

# Election 2008: More Organizations Engaging More Voters

by Bridgette Rongitsch

**L**IKE MANY NONPROFITS, THE Minneapolis Highrise Representative Council (MHRC), found its on-site social services on the chopping block in late 2003. A small, grassroots tenant organization, MHRC represents more than 5,000 low-income, elderly, and disabled residents living in 40 public high-rise buildings throughout Minneapolis. City budget cuts were on the table that would severely undermine MHRC's tenant-led programs, which included a diversity initiative, a tenant crime-watch program, and a resident management program of on-site laundry facilities.

While civic and voter engagement had never been a priority for MHRC, proposed cuts suddenly made community involvement a necessity. Residents realized that they lacked the clout to advocate for their rights and to prevent cuts to services unless public officials knew that they voted in meaningful numbers.

MHRC began to organize. With help from the Minnesota Participation Project (MPP), a nonpartisan voter engagement initiative of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, the group mobilized for action through various activities:

- recruited and trained residents to serve as voter registrars in each of 40 high-rise buildings;
- organized community events to discuss the issues facing their residents;
- met individually with each resident and meticulously built lists;

- organized transportation in groups to the polls on Election Day, and
- ensured that elected officials knew about their efforts.

It paid off, big-time. Not only were service cuts taken off the table, but high-rise residents got to know one another better, developing several trusted leaders and advocates for the interests of high-rise residents as a whole. In turn, this experience demonstrated that *who votes matters* and that building power within a nonprofit community can dramatically affect people's lives.

## Nonprofit Voter Engagement in 2008

The momentum concerning the 2008 presidential election is palpable. There is a sense that everyone everywhere must be involved in some way, and nonprofits are no exception.

While for years nonprofits with advocacy and social-justice missions have interacted with people and encouraged them to be active and informed voters, a larger set of human-service providers and neighborhood groups has now begun to dip its toes into the veritable ocean of voter and civic engagement opportunities. And like MHRC, these nonprofits have begun to see results, from greater clout for their advocacy efforts to increased empowerment for their communities. The essential flexibility of nonprofit voter engagement means that it can easily be integrated into an organization's daily work and

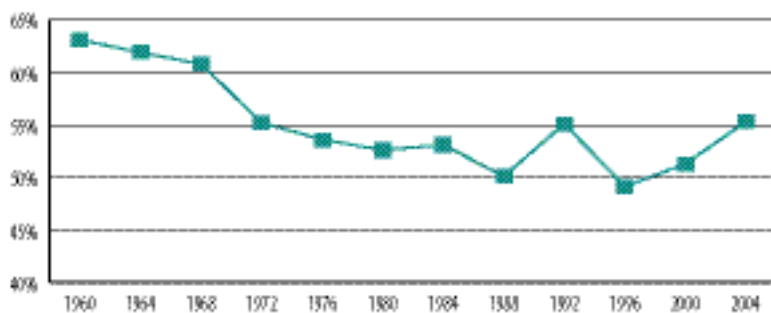
can be effective at both low and high levels of activity.

Most nonprofits lack the time and money to create an entirely new program to engage communities, but they can leverage their inherent civic assets and trusting relationships with their communities to integrate voter engagement into their daily work. A food pantry in Boston, for example, will post "Vote Today" signs in its facility as a reminder, while a community health center in Albuquerque will register all its patients to vote at intake, and a group of nonprofits serving the disability community in Minnesota will host picnic and policy fairs for the self-advocates to meet the candidates running for the state house. Regardless of the level of activity, the country's 501(c)(3) nonprofit sector will have an impact in this election. Even starting small can help organizations build their capacity to further integrate voter engagement into their ongoing work.

## The Origins of Nonprofit Voter Engagement

Using the connections and goodwill of organizations to engage voters is not a new strategy. During our nation's first century, civic associations such as the Grange (a farm-based group) and the Odd Fellows (an immigrant-based group) played a major role in encouraging voting and activism. They educated members about the issues of the day.

Figure 1: Percentage of Turnout of Voting-Age Population, 1960–2004



Source: Federal Election Commission. Data drawn from Congressional Research Service reports, Election Data Services Inc., and State Election Offices.

As more Americans gained the right to vote in the post-Civil War period, political parties increased efforts to depress or dilute voting to help their candidates. Voter suppression took many forms: through property requirements, registration and poll taxes, literacy tests, disqualification based on criminal record, and threats or acts of violence. The League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a variety of civic reformers led campaigns to expand the franchise: agitating for suffrage, emancipation, and ending wealth and property requirements tied to political participation.

But after the main force of the civil rights movement passed, nonprofit involvement in election activity waned, partly in response to congressional action to inhibit nonprofit participation in elections. During the 1960s, Ford Foundation grants supported several voter registration drives in low-income and minority communities. Some influential members of Congress viewed these efforts as targeted and partisan, specifically those preceding the election of Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of Cleveland. The Tax Reform Act of 1969 increased regulation of all kinds on private foundations, including making it difficult for private foundations to fund voter registration (requiring that any grantee register voters in at least five states). Most nonprofits and foundations felt the chill and stepped away from participation in elections—regardless of what was permissible.

Coincidentally or not, U.S. voter turnout declined to historically low levels during the 1970s (see figure 1). Lower-income and newer Americans were the least likely to vote. The lack of electoral competition, rise of money in politics, and reduced voting age all depressed turnout. The country lost its place among the top 100 democracies in voter turnout, with widening voting participation differences based on income, education, and age.

But by 2000, the tide of nonprofit political inaction began to shift. A deepening frustration with cuts in funding for state and local government services left nonprofits facing a greater demand for services and less funding to accomplish their work. These developments were accompanied by a growing awareness that gaps in voter turnout mirrored widening disparities in income. A number of nonprofits concluded that low voter turnout undercut their missions, services, and advocacy. Without the base of voters to hold elected officials accountable, advocacy became an increasingly defensive exercise.

Enter the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. Organized voter suppression and a compromised election infrastructure in Florida, Ohio, and elsewhere led to a widespread belief that U.S. democracy was in trouble.

Finally, nonprofits began participating in elections because they realized that their deepest concentration is in lower-turnout districts and that they

serve largely underrepresented communities. This wide and deep base among local communities represents millions of unreached potential voters.

### Nonpartisanship: Harmful or Helpful?

While conventional wisdom holds that nonprofits are hamstrung by requirements to remain nonpartisan during electoral contests, these requirements are in fact beneficial for nonprofits striving to engage alienated or inactive potential voters. The nonpartisan requirement is a welcome mat for new and younger voters turned off by the overly partisan nature of campaigns. It is this required nonpartisanship that allows 501(c)(3) organizations to work alongside other nonpartisan entities and secretaries of state. These relationships have enormous potential to build a more active democracy by engaging and including all communities.

Early evidence from the new initiatives in nonprofit voter engagement indicates serious untapped potential, but voting isn't enough. Real change requires a wide range of mobilization and engagement efforts. But because elected officials have so much information and awareness about which communities vote, they won't address the issues of nonprofits and communities until these communities turn out to vote in higher numbers. And of course, that increased engagement requires trust in the value of voting but also verification that our voting systems accurately include and count eligible voters.

Since its initial success in 2004, MHRC has continued to make voter and civic engagement a core focus of its work. It coordinates activities with MPP for technical assistance and branded nonpartisan vote materials. Barb Harris, the executive director of MHRC, explains the organization's involvement. "It was no longer enough to speak with residents who were in danger of being evicted and give them the contact information of the person at the housing authority to whom they could go to plead their individual

In 2008, nonprofits have more resources and options available to engage at any level. The Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network (NVEN) has developed nonpartisan resources, such as *A Human Service Provider's Toolkit to Voter Engagement* and *A Guide to Hosting a Nonprofit Candidate Forum*, among other how-to fact sheets and guides, specifically for 501(c)(3) nonprofits. These materials are free for nonprofits and can be accompanied by free webinar trainings and a national nonprofit voting Web site with jurisdiction-specific election information for all 50 states (see [www.nonprofitvote.org](http://www.nonprofitvote.org)). All these guides and trainings are intended not only to instruct nonprofits on how to do the work, but also to make voter engagement easy to integrate into an organization's ongoing work.

case," she says. "Minneapolis was in a housing crisis, and we needed to collectively address the fact that there was not enough affordable housing."

In the 2004 presidential race as well as the 2005 mayoral and the 2006 midterm elections, MHRC educated and mobilized its residents. It hosted highly attended candidate forums, including a 2006 forum with the candidates for Minneapolis's hotly contested 5th Congressional District race. Its massive forum turnout shone a spotlight on the issues for Minneapolis's low-income and immigrant populations. Residents had the opportunity to ask candidates questions about affordable housing, safety, transportation, voting rights, and the economy. On Election Day, MHRC mobilized its community with "Vote Today" signs in Korean, Somali, and Spanish. In 2006 those precincts in which MHRC public housing was the only form of public housing available saw turnout gains of as much as 42 percent, far exceeding gains in neighboring precincts or in the city as a whole. And while impressive turnout has certainly

helped Minneapolis's homelessness and housing community advocate effectively, Harris says that there is an even more rewarding outcome. "This entire experience has been incredibly motivating to us: to our constituent-led board and staff, it reinforces self-empowerment. Through partnering with other nonprofits in other interest areas to engage voters, we have been reenergized for our work. By participating in this type of leadership and organizing, we become more connected to public life, and you can just see the cynicism and the stigmatism begin to be replaced with empowerment and pride. We come out of the shadows as immigrants, as low-income people, as residents of public housing, and we fight for our rights."

MHRC is one example in a growing movement of hundreds of organizations across the country, along with others like OhioVOTES, Everybody Vote Pennsylvania, and the Michigan Participation Project. These projects provide state-specific materials, training, technical assistance, and mini-grants to their respective state's nonprofit sector. The Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network (NVEN), an organization dedicated to expanding the role of nonprofits in elections, likes to call the nonprofit sector "the sleeping giant" of democracy. This sector has the power to become a catalyst for a dramatic increase in voter participation. Nonpartisan nonprofit voter engagement is at the forefront of revitalizing America's democracy one nonprofit, and one voter, at a time.

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