



Over the past several years, community nonprofits across Pennsylvania have been in the trenches trying to ensure that all citizens have access to voting, and 2022 was another pivotal time for the work and democracy's future. By Jeffery Fraser

THE VOTERS' VOICE

When Pennsylvania adopted election-reform Act 77 in October 2019, it was reason to celebrate for groups whose work includes making sure all of the state's citizens exercise their diverse voices in shaping what Abraham Lincoln described as government "of the people, by the people and for the people." They've had little time for a victory lap since.

Within months, a presidential election, the need to familiarize voters with election reforms—including no-excuse voting by mail—and a pandemic that restricted their traditional means of outreach were upon them. At the same time, state and congressional districts were being redrawn in ways that could profoundly influence election outcomes.

Three years later, their work appears to have paid off. Turnout in this year's midterm election topped 2018 statewide turnout, making Pennsylvania one of only eight states where more voters went to the polls, according to a Washington Post elections analysis. But the work is far from done.

Voting still isn't a simple task in Pennsylvania. It requires registration; knowledge of ward, precinct and polling place; and an understanding of how to apply for a mail-in ballot and other rules and instructions. Pending lawsuits are challenging no-excuse voting by mail, creating uncertainty around that option and the logistics of voting in general. Adding a rule that would demand voters produce a government-approved identification card to cast their ballots is a topic of noisy political debate.

Gaps in voter registration leave certain groups underrepresented at the ballot box, particularly people of color and low-income residents. Moreover, although this year's election results are still fresh, they will have national, statewide and local impact because voters have elected members of Congress and the state House and Senate, a governor, and countywide officeholders whose decisions will influence the quality of life of their constituents down to the quality of the air they breathe and the water they drink.

Jeff Fraser is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. His last story for h ran in Issue 1 of this year and explored how the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Hazelwood is being transformed by residents, nonprofits, foundations, businesses and universities that are working together to ensure that changes stretch beyond redeveloping a former mill site on the community's riverfront.

Much of the work of protecting and improving access to voting and rallying Pennsylvanians to engage in civic life has been done by community nonprofit organizations across the state, many of which have small staffs and rely on volunteers and philanthropic support to get the job done.

The Heinz Endowments supports such efforts through a three-year-old Democracy and Civic Participation initiative intended to help build the capacity of the nonprofits to fulfill their missions.

“Our goal is not to influence the outcome of an election but to ensure voices are heard and there is full participation in elections and civic life,” said Andrew McElwaine, the Endowments’ vice president of Sustainability.

A fundamental step is getting more people to register to vote, particularly historically marginalized populations, which is a never-ending job. More than 800,000 eligible voters of color in Pennsylvania were unregistered in 2020, according to an analysis by Pennsylvania Voice, a statewide partnership of

knocking on doors and registering immigrants at their citizenship ceremonies to using social media and other means of digital outreach they honed during the pandemic. Much of the groups’ influence has been rooted in the fact that they have worked within communities of color, are familiar to residents and have developed relationships that lead to trust.

“We’ve seen in the work of our partners that a message from someone you trust is more effective than a TV ad or a political campaign that comes into a community, knocks on doors and tells them, ‘This is what is important,’” said Pennsylvania Voice Executive Director Salewa Ogunmefun.

The nonprofits’ work also positions them to spot election irregularities. Network partners, while tracking whether registered people of color were voting in 2018, caught a voting tabulation problem in Berks County that was bumping many registered Hispanic voters off the rolls.

“When people had Spanish surnames that had special characters in them, their registrations were being rejected, although

all of the information on their forms was 100 percent correct,” Ms. Ogunmefun said. Pennsylvania Voice has since worked with the county to correct the problem and double-checks voting data outcomes across the state for other signs of irregularities.

In addition to voter registration efforts, the nonprofit partnership took part in the years-long redrawing of state political districts, which produced a

new map considered to be more fair than previous versions. Pennsylvania, once one of the most heavily gerrymandered states, earned a B for “better-than-average” partisan fairness, according to a report card graded by the Princeton Gerrymandering Project.

Students on American college campuses are another population of eligible voters that nonprofits work to register and more generally engage in democracy. Few have much exposure to voting and civic participation when they first step on campus. Voter registration among U.S. 18-year-olds is low.

In Pennsylvania, registration rates range from more than 35 percent of voting-aged students to less than 1 percent across 500 school districts, according to a study by The Civics Center, a California nonprofit. In the Pittsburgh Public Schools, 14.5 percent of students were registered. Elsewhere, rates ranged from 29 percent of voting-aged students in the Shaler Area

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nonprofits whose work includes making sure the voices of all citizens are heard. And Pennsylvania’s non-white population is growing at a healthy pace.

White residents remain the largest group, accounting for 75 percent of the population, according to 2020 decennial census data. But their numbers decreased by more than 6 percent from 2010 to 2020, according to census data. Meanwhile, the state’s Black population grew by more than 3 percent, the Hispanic and Latino population rose by nearly 38 percent, and the Asian population increased by more than 46 percent.

Pennsylvania Voice taps into the collective experience and strength of more than 50 community nonprofits to expand the role of communities of color in the democratic process. The diverse statewide partnership includes such groups as Pittsburgh United, a coalition of labor, faith, community and environmental organizations.

Partner nonprofits took several approaches to registering eligible voters leading up to this year’s election, ranging from



Rachael Warriner

Several Heinz Endowments-supported voter advocacy nonprofits participated in a November 2020 Count Every Vote rally in Philadelphia that included youth activists with the Sunrise Movement, an environmental justice organization.

ENGAGED IN democracy

School District to less than 1 percent in six other Allegheny County school districts.

“It is pretty appalling,” said Robert Brandon, president and CEO of the Fair Elections Center, a nonpartisan nonprofit focused on equitable voting access. “High school is a place to learn how to be a full citizen.”

The Fair Elections Center works with colleges and universities to be more proactive in educating students about voting rights and processes and improving their participation in civic matters by taking steps such as hiring students to help organize registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns and folding voter registration into high-traffic events, such as during freshman orientation and when students register for their classes. The nonprofit works with 30 colleges and universities in Pennsylvania that have an estimated total enrollment of 375,000 students.

Interest in voting soared on America’s campuses in 2020, when 66 percent of college students voted, setting a new turnout record according to a study by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. In 2016, the turnout rate was only 52 percent.

“We’ve seen the gap between young and older voters narrowing,” Mr. Brandon said. “On college campuses, it has narrowed even more.”

Other democracy-supporting efforts by nonprofits, in addition to creating and promoting voter registration and participation initiatives, have included running campaigns to raise public awareness of social, economic and environmental issues their work addresses. Some, like a coalition of Western

Pennsylvania’s environmental nonprofits, also try to bring political candidates up to speed. The coalition this year began work on a guide to enhance a candidate’s understanding of regional issues, such as air and water quality, as part of an effort that will include an informational website and could include candidate forums.

“Elections are something a lot of us have shied away from in previous years,” said Ashleigh Deemer, deputy director of Penn Environment, a nonprofit in the coalition. “A lot of our groups want to be nonpartisan and not get too close to that line. But there is a way to do this. We want to reach out to every candidate running, regardless of party, so they understand the issues and how important they are. We want informed candidates and informed voters.”

Allegheny County voters have had a particularly strong hand to play in how air-quality issues are dealt with. Air pollution has long been a problem in the county, where major sources include one of the nation’s largest coke works. In most cases, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency gives state agencies the authority to draft, implement and enforce pollution regulations and controls. But in Allegheny County, that responsibility rests with the county Health Department.

Next year, the county executive and county council members who hire or appoint the department’s director and board are up for election.

“Allegheny County has some of the largest point-sources of air pollution in the state if not the nation,” Mr. McElwaine said. “Voters at the local level have power to influence future decisions.” **h**