



STATE OF MINNESOTA
Office of Minnesota Secretary of State
Steve Simon

Nomination for the 2016 NASS IDEAS Award

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Program Title: Minnesota Vote 2016

Project Lead: Jeff Narabrook, Voter Outreach Director

Nomination Subject Area: Voter Participation

Brief program description: Minnesota Vote 2016 was created with an overall goal of returning Minnesota to its place as the number one turnout state. That goal was achieved when 74% of eligible Minnesotans voted this fall. To publicize the goal, a challenge was issued from Secretary Simon to Minnesotans to again be number one in voter turnout. This challenge led to partnerships with companies, professional sports franchises, retailers, nonprofits, educational institutions, and government agencies to get their communities ready to vote. The overall goal was to encourage voter participation, especially among eligible voters who are new to the process or who have a history of lower voter participation. The program consisted of the Students Vote 2016 high school mock election; the Minnesota College Ballot Bowl campus voter registration competition; the Pledge to Vote program to partner with organizations registering voters; partnerships with professional sports franchises; expanded educational and official materials in 11 foreign languages; online ordering of educational and outreach materials; a new toolkit to support students studying abroad; voter registration trainings; election judge recruitment efforts; outreach to military and veteran organizations; business outreach; and media placement of educational messages.

Executive Summary

History (including length of time in operation) – Describe the factors that led to the development of the program, including program goals and problems it sought to address.

Minnesota Vote 2016 was largely developed to address Minnesota's slide in voter turnout during the 2014 mid-term election. Minnesota went nine straight federal elections in a row as the top turnout state until 2014, when it slid to number six. After 2014, staff assessed the outreach program and started developing a number of new strategies, growing out of the Office's long-standing commitment to increasing voter participation. The Minnesota Vote 2016 voter outreach program ran from January to November 2016. New flagship programs were added, such as the Students Vote 2016 mock election and the College Ballot Bowl voter registration competition.

Significance – Discuss how the program exemplifies best practices in state government, including its unique, innovative or cost-effective aspects. Please consider how it supports the public policy goals of your office and assists your state office in executing its responsibilities.

Minnesota statute gives the Office of the Secretary of State the authority to "sponsor or participate in nonpartisan activities to promote voter participation in Minnesota elections and in efforts to increase voter registration and voter turnout." Overall, the Minnesota Vote 2016 program strove to build capacity among community partners to engage their own audiences (commonly referred to as "train-the-trainer") rather than having Office staff participate in direct voter engagement activities at events, as had been more common in the past. This change in strategy allowed the Office to have a much greater and broader impact on preparing the community to vote and came at a reduced overall cost to the office than previous cycles.

For example, the Pledge to Vote Program was designed to help organizations easily conduct voter outreach. Our Office provided enrollees with a voter outreach kit and basic training materials. The kits contained voter registration applications as well as "I Will Vote" pledge cards for voters whose registration was current and up-to-date. Voters who filled out a registration application or a pledge card received a postcard and text message reminder from the Office to vote in November. The program ran from June to November. 103 organizations participated, gathering 1,683 registrations/pledges to vote. The program strove to increase the scale and breadth of the Office's voter registration activities and succeeded, increasing the number of registrations gathered by 53% compared to 2014. It used minimal staff time compared to the amount needed in previous cycles for tabling and field work (about .25 FTE compared to 4 FTEs) and allowed for over 100 groups across the state to be active and effective in their voter registration efforts.

Similarly, staff gave trainings and presentations in a wide variety of contexts. Examples include professional association gatherings, meetings of citizen organizations, at human service providers, during gatherings of college student organizations, at various public gatherings, and at high schools. Topics included how to register people to vote in Minnesota, general information about the 2016 election, precinct caucuses, absentee voting, ways for people who face barriers to vote, and why voting matters, among others. This train-the-trainer model enabled a much wider audience to be prepared and registered to vote than would have been the case if the Office prioritized conducting voter registration drives directly with the public at public fairs, festivals, and events.

Program Impact/Results – Explain how this program has contributed to the improved functioning of state government (you may highlight both financial and administrative/pragmatic impacts), including its benefits to citizens and other stakeholders, including other government agencies/units.

Minnesota Vote 2016's main contribution to the improved functioning of state government was in equipping voters to be prepared to engage fully in elections, both on November 8 and in the future. This was achieved through a wide variety of initiatives:

For the future generation of voters, the Students Vote 2016 program was Minnesota's first statewide high school mock election. It was set up to allow each school to run their election as best fit their needs. The program was a great success, with 96,000 students participating in 274 high schools. Participation far exceeded expectations and feedback from schools was overwhelmingly positive: 96% indicated they would like to participate in Students Vote again. 281 high schools signed up, representing 54.5% of the 515 schools in the Office's database. These schools collectively represented 171,000 students, 67% of the entire 9-12 population in the database. The follow-through rate was very high: 274 of the 281 schools that signed up held an election. And, the feedback from students themselves was inspiring, including this quote from the Rochester Post-Bulletin:

"Ms. Gardner, that's the first time someone from our family voted," said Guydan Hajsakor, 17, a Syrian refugee who has been in the U.S. about 11 months. "You know, my dad never went for the Syrian presidential race because he said it's a big lie." He said he plans to vote in the next presidential election when he'll be a citizen. "It's a big deal, your voice is heard," Hajsakor said. "When I'm a citizen, my voice will matter."

The Minnesota College Ballot Bowl was a voter registration competition where campuses across the state competed against one another over the course of several weeks to register the most students. Seventy-five campuses across the state signed up to participate. Campuses began collecting registrations when students returned for the fall semester, and had until October 17 (the pre-registration deadline) to do their work. 21,386 registrations were gathered and reported as a result of the program. The actual number of registrations is likely higher—many schools did not have reliable systems for tracking their work. This program likely drove down the number students needing to register on Election Day, thereby reducing voter lines and wait times.

Secretary Simon approached Minnesota's major sports franchises and asked that they each consider producing a five-second and 15-second TV spot with star players to promote voting and voter registration. The Minnesota Vikings (Alex Boone), Minnesota Twins (Brian Dozier, Joe Mauer, Kyle Gibson), Minnesota Timberwolves (featuring Karl Anthony-Towns), Minnesota Lynx (Lindsey Whalen), and the Minnesota Wild (Charlie Coyle) each produced spots. Between September and November 8, the Office partnered with Fox Sports North which aired the spots (at no cost to the Office) a total of 900 times.

Educational and promotional materials were dramatically expanded in 2016 to include new topics as well as content in 11 foreign languages. Factsheets were provided on 13 voting-related topics and printed on half-sheets. Nearly all factsheets were translated into 11 languages. The 'Minnesota Vote 2016 Overview card' (5.5" x 8.5") highlighted key election dates, eligibility requirements and important voter tools at mnvotes.org. A 'Register to Vote Here' poster (22" x 26") that highlighted voter eligibility requirements was created and displayed at voter registration drives at businesses, nonprofits, events, and colleges. Colorful, self-adhesive cling (7" x 7") window clings were made to promote "Vote November 8" and the Office's website, mnvotes.org. Organizational partners and members of the public could order these items on the website, at no cost to them, and have them shipped directly to their location. Over 200 organizations placed a total of 480 orders through the fulfillment vendor. Materials were translated into Amharic, Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Oromo, and Karen, in addition to continuing and expanding materials in Russian, Hmong, Somali, Spanish, and Vietnamese. A section on the website was created for each language containing five main pages.

In order to reach an even broader audience, the Office partnered with the Minnesota Broadcasters Association Partnership (MBA) to make media placement of educational messages. This partner provided guaranteed airtime value and accurate tracking of 15-second and 30-second radio and TV PSAs (provided in male and female voices, and in English and Spanish), and a 3-to-1 ROI on paid time. The radio spots ran at least 5,824 times across 208 stations and the TV spots ran at least 180 times across 9 stations. This paid placement cost \$8,500. In addition, the MBA provided a voter outreach resource guide to all of its members in support of election- and voting-related news programming and community outreach, and recorded a TV and radio interview with Secretary Simon for broadcast on its Access Minnesota public affairs programming for members.

Through Minnesota Vote 2016, the Office led a robust election judge recruitment effort. Outreach was conducted to many groups which had not previously been approached. There was wider statewide geographic outreach, a greater push for more multilingual applicants (particularly with those organizations that would more likely have multilingual applicants), greater targeting of youth for trainee opportunities, and greater targeting of young adults.

A special toolkit was developed to educate students studying abroad how to vote while away. Staff built a relationship with the Minnesota Study Abroad Professional Association to develop and disseminate tools to all study abroad programs in Minnesota colleges and universities.

To engage military members and veterans, Secretary Simon met with leaders from the Minnesota National Guard and Department of Military Affairs to brief them on the project, solicit participation, and request contacts to work with. In addition to working directly through military service organizations, staff contacted and utilized communications infrastructure of several federally approved veteran charter organizations and their supporting auxiliary units. These channels supported outreach to veterans as well as current service members and their families. The Office provided outreach briefs to approximately twenty military-focused organizations in Minnesota which included recommended messages, platforms, and timing for military members and their families residing in Minnesota, as well as those residing or serving outside of their precinct.

In 2016, the Office conducted outreach to the business community that targeted umbrella business organizations; the state's largest 50 employers; chambers of commerce; and businesses that deliver specific public audiences. Umbrella organizations such as Greater MSP sent a memo in the CEO's e-newsletter to members about the Office's resources with a link to the Office's member-only custom voter outreach resource guide. Staff contacted and conducted outreach to the state's 50 largest employers. In the summer, Secretary Simon conducted direct calls to presidents of about a dozen larger chambers of commerce as well as those he had recently visited and encouraged them to use outreach materials and promote them to their members. An email with solicitation and resources was sent to database of more than 140 chambers the week following Labor Day.

Summary

While there is no silver bullet when it comes to increasing voter turnout, Minnesota Vote 2016 was built around partnering with organizations around the state with a robust audience and a loud voice, and empowering and resourcing community groups to get their constituencies registered and out to vote, all at a lower cost than in previous cycles. The strategy paid off, concurrently bringing Minnesota back to number one in the nation in voter turnout and engaging Minnesota's next generation of voters.