HENNEPIN COUNTY
MINNESOTA

Voting Barriers in Marginalized Communities

2019

This research analyzes the qualitative perception of the election process and different voting barriers to communities with historically low voter turnout. These communities tend to be individuals who are highly mobile, experiencing homelessness, or people of color. This research is necessary because a portion of eligible voters are finding it difficult to maneuver the voting process. Our data comes from conducting 7 different focused storytelling circles held October 2018 through March 2019, with 5 to 12 participants each session. Each session lasted 2 hours and were held at different times of the days to attract a wide selection of participants. A volunteer from a specific community conducted each session at community development centers or homeless shelters while our researchers took notes. The questions were focused around voting barriers: transportation, work, information, polling places, registration, and others. The findings explained that many people in low turnout communities do not vote due to lack of information of registration, polling places, candidates, and party issues. The findings also showed accessibility issues and a general distrust of government. With this research, the goal is to create simple, yet cost-effective solutions to ease the process of voting for historically low voter turnout communities.

Contents

Introduction

As Hennepin County Elections division began to pursue using outreach and community engagement to reduce barriers to participation in the elections process, the division sought to hear from members of historically low turnout communities what barriers they experienced to engaging in the 2018 election and elections prior. Initially, the Elections division's Voter Engagement team explored the idea of an Election Knowledge Survey laid out by Claire Psarouthakis in her graduate capstone project. Psarouthakis suggested a Survey Monkey to get a sense of what people in the county knew about basic election law, their rights, and elections procedure to identify gaps in knowledge. A stakeholder analysis led the Voter Engagement team to pursue a qualitative way to study barriers including limitations in knowledge.
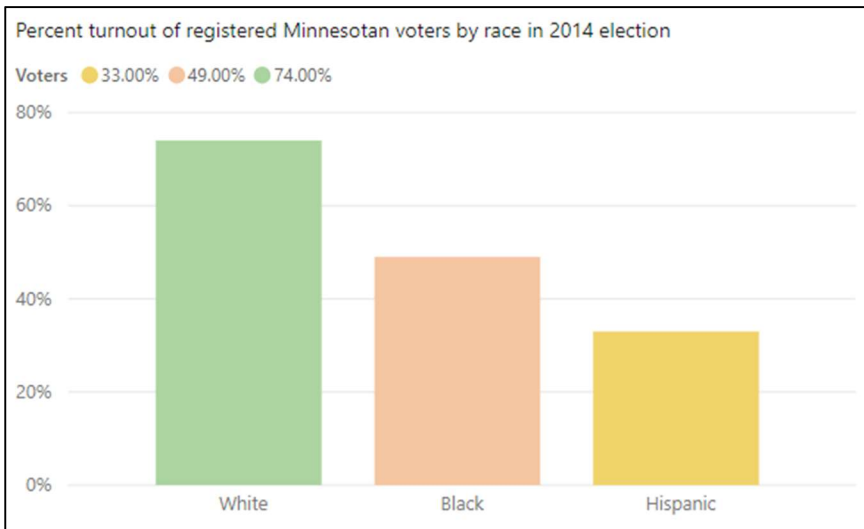
Background

Minnesota is often ranked highest on voter turnout. In the last 2 statewide elections, 2016 presidential and 2018 midterm elections, Minnesota ranked number one in voter turnout in the U.S. (Pugmire, 2018). In Hennepin County, the 2014 midterm election voter turnout was 59%; the 2016 presidential election the voter turnout was 81%, and the 2018 midterm election the voter turnout was 77%. As
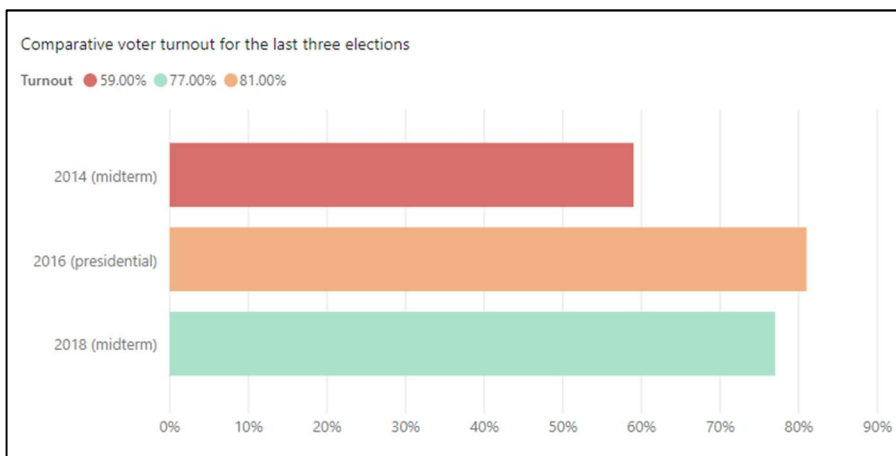
noted in the table, the midterm election reflected an 18% increase. Turnout for the 2018 midterm election is nearly the same as the turnout 2016 presidential election.

Some reasons for high turnout could be policies that make it easy to access the ballot, such as election-day registration and no-excuse absentee voting, Minnesota's culture of moralistic engagement in politics, volunteerism, and civic society, a state history of strong third-party movements, and a belief that government works (Bierschbach, 2016).

Percent turnout of registered Minnesotan voters by race in 2014 election

Voters ● 33.00% ● 49.00% ● 74.00%

[Bar chart showing White ~74%, Black ~49%, Hispanic ~33%]

Notwithstanding high voter turnout according to aggregate data, Minnesota is ranked third from the bottom in terms of Black Americans turnout in the 2014 midterm elections: 74% of registered white Minnesotans voted compared to just 49% of Black Minnesotans, and 33% among Hispanics (Russonello, 2016). Moreover, it is important to examine the correlation of poverty and voting trends. Many studies have found that the 20% of the US population with the highest income tend to have higher voter turnout (Leighley and Nagler, 2006). In fact, in the 2012 elections, there was a 33 point gap between the highest income brackets voters and lowest income bracket voters (Mcelwee, 2014).

Main Concept

The team first identified local community organizations that specialized in engagement of historically low voter turnout populations. Each organization was asked what they would like to see, how they would benefit, and what to keep in mind when engaging the communities they work with most. The team considered several options including a paper survey, online survey, and one-on-one interviews. Through a large group meeting with stakeholder organizations, the team learned that storytelling circles opened up the most options for equitable participation across identities. These storytelling circles were modeled like focus groups with an emphasis on hearing people's stories and were facilitated by someone from the community. A list of stakeholder organizations and their participation can be found in Appendix A.

Methodology

Each circle had a community partner who defined the target population, invited their community, and recommended a facilitator. As much as possible, the team kept the populations residence focused. Of participants, 86% live in Hennepin County and 14% live in surrounding areas.

The community partners were ACER (African Career, Education, and Resources): a nonprofit organization that works to improve the quality of life within African immigrant communities; NACDI (Native American Community Development Institute): a nonprofit organization that initiates projects the benefit the Native community; Catholic Charities' Opportunity Center: a day drop-in center for people experiencing homelessness or in need of support; Catholic Charities Exodus: a low-cost supportive housing units; Catholic Charities' Higher Ground: a night-by-night shelter, pay for stay floors, and longer term subsidized housing; and the SEAD (Southeast Asian Diaspora) Project: a nonprofit organization that does community building work through language and storytelling.

The target goal was between 7 and 12 people in every session to get a thorough variety of experience and insight; 57% of our sessions met this goal. The facilitators received paid training facilitated by the team to practice how to encourage equal participation and discuss the facilitation plan for the session. The facilitators were given leeway to adapt the facilitation plan as long as they addressed the main topics outlined. Appendix B contains a copy of the facilitation plan and question list used for each session. Most sessions were structured very closely to the written plan. Some sessions included structured time for participants to write, draw, or talk in pairs prior to sharing to the full group.

During the storytelling circles, the facilitators asked a progression of questions within 10 different topics: transportation, accessibility, work place, absentee, polling place, registration, lack of information, distrust in government, felonies, family, and intimidation. In the process of analyzing the collected data, the comments assigned to the 'accessibility' topic was found to overlap significantly with other categories. The 'accessibility' tag was subsequently removed from the analysis and the comments assigned to it were split between 'polling place' and 'transportation', which become 'transportation/mobility'.

At each session, there were 1-3 note takers who transcribed the conversation verbatim so that the facilitator could focus on the conversation. During each question, the note taker tracked what the comment was and who mentioned it. After the session was complete, a member of the Voter Engagement team put all the notes together to catalogue what was said. The notes were then categorized based on the larger barrier topics. For the purpose of totaling the comments, each time someone new participated, it counted towards a new tally. It was decided to tally in this way because some participants would say the same thing multiple times. The tallying system that was used accounted for this behavior. On a voluntary basis, the team also gathered demographic information about the participants; 52 out of 59 participants answered the optional demographic survey. Of the 52 respondents, some decided to not answer certain questions. This type of occurrence was coded as empty.

Data

The following paragraphs detail demographic questions that had significant findings. The survey asked 9 different questions, 5 questions are detailed below. The other 4 questions including marital status, parental status, mode of transportation, and city of residency. All of the graphs for the demographics listed in the data section can be found in Appendix C.

Race/Ethnicity

In the 7 storytelling circles, we had 59 participants; participant numbers ranged from 3-12 per session. After the storytelling session, the facilitator distributed surveys to the participants. The surveys consisted of questions asking about race/ethnicity, age group, city, parental status, marital status, transportation method, languages spoken, and frequency of voting. The respondents were also asked to share their contact information if they wanted so that the report could be distributed to them. The survey was distributed to all 59 participants with 52 responding to the survey. The category labeled as 'No Response' represent those who decided to not take the survey after the listening session. The category listed as 'Empty' represents those who responded to other questions on the survey but not the race/ethnicity question. Both the 'No Response' and 'Empty' category are used throughout all of the charts. Of the 52 responses, 47 answered the question, "What is your race/ethnicity?" As seen in the graph, the top 2 categories were Black (18 participants) and Native American (9 participants), which makes up almost half of the participants.

Age

The ages of the respondents were separated into groups. While the ages of the respondents are relatively dispersed, the largest age group was 51-60 years old (17 respondents). The age question was answered by all who took the survey; therefore, there is not an empty category.

Language Fluency

The number of languages that respondents could speak ranged from 1 to 3 or more. Most of the participants (39 of the 52 respondents) only spoke 1 language, being English. There were 6 respondents that spoke 2 languages, one of them being English and the other language being either Hmong, Spanish, Ojibwe, or Arabic. 2 respondents listed that they spoke 2 other languages in addition to English: French and German, and Spanish and Italian.

Frequency of Voting

The respondents were also asked the question of how often they vote. Most had voted before (33 respondents) and 10 respondents said they vote in every election. Of the 52 survey respondents, 7 said they had never voted before, which is almost 12% of the respondents. While analyzing the data, it

became clear that many respondents do not vote due to a multitude of reasons. Throughout the listening circle, the researchers asked pointed questions to discover why respondents do not vote.

Results

Our research examined 10 barrier groups the respondents were able to respond to: transportation, accessibility, work place, absentee, polling place, registration, lack of information, distrust in government, felonies, family, and intimidation. The intimidation barrier examined if voters felt threatened in the polling places. Only 2 people said that they felt intimidated. Within the family barrier, the volunteers asked if the voters did not vote due to family values or historical family actions. Only 3 respondents shared this similar barrier. The workplace barrier focused on the ability to leave work to vote or get approval to take time off for voting. While Minnesota law explicitly allows time off of work to vote, 7 respondents responded that difficulty taking time off was a barrier to them voting. The absentee voting barrier asked if they knew about this option or if it made sense. There were 8 participants that wanted more information. The registration barrier examined the ease of registering to vote and the understanding of laws accompanying it; 15 respondents commented on the difficulty of registering.
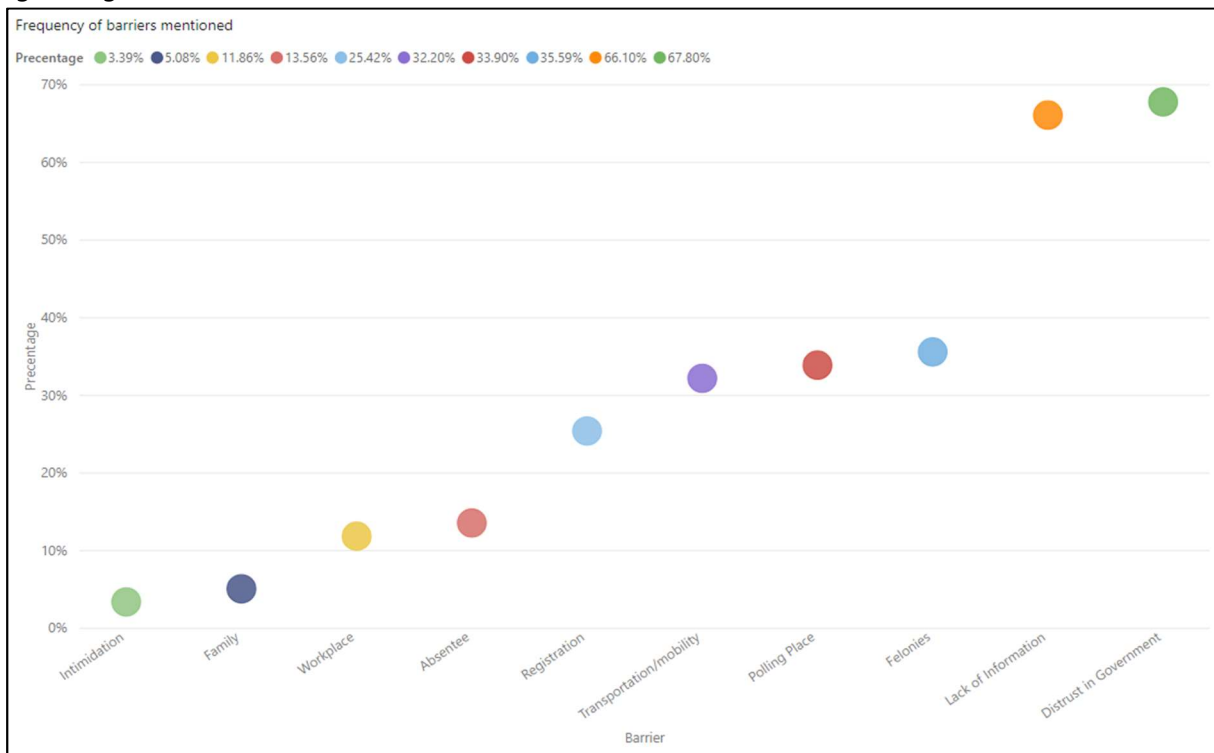
The top 5 barriers were distrust in government, lack of information, felonies, polling place, and transportation/mobility. Transportation/mobility focused on external factors that affected ease of physical access to the polling place, of which 19 respondents identified barriers. The topic of polling place questioned how the polling place operated and if they had any troubles locating where to vote. There were 20 respondents who agreed with this. The volunteers also asked about felonies which questioned if having a past felony made it difficult to vote and if the process was understood about

how to vote again. This topic received 21 responses. The lack of information focused on the education needed to vote and the difficulty to receive that information as some participants did not have access to television or computers. A larger amount of participants responded to this question; of the 59 respondents, 39 agreed with this. The most commented on topic was the distrust in government which focused on some participants' decision to not vote due to the belief that their vote does not count and distrust rooted in historical experiences. There were 40 respondents who agreed with this. As shown in the graph below, the top 5 mentioned barriers were commented on at least once in every story telling circle.

Top five barriers mentioned
● Distrust in Government ● Lack of Information ● Felonies ● Polling Place ● Transportation/mobility
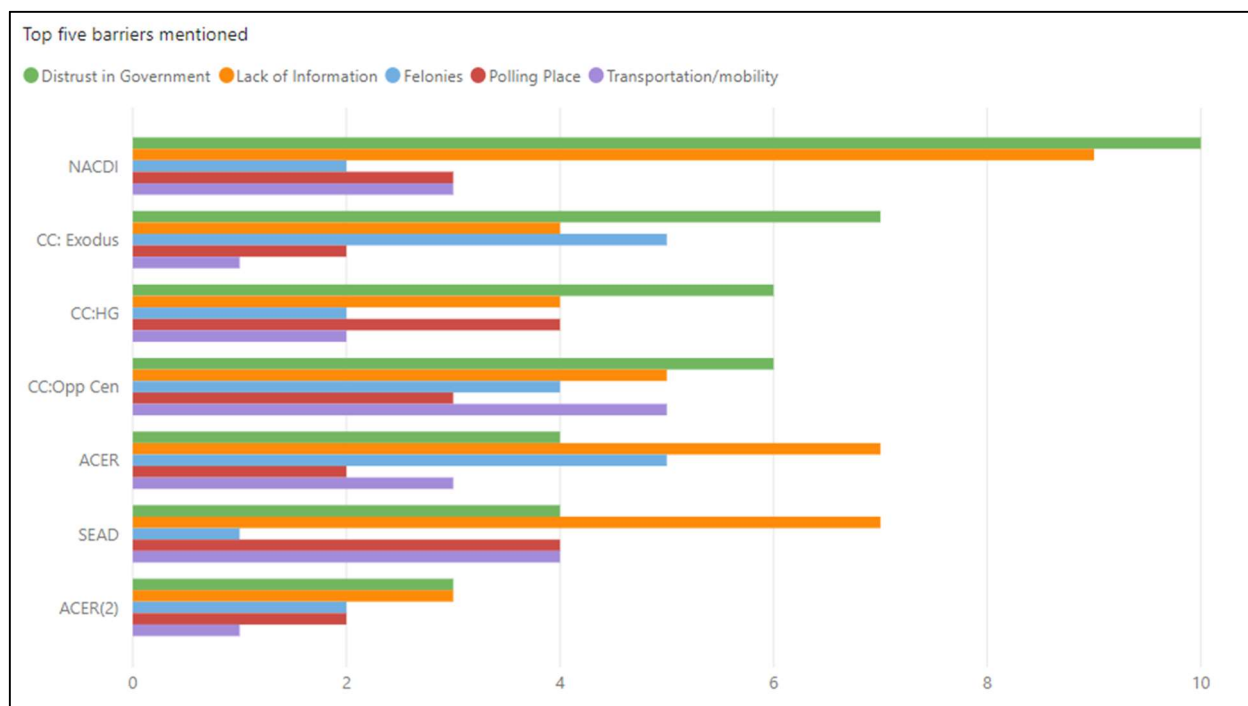
Many participants noted a distrust in government as a barrier to their successful voting. To illustrate, a participant from the NACDI's storytelling circle cited historical trauma as a reason for distrusting U.S. government agencies in the voting process, stating: "Definitely, I'm not going to vote. They are gonna want some blood next. When you look at our history, it was horrible. We had our hair cut and they changed our names. When it comes to stuff with the government, voting isn't a top tier. I'm worried about my kids. I could care less about voting." A participant from the SEAD Project's storytelling circle illuminated how distrust in government displays itself in a refugee experience, saying, "It stems deeper than language barriers. My grandparents say their vote doesn't matter. It's deeper than that. Southeast Asians have always been oppressed by the government. There's this deep trauma that says you shouldn't trust the government." Some participants expressed that they trusted the elections system as a whole, but they didn't trust the candidates on the ballot to keep their campaign promises or consider their communities' needs once elected. Others noted that they have difficulty trusting the absentee voting process.

There were 39 participants that noted lack of information as a barrier. This category included any information that was misunderstood or unknown (e.g. when Election Day is, ways to vote, rights related to time off work to vote, the difference between the primary and the general elections). Notably, at least one participant from every storytelling session spoke of not knowing or understanding what was on the ballot; including who the candidates are, the parties, the issues, and the role of various offices they were voting on. One participant from NACDI noted "I still don't know certain things, like what the commissioner does, and how they serve our communities. And the public schools, I don't know why they are so important for voting time. When people are promoting voting, they don't explain anything." There were also several complaints of lack of information and clarity about the voter registration process, particularly Election Day Registration requirements. There were several notes of desire for voter engagement and education to occur year-round so that people could become familiar with the nuances of the process, rather than seasonal engagement that is typical for campaigns and nonprofit organizations. Several participants also noted that it was more impactful for them to learn about voting, candidates, and politics in a way that was written in plain language and culturally specific, particularly when language translation is needed, and delivered by someone they know and trust in their own community. One person from NACDI shared how language and terminology can cloud the voting process: "Language that professionals speak is a barrier. I have had conversations with some of these people, and I have asked them, what did you just say to me? I know that people can use these terms because they have learned these terms, I'm not saying that they need to dumb it down."

Felonies were mentioned as a barrier for a participant or someone in a participant's family or community 21 times. Laws regarding voter eligibility due to criminal record vary state by state in the United States. In Minnesota, voters who have been convicted of a felony must complete their sentence in entirety, including time served in prison, probation, and parole, before they are eligible to vote. Several participants mentioned confusion about the law in Minnesota and that they had assumed that a voter was permanently ineligible to vote once they had been convicted of a felony sentence, like in other states. A similar opinion throughout all listening circles can be summed up by one comment from Catholic Charities Exodus: "If you're not in jail and even if you're on probation, you should be able to vote." A participant from ACER said, "They have been misled on several occasions on voting rights and other things. They have been told by people in the past that they can't vote because they are an ex-felon, even though they can vote." Participants mentioned feeling as though the information was intentionally kept from them when their rights were restored.

There were 32.9% of respondents that mentioned barriers experienced at the polling place with participants often mentioning underrepresentation of the community in the election judge pool, set up of the polling place, and experiencing under-trained or misinformed election judges. Many respondents expressed a desire for polling places to feel welcoming. A participate from the SEAD project commented, "Election judges need to be interracial. Everyone needs to see themselves reflected." Another participant from the same circle mentioned, "There weren't enough interpreters and then the young people who came as interpreters couldn't interpret for more than 1 elder at a time, making it a long process and irritating the elders." A different comment about the security of the polling places was from Catholic Charities Opportunity Center: "There is not enough security at the polling places. People get frustrated because of lines and confusion, so there can be pushing and shoving." Strategies for this included clear and helpful signage, easy options for people in wheelchairs,

people who speak multiple languages and reflect their community as election judges, having a play area for kids, treating Election Day as a celebration, and letting people help each other with their ballots. There were several comments about the potential impact of making Election Day a holiday.

As mentioned earlier, after examining the data it was decided to create a new category that captured the transportation/mobility issues surrounding elections. Transportation/mobility focused on external factors that affected ease of physical access to the polling place, which was mentioned by 19 participants. One participant at the storytelling circle at Catholic Charities' Opportunity Center shared how for them, getting food and a shower are priorities before waiting in line to vote. Two other participants in the same listening circle mentioned, "Not everyone can take care of themselves, they need more support," and, "Many of them have been shuffled around waiting for things to happen, but not a lot has been happening. It's waiting game getting around to fill in their schedule." Another participant at Catholic Charities' Higher Ground pointed out time and institutional limitations, expressing that voting is not easy and they [*sic*] make it hard to fit into your schedule. Finally a participant from Catholic Charities Exodus brought up the struggles of addiction saying, "A lot of addicts miss voting. A lot of them will want to vote on Election Day and then miss the election because they were high. They're overlooked. That's one reason why we miss a lot of voters."

Concluding Thoughts

Recommendations

The experiences and stories of the 59 participants who shared in the storytelling circles affirm that people in historically low turnout communities are indeed experiencing barriers to voting at many levels, from individual to institutional. Many of these barriers are tangible and can be addressed and better understood with concerted attention and committed resource allocation to the following:

- Use storytelling circle model to conduct year-round interactive data collection. Pair the data collection with opportunities for learning, creating space for different sharing and learning styles (e.g. pair sharing, worksheets, drawing, etc.) so that process might be easier and more accommodating for persons less prone to share during large group discussion.

- Empower community members by providing the pertinent information and resources to engage their peers and families using clear visuals, plain language, and translated communications materials to do year-round education and engagement.

- Involve community members in changes to elections procedures and partner to inform communities least represented about changes first.

- Encourage political parties and campaigns to engage in year-round community engagement in underrepresented communities to increase trust in candidates and elected officials.

- Institutionalize Election Day a holiday as a way to increase participation and take away time barrier, as recommended by several participants. This could require a county ordinance establishing the day as a paid holiday for staff and an encouragement to other public and private institutions to follow suit. There are several municipalities around the country who have established general election days as holidays.

- Advertise accessible voting equipment options at polling locations and other policies and procedures already in place to make voting in Minnesota easy and accessible, such as no excuse absentee voting and Election Day registration.

- Help cities increase number of multilingual election judges to ensure that voters who come to polls will have the translation help they need.

Limitations

It is necessary to reflect that this study is limited in its small sample size and therefore cannot be generalized to the greater population. The researchers also understand that the process for collecting information, with note takers being a part of the Hennepin County Elections Team, may implicitly influence storytelling circle participants' discussions. Similarly, storytelling circles—as with other group data collection methods—may experience groupthink tendencies that could dilute or silence non-normative (according to the particular storytelling group) experiences of the voting process. Finally, the

researchers understand that there could have been more equal representation of Hennepin County's communities in the storytelling circles.

Conclusion

Underrepresented voters in Hennepin County report that they primarily do not vote due to a distrust in the government and elected officials and a lack of knowledge about elections, candidates, and elected offices. Restrictions on eligibility due to felony status, language resources in the polling place, and barriers to transportation and successfully making it to the polling places also contribute to Hennepin County residents being unable to access the election process. By taking action to address these specific issues, Hennepin County Elections would be able to significantly reduce barriers to registering to vote and voting for historically low turnout communities.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Below is a list of organizations that gave consultation and participated in this process and how they participated.

African Career and Education Resources, Inc.	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting, hosted 2 storytelling circles
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)	Stakeholder meeting
Asian American Organizing Project	Stakeholder meeting
CAPI USA	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting
Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis	Hosted 3 storytelling circles
City of Minneapolis Neighborhood and Community Relations	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting
Common Cause Minnesota	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting, co-formed facilitator plan and question list
COPAL (Communidades Organizado el Poder y la Accion Latina)	Stakeholder meeting
League of Women Voters Golden Valley	Attended large group meeting, co-formed facilitation plan and question list
League of Women Voters Minnesota	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting
League of Women Voters Minnetonka, Eden Prairie, Hopkins	Attended large group meeting
MN Compass	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting to consult on data collection
MN Voice	Attended large group meeting
MN Youth Collective	Stakeholder meeting
Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI)	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting, hosted 1 storytelling circle

Reviving Islamic Sisterhood of Empowerment (RISE)	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting
SEAD (Southeast Asian Diaspora) Project	Stakeholder meeting, attended large group meeting, hosted 1 storytelling circle
Voices for Racial Justice	Stakeholder meeting

Appendix B

Facilitator Plan

Things in italics should be asked or shared with the group.

6:00 – Circles Start with Reflection

- The facilitators set up guidelines for the circles.

- Go around and do a brief name introduction.

- Hennepin County Election representative does a brief introduction of the Elections office and the larger research project.

- You will first start out by asking reflective questions about the circle's experiences with voting:

    o *If you haven't voted, why?*

    o *What kinds of things keep you from voting?*

    o This can be a time in the session where individuals are reflecting and may take time to write down different things that prevent them from voting.

- You will take note of the most important and frequent topics that come up with individuals. (If needed, you can write them down, or have the note takers keep track of the list)

AT THIS POINT YOU SHOULD REFERENCE THE QUESTIONS LIST

6:15 – Circles should move on to topic questions

- We will now move on to the topics that were mentioned the most in your reflections as barriers to voting.

- You should use your own judgement and follow the flow of the conversation to figure out what questions to ask.

    o We want to touch on all the topics, so you can do that in a way that makes you and the group most comfortable.

- Make sure to ask questions and respond less, we want participants to share as much as possible.

7:45 – Closing questions

- You will guide the group toward the end of the storytelling session.
- Ask: *"Did we miss anything that is still on your mind right now? Anymore thoughts you didn't get to share yet?"*
- Ask if there are any questions.

Questions List

Transportation

- What difficulties, if any, have you experienced when trying to go to your polling place?
- Has transportation ever stopped you from going to vote, if so how?
- From the minute you wake up to when you go to sleep, what does your transit look like on Tuesdays?
- What resources do you know of that can take you to the polls on Election Day if you can't find transit there?
    - o Do you know that your local DFL or Republican Party can drive you to the polls?

Polling Place

- What does an accessible polling place look like to you?
- If you have voted, is the current setup of polling places useful? Is it easy to navigate or stressful, and why?
- What type of services would make voting easier if available at a polling place?

Documentation for registering

- Have you ever been unable to register to vote at the polls? What was the reason?
- Do you know that you can register to vote online?
- Do you know what documentation is needed to register at your polling location on Election Day?

Early/Absentee Voting

- What options do you know about to vote on days other than Election Day?

Knowledge Barriers/Lack of Information/Education

- What do you wish you knew about voting but currently do not know?

- Do you know what the offices/elected positions do?

- Have you ever decided not to vote because you did not know enough about the office or the candidates?

- Does lack of information or too much information affect whether you vote?

- Have you ever not voted because you didn't think it would make a difference?

- Where do you get your news on elections and in general? What media/platforms do you get most of your news from?

Trust in Government

- Have you had experiences in your birth country or here that have caused you to question voting?

- Do you believe the voting process could be made more trustworthy? If yes, how so?

Assistance/Accessibility

- Do you see the current accessibility and translation tools we have in place as useful? Are there other things you wish we had at polling places?

- Would having more individuals from your community working at poll sites be more helpful? Why?

- Are language barriers holding you back from voting in any way?

Workforce

- What concerns, if any, do you have about asking for time off from work to go vote?

- Tell us about your experience asking for time off from work, in general. If you haven't, what has stopped you?

Family Commitments

- What family commitments have kept you from voting, if any?

- How can polling places be more child friendly?

- Does anyone in your family or in your life that is close to you vote?
    - How important is voting to the people close to you in your life?

Past Barriers

- Have you ever been confused at the polls or when trying to vote?

Intimidation

- Tell us of an experience, if any, of feeling unsafe at polling places or while voting?
- Do you feel that voting, in general, is unsafe? What does unsafe mean for you?
- Do you feel like there is any effort trying to prevent you from voting?
- What would make you feel safer at the polls?

Felony Conviction

- Ask it by broadly asking about someone else that they may know like a family member or friend. Ask about whether parole officers let them know about voting.
    - Have any of your friends or family been unable to vote because of a felony conviction?
    - How did they learn they could not vote?
    - How did they learn when their voting rights were restored? Do you know if their parole officer told them they could vote once they were off paper (no longer on parole or probation)?

Appendix C
Below is the demographic breakdown of all participants.

Number of langauges spoken

Empty
3 or more
2
No Re...
1

List of languages spoken

Arabic, English
Hmong, English
Empty
3 or more
No Response
English

Frequency of voting

Empty
Never Voted Before
No Response
Vote in Every Ele...
Voted Before