



**Assembly Select Committee on Civic Engagement  
California State Capitol, Room 126  
Tuesday, December 8, 2015**

**Testimony of Kim Alexander, President & Founder  
California Voter Foundation**

Over the past 25 years I have seen California's voter turnout decline, and when people consider what can be done, one response always comes up time after time: we need to teach civic engagement to kids in schools.

California's turnout is not just dropping, it is growing less reflective of the state's overall population. Simply put, the people who vote here look less and less like the people who live here.

Government is confusing to most people. As a Californian, I have 22 elected representatives at various levels of government. And then consider that many people move around and how bewildering it is.

We need to stop judging and start helping, and meet people where they are, make the process work for people's everyday lives. This doesn't mean moving to voting online. But it does mean making everything people need to be informed available, online and easy to use.

One issue the California Voter Foundation is working on is candidate statements. We want to see more of them made available to the public, to make them accessible year round and archive them, thus creating an essential accountability tool for civic engagement. We have the ability to create a giant filing cabinet that anyone can access from anywhere. We should lay bare for the public the tools people need to be meaningfully engaged in civic life and government. And this really starts with the commitments politicians make when they run for office and ask for our votes.

But if we don't teach people how to make informed choices in the first place, and how to hold politicians accountable, then all that information is not going to help.

Why is civic education lacking? Because it's not funded and not required to be taught.

I realize this is a big challenge, that it would be hard to mandate civic education in schools in California, and to work out all the interests' concerns, but we should try.

There is a gap between the people and the government. There is a link missing in the chain. People don't understand the process or how to be heard. They know special interests have the most power, and this frustrates and angers people.

I'm still raw and saddened by the violence that erupted in San Bernardino last week.

What all these people have in common - the San Bernardino terrorists, the Planned Parenthood murderer, the monsters in Paris - is that they chose not to express their opinions in a civil way. They chose violence instead.

Or consider the widespread violence and unrest in our country relating to law enforcement. As U.S Attorney General Loretta Lynch remarked on Monday:

"We understand that the same systems that fail community members also fail conscientious officers by creating mistrust between law enforcement and the citizens they are sworn to serve and protect. This mistrust from members of the community makes it more difficult to gain help with investigations, to encourage victims and witnesses of crimes to speak up, and to fulfill the most basic responsibilities of public safety officials. And when suspicion and hostility is allowed to fester, it can erupt into unrest."

Civic engagement isn't just a nicety. It's a matter of public safety, of public health. It's what allows us to live in a civil society. Let's not treat it as an afterthought.

It is noteworthy, but perhaps not surprising, that places that have low voter turnout and registration have higher levels of violence. And places with high turnout not only have lower levels of violence but are also comparatively healthier.

There should be funding built into the state budget to give schools an incentive to teach civic engagement; perhaps a grant program, with outreach targeted to areas that have low voter turnout.

We also need incentives for counties to want to expand participation. They are no longer being reimbursed for vote-by-mail balloting, resulting in tens of millions of dollars lost. Things most likely to be cut in this fiscal environment are things like outreach programs and the font size of printed voter guides, making those booklets even more difficult to read and comprehend.

Legislative leadership and enthusiasm for addressing low voter turnout is higher than I have seen in a long time. However, in the political world it comes down to money - are we willing to make a financial investment in civic engagement?

I am very encouraged by the leadership of our state's Chief Justice, Tani Cantil-Sakauye, and our Secretary of State, Alex Padilla. Their enthusiasm and energy make me hopeful that

change is possible. Another hopeful sign is the creation of the new California Consortium on Public Engagement.

To sum up:

- Make everything people need to be engaged publicly available and easy to access
- Teach Californians when they are kids in school how to be engaged and make informed choices
- Pass laws and fund programs in the state budget that support these activities