VIDEO VOTER

Producing Election Coverage for Your Community

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Introduction

Voting is the heartbeat of modern democracies. Democracies cannot function, however, if citizens lack the information they need on the candidates, issues, personalities, endorsements and ballot measure pros and cons—to cast informed ballots.

Why Video Voter is Needed

Americans cite local TV newscasts as their leading source of political information, yet local TV news provides very little information on elections. During the 2002 elections, over one-half of the nation's local news programs provided no coverage of candidate positions.[1]

In those that did, only 28% contained candidates speaking (instead of reporters commenting on them), and the average candidate sound bite was only 12 seconds long. Most of the stories focused on the election "horserace"—who was ahead, who was raising the most money—but not the issues. Only 7% of all TV newscasts focused on state and local races.

Americans also get political information from cable TV news (38%), but the overall audiences are small (2.4 million), and most cable TV news coverage (68%) consists of repetitive stories. Americans also get political news from network TV news (35%), but audiences have dropped 44% since 1985, and shows' news content has shrunk by 11% since 1991 to make way for ads, promos and teases. Americans also get political news from newspapers (31%), but readership has declined 11% since 1991.

Although television is still the dominant political information medium, it generally portrays negative images of government service. Local television is virtually devoid of intelligent coverage of politics or candidates for office.

In fact, voters receive much of their information about political candidates through paid advertising-television, radio, direct mail, Internet appeals and yard signs. Yet voters are scarcely better informed about candidates and issues than they were 50 years ago. One reason is that political TV ads are too often shallow, distorted, trivial and mean. These 30-second "hit pieces" typically highlight flaws or omissions (sometimes minor or distorted out of proportion) in an opponent's record and magnify them to monumental proportions. Negative ads attack, but they rarely propose reforms or communicate significant information about the sponsoring candidate.

One result is falling voter turnout. According to the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, the United States now stands 139th in voter turnout out of 172 democracies in the world.[2] Voting rates in presidential elections dropped more than 25% in the 36-year period from 1964 to 2000. In 1964, 95.8% of regis-

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[1] Survey by Norman Lear Entertainment Center, USC Annenberg School of Communications, www.learcenter.org. The study reviewed the highest rated half-hour local TV news shows on 122 randomly selected stations in the top 50 national markets 7 weeks before the 2002 election.

[2] Gans, Curtis, "Citizen Participation in the Political Process" at an Educational Testing Service Civic Life in America Issues Forum, May 14, 2002. http://www.ets.org/aboutets/issues/0005.html.

[3] Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, United States Graph: Retrieved July 27, 2004 from http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm.

tered voters cast a ballot, but only 67.4% of registered voters did so in 2000.[3] This is a sizeable drop, but it's still a better turnout than we see in a non-presidential election. For off-year elections, participation rates are closer to 20% or 30%, and often drop to less than 10% of registered voters casting a ballot.

People choose not to vote for a variety of reasons, but lack of information is a critical factor. Most want to vote responsibly, but feel uncomfortable voting for candidates they know nothing about. Accurate, timely and easily available voter information on the local level may very well be the key to improving voter turnout. That's where you come in.

The power to change the status quo is at your fingertips.

Why *You* Should Produce Election Programming

PEG access cable TV channels are perfectly positioned to produce and distribute free election programming for candidates and ballot measures. They have the community focus and desire to produce programming which can help support a vibrant local democracy. They also have several distinct advantages over broadcasting as a medium for local political communication.

- First, the cablecast footprint of most community media outlets is narrower than that of local broadcast stations, which can cover dozens of local communities and jurisdictions. Community media channels can therefore focus on the elections that are of particular concern to their specific communities.

- Second, many PEG stations are established with the express directive to serve their communities. What better way to do so than to provide the election programming necessary for citizens to make informed voting decisions?

- Third, PEG stations have both the equipment, facilities and personnel to create election programming; and the channels to distribute it.

Video Voter programming has the potential to vastly change the depth and breadth of political information in your community.

How to Create the Ideal Video Voter System

The process is straightforward and economical. The ideal Video Voter system would allow voters to watch candidate and ballot measure programs in their homes and on-demand wherever they want them. This system requires three steps: production, distribution and retrieval.

Production:
This step involves putting voter information into usable video formats. That's where you, the PEG producer, come in. Many cities have TV production studios connected to their local access cable TV systems. These are available for use by local governments, educational institutions or members of the public on a first-come, first-served basis. But TV production can also be done at many other places -- high schools and universities, public TV stations, commercial broadcast stations, even private production studios. It doesn't matter where the videos are produced. What's important is that they be produced in formats that are generally consistent and attractive to both candidates and voters. This guide explains how to produce these candidate and ballot measure videos and discusses different formats you can use.

Distribution:
Voter information programs produced in PEG access studios can then be distributed over PEG access channels. Voters can watch them in their homes. The videos can also be distributed over the Internet by using an existing city or nonprofit organization's website or by creating your own. Eventually digital TV stations, direct broadcast satellites and even cellphones capable of receiving videos can one day distribute these videos as well.

Retrieval on demand:
Voters can record your election programming in their homes on their Digital Video Recorders (DVRs) such as TiVo and watch it whenever they choose. They can view your programming on the Internet. They can view it on new Video on Demand (VOD) cable TV systems that cable providers are installing around the country. And they can, in the near future, view it on their cellphones.

The Video Voter approach connects the resources of local access producers and production facilities with local politicians, produces videos of candidates and ballot measure committees, uses multiple platforms (cable TV, Internet, digital TV, cell phones) to distribute the videos, and incorporates the technologies of home digital video recording (DVRs) and Video on Demand cable TV to allow viewers to watch the videos on demand. The result is a low-cost, easily accessible system of Video Voter information that will ultimately create a more informed and engaged electorate.

In short, the day is rapidly approaching when voters will be able to watch Video Voter information whenever and wherever they choose. The necessary distribution technologies are already in place or will be shortly. Now, all that's needed is for you to begin producing candidate and ballot measure programming in your own community.