

Technology and the Future of Civic Engagement

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Los Angeles Marriott Downtown

Kim Alexander, Founder and Executive Director of California Voter Foundation

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Tracy Westen, Vice-Chairman and CEO of Center for Governmental Studies

Moderator: Peter Manzo, Advancement Project

The panel discussion addressed the relationship between civic engagement and the digital divide.

Panelists began the discussion defining civic engagement as a mean to govern oneself in order to capitalize on opportunities for an improved quality of life, increased participation in the voting process and political dialogues. Panelists examined the promise of technology and the impact it may have on pattern and quality of civic engagement. Panelists agreed technology can improve and/or harm democracy because individuals who have access to technology directly benefit by acquiring information. However, those who do not have equal access are further marginalized. Secured online voter registration and paperless voting methods were mentioned as noted opportunities to use technology to advance civic engagement resulting in increased voter participation. The panel cautioned that technology should not be seen as replacing traditional methods of information dissemination such as printed materials and media coverage.

The panel addressed how digital divide, defined as the lack of access to technology predominantly associated with lower income individuals, Latinos, non-English speakers and persons with disabilities, affects civic engagement. In order to address this issue, cheaper forms of technology, such as text messaging via mobile devices, can aid in engaging disconnected groups.