

**Democracy is a Team Sport:
Forging Active Partnerships Between Election Officials and Major League Sports**

Jocelyn Benson, Michigan Secretary of State

Project Description: In 2020, election officials across the country faced numerous challenges as they worked to ensure safe and secure elections during a global pandemic. In Michigan, the Secretary of State pioneered robust, nonpartisan partnerships with professional sports teams to support election administration and voter education. The Detroit Pistons (NBA) and Detroit Lions (NFL) were among the first franchises in the country to offer their facilities and resources in support of nonpartisan election administration. When the Detroit Red Wings (NHL) and Detroit Tigers (MLB) joined the effort, Michigan became the first state in the country with all four major teams actively partnering with local and state election officials. These partnerships included use of facilities, establishing ballot drop boxes, voter registration events, and PSAs promoting accurate and trusted information about elections. Beyond Michigan's borders, Michigan's teams provided a blueprint for other states and municipalities who in turn developed impactful partnerships with election officials. This innovative solution to acute short-term needs helped solve resource and capacity challenges in the short-term, and also paved the way for lasting, long-term partnerships and impact in the years ahead.

Subject Area: Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 2020, election officials across the country faced incredible challenges and obstacles in their efforts to ensure a safe, secure, and accessible general election. One major challenge in the face of the COVID-19 was securing the space, personnel, and resources necessary for healthy voting and strong elections infrastructure. Would polling sites and absentee counting boards be large and accessible to facilitate safe socially-distanced voting and vote counting? Would there be enough poll workers to adequately staff the polls on election day? Another central challenge came in the form of misinformation and disinformation. In the face of increasing uncertainty and false noise about voting rights, election officials had to find creative solutions to provide voters with the information they needed to cast their vote. What messengers and new voices would voters trust to reinforce faith in the security of our elections process, and encourage them to vote?

The Michigan Department of State (MDOS) established a new, innovative solution to both of these challenges by developing robust, active partnerships with major sports teams in the months leading up to the November 2020 general election. Athletics occupies a unique space in American life, bringing together people from different backgrounds and perspectives around shared experiences and friendly competition. For this reason, professional sports teams offered unique, nonpartisan, and trusted platforms which were previously largely untapped resources in the election administration field. Partnerships with professional sports leaders and teams proved to be a valuable asset in the effort to ensure a secure and accessible election in 2020.

The Detroit Pistons (NBA) was among the first teams nationwide to announce this kind of robust partnership with an election official and make their facilities and resources available for nonpartisan election efforts. Under Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson's leadership, MDOS announced a multi-faceted partnership with the Pistons, who committed to taking an active and nonpartisan role in support of democracy. Shortly after, the Detroit Lions became the first NFL team in the country to offer their facilities for election administration and team up with the Secretary of State to support non-partisan voter education efforts. In the months that followed, the Detroit Red Wings (NHL) and the Detroit Tigers (MLB) joined the Pistons and Lions in partnership with MDOS.

Significance

Michigan teams led the way for professional sports across the country to dedicate significant resources and develop robust partnerships with election officials. Detroit became the first U.S. city where all four professional sports teams took an active, nonpartisan role to support the November 2020 election.

Leveraging the resources and unrivaled platforms of Michigan professional sports teams allowed the Michigan Department of State to reach voters with trusted nonpartisan information, encourage their participation in our democracy, and further reassure voters that Michigan would have sufficient resources to safely and securely administer the 2020 election.

Democracy is a team sport. With these partnerships MDOS demonstrated how effective collaboration can empower voters and support election administrators not only in Michigan, but also in states across the country.

Impact/Results

Through these partnerships, Michigan's professional sports teams supported nonpartisan election administration in a series of proactive, nonpartisan actions, including:

- Partnered with the Detroit City Clerk's office and MDOS to designate Henry Ford Detroit Pistons Performance Center and Detroit Lions Ford Field Stadium as ballot receiving boards on election night. With the ample space and staff these locations provided, the Detroit City Clerk was able to ensure they had the resources needed to administer the election.
- Encouraged employees to volunteer as poll workers for both the August 4 primary and November 3 general elections. Pistons, Lions, Red Wings and Tigers leadership encouraged this kind of service and provided paid time off for volunteers. Pistons and Lions employees and athletes staffed the receiving board at the Pistons Performance Center and at the Lions Ford Field.
- The Pistons hosted a secure ballot drop box and built multiple events around it. The Tigers and Lions also offered space for drop boxes, but ultimately there was more demand than supply, with the Clerk placing more than 30 boxes throughout the City.
- Provided nonpartisan, verified information about elections on team websites.
- Built a voter registration platform on the Pistons.com website which integrated directly with the Michigan Bureau of Elections online voter registration system. Individuals could register to vote online and submit their application to vote by mail directly through the Pistons portal.
- Created PSA videos utilizing players, coaches and team personalities aimed at voter education, applying to vote by mail and "how to" videos to ensure ballots are filled out correctly and returned properly to be counted.
- Hosted live voter registration and education events with accurate information and non-partisan community organizations featuring information on how to register, vote, complete and return voting ballots.
- Provided refreshments for election workers during the day on Election Day, free of charge to local election officials.

In addition to professional sports teams, Michigan State University athletics also partnered with MDOS to ensure students were informed and encouraged to vote. These efforts included hosting virtual voter registration drives, creating PSAs and other public-facing encouragement to serve as poll workers and trust the vote by mail system. In future elections, MDOS will build on partnerships with collegiate athletics as well to motivate student turnout.

As partnerships with major athletic teams in Michigan gained traction, other states began to follow Michigan's model and blueprint for productive sports partnerships. Alongside More Than A Vote, an organization created by LeBron James to promote nonpartisan voter engagement with a focus on Black voters, the Michigan team encouraged and facilitated collaborations in other states.

By Election Day in November, over 20 NBA teams, half of the NFL's 32 franchises, and many MLB and NHL teams developed partnerships like those in Michigan with election officials, either providing voting locations or assisting with other election-related needs.

Moving forward in Michigan, the relationships and partnerships that began in preparation for the 2020 November general election will continue to grow and develop. Professional sports teams and their previously-untapped platforms are now connected with election officials who can continue to partner with them in service of democracy. For example, the Pistons are already working with the Detroit City Clerk to support local elections in 2021.

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Voter Information Websites

Detroit Pistons (NBA)

<https://www.nba.com/pistons/voting-landing>

Detroit Lions (NFL)

<https://www.detroitlions.com/community/nfl-votes>

Detroit Red Wings (NHL)

<https://www.nhl.com/redwings/info/vote>

Detroit Tigers (MLB)

<https://www.mlb.com/tigers/community/vote>

Facilities Used for Election Administration



Photo of Pistons Receiving Board on Election Night. More photos available at [Pistons.com](https://www.pistons.com).

Ballot Drop Boxes



Photo of Ballot Drop Box outside Pistons performance center.

Voter Registration Events



National Vote Early Day “Fall Fest” Voter Registration and Absentee Ballot Request Celebration at the Detroit Pistons Performance Center



Detroit Lions host virtual voter registration event. [View recap video on DetroitLions.com.](https://www.detroitlions.com)

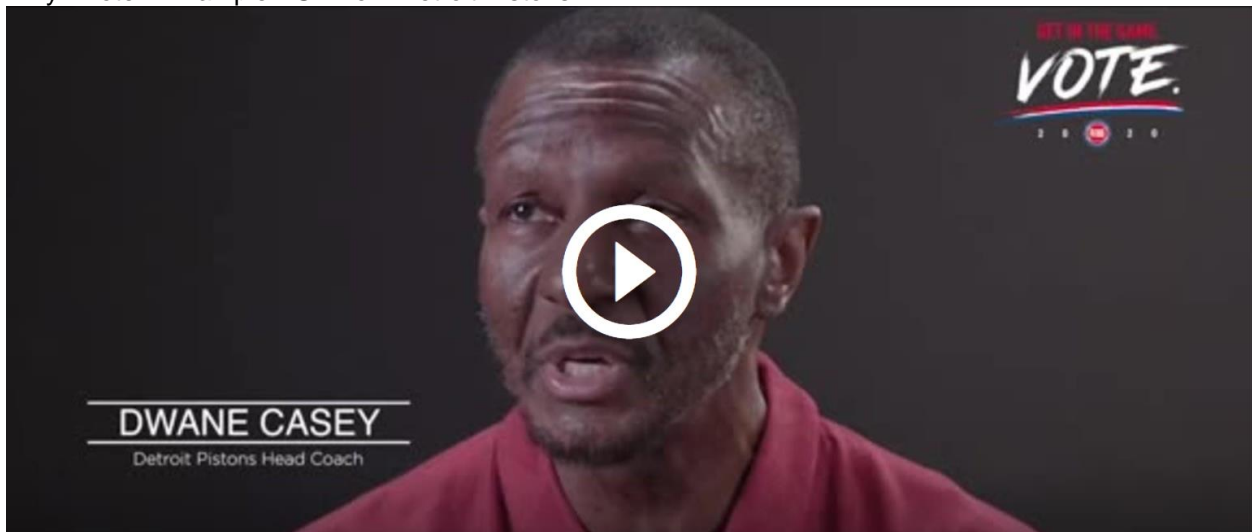
PSAs with Nonpartisan Election Information

Early Voting – Example PSA from Detroit Lions:



Link to video: <https://tr-tr.facebook.com/DetroitLions/videos/650543718998226/>

Why I Vote – Example PSA from Detroit Pistons:



Link to video: <https://www.nba.com/pistons/video/teams/pistons/2020/07/14/3324068/1594754288526-voting-campaign-coach-casey-voting-interview-v1>

Press Clippings

[Pistons, Lions, Detroit sports teams lead the way on Election Day](#) (WXYZ Detroit, Nov 2020)

[Detroit Sports Teams Partner With Michigan Secretary of State To Boost Election Turnout and Promote Voter Education](#) (Detroit Is It, Aug 2020)

[Sports venues across country in play on Election Day](#) (Associated Press, Nov 2020)

[LeBron James' group touts sports venues as mega-voting sites](#) (Associated Press, July 2020)