

# Promoting Civic Engagement in the Elections Process

Ramsey County Board Workshop  
May 23, 2017

# The Challenge

Ramsey County residents register and vote at a disproportionately low rate compared to the rest of Minnesota

- This phenomenon reduces our impact on state, federal and local elections
- It also reduces our ability to influence decision makers
- And it denies us the fair share of state resources to which our population size entitles us; some examples include:
  - Direct state spending on roads, transit and projects involving bonded debt
  - Tax policies affecting renters
  - Implicit subsidies to support development outside the urban core

Non-participation may also be a symptom of non-involvement in other community activities

Social well-being, through voter participation, may be closely related to economic prosperity

Non-participation works against the interests of those citizens who don't vote

## Voter participation varies widely

Ramsey County, and in particular parts of the City of Saint Paul, consistently lags behind the rest of the state in terms of voter participation

- 11,000 more votes were cast in District 64B (Highland) than in District 67A (Payne-Phalen, Greater East Side) in 2016
- Both districts have approximately the same population

Correlation between registration - a necessary first step - and voting

The only practical way to improve voter participation countywide is to focus on the parts of the county and segments of the population where the participation rate is low

## Factors that affect voter participation – 1

There is a correlation between demographic factors and the rate of voter registration and voter participation (from US Census Bureau)

- Age ( nationwide in November 2016)
  - 70% of 18+ voters were registered; 61% voted
  - 55% of voters aged 18-24 were registered; 43% voted
- Years of education (nationwide in November 2014)
  - Advanced degree – 79% registered; 62% voted
  - Bachelors degree – 74% registered; 53% voted
  - High school graduate – 58% registered; 34% voted
  - Not a high school graduate – 44% registered; 22% voted

## Factors that affect voter participation - 2

- Residential tenure (nationwide in November 2016)
  - Home owners – 74% registered; 67% voted
  - Renters at residence less than one year – 68% registered; 51% voted
  
- Family income (nationwide in November 2016)
  - more than \$150,000 – 86% registered; 80% voted
  - \$100,000 to \$150,000 – 84% registered; 76% voted
  - \$50,000 to \$75,000 – 77% registered; 68% voted
  - \$20,000 to \$30,000 – 64% registered; 52% voted
  
- Race and/or ethnic background (Minnesota in November 2016)
  - White – 79% registered; 71% voted
  - Black – 75% registered; 66% voted
  - Asian – 64% registered; 52% voted
  - Hispanic – 40% registered; 37% voted

## Why don't people register and vote?

- Our conversations with community groups (like the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood) indicate that the non-voters believe that the candidates are not talking to them or listening to them.
- Non-voters also tend to be outside the group of people who actively support candidates and campaigns and feel no connection to either
- Question: how do we address this perception (or reality?)
- It would be worthwhile to find out more about this phenomenon, since it may be the principal factor behind eligible persons not voting
- From the perspective of the non-voters, what changes would be necessary to persuade more people to vote, and how would things be different if they did?

## Cultural barriers to voting

People who move a lot tend not to have the documents needed or the personal contacts which would enable them to register at a polling place when voting

Many county residents do not readily trust the government

- Immigrants who come from countries where contact with the government is to be avoided
- Residents who perceive that the government does not act in their interest
- Residents who perceive that they have been harmed by government actions or inactions

Some voters may find the recent political environment intimidating and avoid voting and other interactions with government as a result

Voting not a habit among family, friends, peers

Many non-voters don't encounter people in the electoral process who look and sound like them

## Schools are key to civic education

- Develop information and activities on registration and voting that can be made an integral part of civic education in the classroom
- Work with the schools on participation in National Voter Registration Day, which is at the beginning of the school year in September
- Establish opportunities for students to see and participate in the electoral process at our polling places
- Work with the schools to make voter registration part of high school graduation



## What can't we do?

Inducements to register are prohibited by the Voting Rights Act

- McDonald's
- Taste of Minnesota

Per capita payments for registering voters are also prohibited

# What is Elections doing now?

Expanding early voting days and hours to permit working people to vote at a time and place convenient to them

- Evenings
- Weekends

Establishing more early voting locations

- 2017
  - Arlington Hills Rec Center
  - MLK Rec Center
  - Highland Golf Course
  - Owasso Building
- 2018 proposals
  - (New) Scheffer Rec Center - when it re-opens
  - Battle Creek Rec Center
  - Public Works Building – Arden Hills
  - Others?

Making mailings of voter registration materials in selected precincts

## What else could Elections be doing?

Mail every voter an absentee ballot application for each election

Bring voting services to the voters

- Establish remote office hours at selected times and locations
- Operate a Votemobile
- Agent delivery of ballots

Conduct early voting at many colleges and high schools, using (in part) student election judges

Develop and implement a strategy for county participation in National Voter Registration Day

Develop a new Bring Your Parents to Vote project

Develop agreements with community groups to provide volunteer election judges

## What else could Ramsey County be doing?

- Be the catalyst for a full spectrum of civic engagement activities
- Have all county departments interacting with the public become proactive in offering election information and registration
- Partner with community organizations carrying out services on behalf of or in conjunction with the county to register voters
- Work in coordination with the cities and school districts, particularly in Saint Paul
- Develop a public information and social media campaign

## Our strategy needs to be local and personal

- Need to make clear to the public the link between voting and actions to meet community needs
- Our efforts must be self-supported and locally focused
- Need to take advantage of the opportunities to deal directly with the voters, without going through intermediaries
- The most effective strategies provide person to person contact
- Conclusion: changes are needed - what we are doing now and have been doing has left out a large number of potential voters

## Work with our local government partners

- Make a commitment to civic education jointly by the county and our city and school district partners.
- Make our schools and libraries centers for obtaining information about the candidates and/or our local elected officials and voting
- Provide more voting services through county and local government offices and sponsored activities

## Voter registration assistance is a county responsibility

Ramsey County is required by law to offer registration assistance to persons applying for public assistance (Minn. Stat. § 256.925)

Traditionally, agency-based activities have been passive and largely ineffective – they need to be reoriented

Several county departments are in a good position to register voters

- Financial Assistance Services
- Social Services
- Workforce Solutions
- Libraries
- Community Corrections

So are some of our government-related organizations and activities

- PTA
- WIC

## Suggestions for future county activities

- Convene a joint meeting of the county board, Saint Paul city council and Saint Paul school board to discuss and develop a coordinated civic engagement strategy.
- Question: should civic engagement become part of formal part of the mission of the Elections Office?



# Questions and Discussion