	0	4,641
IA		1,480		1,480	694	416	1,391	193	609
IL			26,975	26,975	9,441	5,665	1,380	62	5,727
IN	23,090			23,090	16,163	9,698	40	2	9,700
KS			2,303	2,303	806	484			484
KY	14,200	1,925	3,085	19,210	11,923	7,154	1,073	48	7,202
LA	12,452		17,231	29,683	14,747	8,848	1,690	76	8,924
MD		45,664		45,664	21,416	12,850	368	17	12,867
MI	215,470	68,580	65,964	350,014	206,080	123,648	18,668	2,549	126,197
MN	42,581	13,125	38,515	94,221	49,443	29,666	28,402	2,932	32,598
MO	47,362	77,516	40,820	165,698	83,795	50,277	9,437	1,349	51,626
NJ		31,683	10,482	42,165	18,528	11,117	489	22	11,139
NM	77,432	2,216	35,259	114,907	67,582	40,549	52,656	5,154	45,703
NV	87,968		3,511	91,479	62,806	37,684	10,435	914	38,598
NY			120	120	42	25	19,192	3,181	3,206
NC	26,841		28,401	55,242	28,729	17,237	15,631	1,621	18,858
OH	247,335	120,751	177,278	545,364	291,814	175,088	45,101	4,536	179,624
OK			1,744	1,744	610	366			366
OR			19,535	19,535	6,837	4,102			4,102
PA	153,898	112,953	134,514	401,365	207,783	124,670	29,718	4,043	128,713
RI		9,092		9,092	4,264	2,558			2,558
SC		2,805		2,805	1,316	789	840	38	827
TN		9,242		9,242	4,334	2,601			2,601
TX	42,695	6,210	30,777	79,682	43,571	26,143	502	23	26,166
VA							19,288	2,975	2,975
WA		5,928	33,503	39,431	14,506	8,704	1,782	133	8,837
WI	31,203		40,840	72,043	36,136	21,682	2,805	351	22,033
Other	658		1,380	2,038	944	566	320	68	479
Total	1,312,635	547,539	1,137,225	2,997,399	1,573,669	944,201	444,266	48,960	993,006

* Estimates based on: 70% of applications successfully adding a voter to the rolls, 67% of enrolled registrants persisting from '06, and 50% persisting from '04, and 60% turn-out.