

Case Study

Minnesota's 'students voting'

More than a mock election



Introduction

Over 100,000 students from hundreds of K-12 schools across Minnesota took part in one of the most successful student mock election programs in the country in 2022. Called **Students Voting**, it was the result of a partnership between the Minnesota Secretary of State's office, the YMCA Center for Youth Voice, and BallotReady.

Merging two distinct mock election programs in 2018, Students Voting has pioneered an all-encompassing statewide K-12 student voting experience that mirrors the real democratic process.

However, Students Voting is more than just a mock election. Using BallotReady, teachers have the resources to provide their students with a comprehensive voting experience including researching the candidates on their ballot prior to voting, using a sample ballot to plan their selections, learning how to vote early or on Election Day, and understanding the power of their vote in our democracy. The impact of this program is reflected in Minnesota's status as one of the highest youth civic participation states in the country.

“Our goal is to provide very hands-on civic learning programs that have kids learning civics by doing civics, and so the student voting program is one of our favorites,”

said Amy Anderson, Executive Director of the Center for Youth.

We recently sat down with Amy and Michael Wall, the Outreach Manager for the **Center for Youth** Voice to learn more about how they pulled this remarkable program off.

How the students voting statewide mock election works

Any K-12 school or teacher in Minnesota who wants to participate in Students Voting can sign up directly through the Secretary of State's or the Center for Youth Voice websites. After signing up, each school receives at no charge:

- ✓ A realistic ballot PDF customized with their choice of offices and ballot questions
- ✓ Ballot boxes
- ✓ Privacy screens to set up desktop/tabletop voting booths
- ✓ "I've Voted" stickers



But the real power of the program is the flexibility afforded to teachers and schools to tailor the curriculum and the process.

"Students voting is meant to be customizable and schools can run it in very different ways.

Some schools integrate it into their AP government class, while others turn it into a schoolwide event, complete with polling booths and a mock Election Day. In some schools, the student government runs the election, in some schools it's a teacher who pulls in interested students to be election judges, in some schools, it's staff or faculty, and in some schools, they recruit adult volunteers from the community"

– Michael Wall

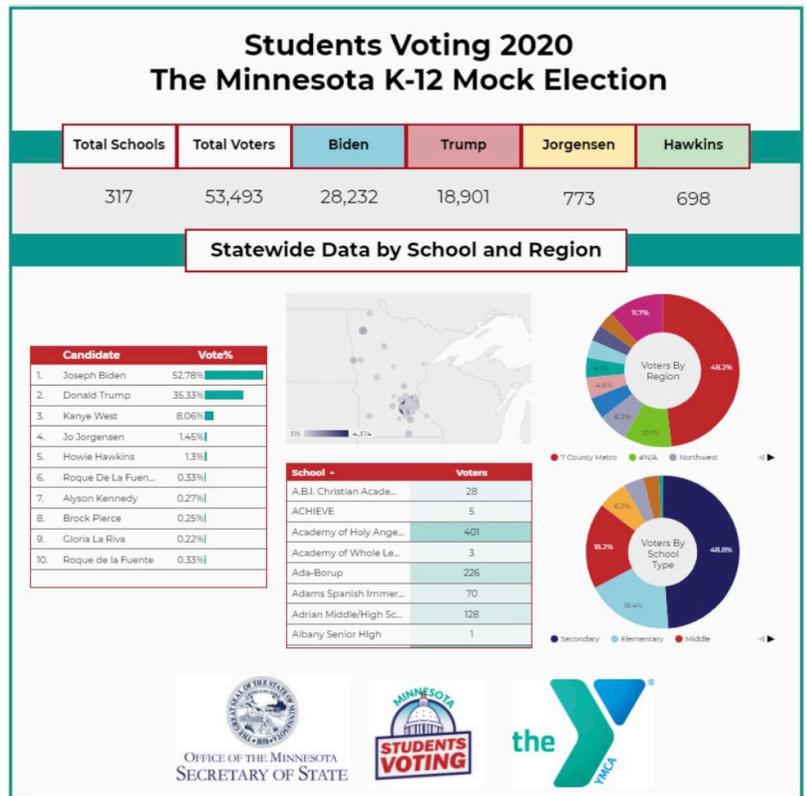
A typical timeline for the mock election might look like this:

In the spring before the fall election

- ✓ Schools and teachers are sent information on the program and opportunity to introduce civic participation, voting, and developing one's voice
- ✓ Registration Opens

In the late summer before the fall election

- ✓ Welcome back email reminding the registered that they are participating
- ✓ Deadlines given for defining ballot customization (based on sample ballot from the Secretary of State's office) and physical free materials requested
- ✓ Resources provided to school contacts, including BallotReady program page link



Weeks leading up to the election

- ✓ Schools access BallotReady voter guides
- ✓ Students research their ballots and candidates fill out their sample ballot
- ✓ Materials shipped to schools

During the voting period

- ✓ Schools administer elections using digital or paper ballots, depending on their state and program guidelines (The Minnesota program heavily recommends paper ballots to their participating schools, as the state requires all voters to vote using a paper ballot)
- ✓ Students participate in the voting processes as closely resembling a real election as possible using materials received, realistic ballots, and curricular resources like polling place set up guides, if desired

After the Election

- ✓ Schools collect election results and submit them to BallotReady using an online form
- ✓ Teachers share school results with students
- ✓ Students review statewide and individual school results and trends using the BallotReady results dashboard
- ✓ Classrooms participate in post-election discussions, analyzing implications and comparing voting patterns both in schools and the 'real' election results

Teachers and students alike have spoken to the power of the program with a variety of insights being shared.

“The election ran great, the students were very excited to participate in the mock election. We actually had some students chanting, “Mock, mock, mock!””

What a great activity for students. They had fun with it. There is a buzz in our building today. This helped students feel like they were participating even if they aren't 18.”

– Nashwauk-Keewatin High School

“The students loved it. They were very involved and asked some really thought provoking questions. They devoured the platforms and other material I offered for them to make their choice.”

– Lakeside Academy

Program growth & impact

The program has grown considerably since its start both in scale and scope. Initially, the program was only for high school students, but in 2018 the collaboration with the Center for Youth Voice included a comprehensive K-12 experience bringing thousands more students into the process.

Additionally, after providing only the **Presidential ballot in 2016**, Student Voting expanded in 2020 to offer BallotReady's **customizable** ballots featuring federal, state, local, and even judicial candidates, enabling schools to pick the scope of the ballot to provide. **By 2022, every participating school was utilizing the customizable ballot allowing them to include more down-ballot positions.**

Given the number of participating students each cycle, the results of the mock election don't go unnoticed either- with even **national news outlets reporting** about the outcomes ahead of the actual General Election vote.

Ultimately, it's Minnesota's students that have benefited the most.



“The research has shown that kids who participate in mock elections through and through kind of an authentic process like this are much more likely and confident to go and vote when they turn 18, and when they turn 18, they are eight times more likely to continue voting after that”

– Amy Anderson

Boosting youth civic participation

Students Voting and other student mock elections have demonstrated a statistical impact on youth voter participation.

A 2020 Tufts University study demonstrated that young people who received both voting instruction and encouragement in high school exhibited a 7% higher voting rate compared to those who received neither.

“Students who learn the mechanics of voting are much more likely to actually vote when they turn 18,” Wall said, emphasizing the significance of civic education. “The low voter turnout among young people in many parts of the country can be attributed to a society that has not adequately equipped them for participation and has not sufficiently valued and facilitated their engagement in the electoral process.”

In Minnesota, where a generation of young people have been introduced to the voting process in their civic curriculum, the efforts are clearly paying off.

An estimated 31% of eligible 18-to-29 Minnesotans voted in the 2018 midterm election, a 10% increase over nationwide turnout in the 2014 midterm election. In Minnesota, the increase in youth turnout in 2018 was more than **20% higher** than the same age group was in the 2014 election.

In the 2022 midterm elections, Minnesota achieved the **third-highest rate of youth voter turnout** among all states, with a turnout of 36%. This figure surpasses the national estimate for youth voter turnout by CIRCLE of 23%. In 2022, Minnesota was one of only four states with a youth turnout rate above 35%. Minnesota’s exceptional youth turnout highlights the transformative power of the Minnesota Mock Election, empowering young individuals with hands-on civic learning experiences and fostering a culture of active civic engagement.

Conclusion

Minnesota is not the only state that hosts a mock election for students, but the impact and lessons learned from the Students Voting program can provide a valuable model for other Secretary of State offices and youth civic programs across the country.

Although the success of the program is remarkable, with the right tools and the right guidance it is also replicable – and both Center for Youth Voice and BallotReady are focused on enabling other states to plug and play a similar program.

“It is about when you believe that change needs to be made. Do you know how it works and what to do to get your voice heard?” Wall said. “The time is now to instill in young minds the belief that their voices matter and to equip them with the knowledge and tools to effect change through active civic participation.”





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