

League of Young Voters Profile

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The League of Young Voters is a national youth-led organization with state-based affiliates in Maine, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Louisiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, New Mexico, and California that support young people in developing the power to solve problems facing their communities. As the League's website describes it, "We work with young people who have been shut out of the political process to make politics fun, engaging, relevant, and meaningful."

Founded in 2003 by political artists and organizers, the organization's long-term goals are to engage young people who have been disenfranchised in the political process, and to make elected officials accountable to their needs and concerns. During election years, the League focuses on registering young people to vote, distributing voter guides written by and for young people, and conducting get-out-the-vote efforts that include knocking on doors and phone banking. When elections are over, the League continues organizing on issues that affect youth in their local communities, including violence, rising student debt, voting rights, and climate change. The League's approach to organizing reflects a deep understanding of the value that arts and culture bring to civic engagement work. Executive director Billy Wimsatt, who is a founding member of the League, says that from the beginning, "There has never been a question about whether or not art should be connected to politics. It has been in the DNA of the work." This is, in large part, due to the fact that many of the founding members and current staff are young political artists with roots in the hip-hop community.

During its first year, the League seeded 60 groups across the country that engaged more than 100,000 new young voters. However, the League soon discovered that it requires a great deal of training and support to sustain local and state-based organizations; in the aftermath of the 2004 election, most of the groups they had helped to get off the ground folded. This experience taught the League to value really good sustainable organizing and caused them to re-evaluate their strategy. While the League is still committed to figuring out the best way to create national programs to engage young people in this political moment, in recent years they have focused most of their efforts on strengthening the work of eight local affiliates. "Each local is a laboratory with really different circumstances in every respect that you can imagine," states Wimsatt.

At the local level, the League has been able to experiment with different ways of incorporating the arts and culture into civic engagement and community organizing.

The Milwaukee League, known locally as the Campaign Against Violence, has developed an organizing model that combines creative outreach strategies with precinct-based organizing to build power for disenfranchised youth and address the issue of violence in the community. Founded by a group of local political poets who ran the

campaign of the first African-American mayoral candidate in the city's history, the Campaign Against Violence has created a highly developed and engaged cultural community that is tied to sophisticated political organizing. They host a weekly Poetry Night at the Onyx, a popular nightclub, which attracts 400-500 young people and combines a club atmosphere and popular poetry with community empowerment. Through creative outreach strategies such as this one, the Campaign engages young people in informal political discussions about pressing local issues and electoral politics. This is coupled with a precinct-based operation that relies on youth leaders who are trained to conduct traditional voter outreach during elections and intervene in violent situations that occur in the neighborhood through non-violent mediation techniques. This combined strategy has made the Campaign a "political force to be reckoned with in the districts where they work," says Wimsatt. An example was their recent success in stopping an anti-loitering ordinance proposed by the city council that would have made it illegal for three or more youth to hang out together on the street. Through creative outreach strategies such as the Poetry Night and precinct-based organizing, the Campaign was able to mobilize enough people to take a stand against the ordinance and successfully swing the votes of two city council members, defeating the ordinance 8-7.

The League affiliate in Columbus, Ohio has partnered with Video the Vote in another example of effectively integrating the arts and culture with civic engagement. Video the Vote is a national program that documents and reports voting irregularities and ensures that these stories are disseminated through independent and mainstream media outlets. Ian Inaba, Guerrilla News Network, and James Rucker, Color of Change, founded the program in response to widespread voting irregularities during national elections in Florida (2000) and Ohio (2004), which resulted in the disenfranchisement of thousands of African-American voters.

Video the Vote has a website that enables them to disseminate tools and resources to ordinary people interested in protecting the right to vote. The League coordinates the Video the Vote initiative in Columbus, providing the infrastructure for the operations on the ground. Reflecting on this partnership, Wimsatt says, "[The people involved with Video the Vote] are artists who had a great idea and a network, but they are visionaries rather than organizers. [The League] organizer coordinated the volunteers and built the infrastructure, making this a more a long-term project." The Video the Vote strategy proved to be an effective tool for protecting the franchise of young voters during the 2006 election, when a highly contested congressional race brought many young voters out to the polls. Early in the morning on Election Day there were reports that poll workers were improperly giving young voters provisional ballots instead of allowing them to vote at the polls. The League dispatched volunteers to the scene to record these voting irregularities. These videos were then sent to election protection advocacy groups that used this evidence to pressure election officials to re-instruct poll workers on how to use provisional ballots.

While Wimsatt says that the League is unusually good at integrating art and culture with civic engagement and community organizing, he acknowledges that they are "far from maximizing what this work could look like." The League is interested in

crystallizing the models that local affiliates have developed and disseminating them to youth organizers throughout the country so that they can be replicated in time for the 2008 election. They are currently undergoing a strategic planning process in order to articulate and clarify their models and think about how to grow the work. However, one of the obstacles they face is how to sustain the work on a larger scale.

Wimsatt believes that this is a challenge facing the progressive movement as a whole where civic engagement work is “piecemeal, temporary, and episodic.” It “doesn’t build on common infrastructure,” says Wimsatt. “We are all so far from reaching our mission that if we are not at least talking about and planning for how to take things to the next level of scale, then we are just playing around. We are not really changing things, we are doing cute little projects.”

He finds this to be particularly acute among arts-based civic engagement initiatives. The technical aspects to civic engagement work— including building lists, managing data, creating templates, training volunteers, and accounting for volunteer time— “require a level of scale, infrastructure and expertise that is simply out of reach of all these cool political arts projects that are trying to engage people.” Wimsatt points to the Guerrilla News Network’s (GNN) efforts to distribute *American Blackout*, a documentary about the disenfranchisement of African-American voters during the 2004 presidential election, as clear example of the challenge facing artists who want to do politically engaged work. GNN distributed the video on their website and through other grassroots efforts. However, they lacked the infrastructure to distribute the video as part of an organizing campaign capable of impacting policy at either the state or national level. In the next few years, the League would like to build the necessary infrastructure to work systematically with artists so that they can be effective in their relationship with local organizing efforts.

Wimsatt envisions the creation of a national strategy for youth art and culture civic engagement within the progressive youth movement, to “knit together the great pieces of existing work into a powerful quilt.” Such a strategy, he says, would “take all the best political artistic talent of our generation and combine it with a coordinated political strategy that has a [long-term] vision and sophisticated infrastructure.” Rather than duplicating efforts or creating something from scratch, it would bring together arts projects, civic engagement groups, base building organizations, and political artists, among others, who are currently working on a shoestring budget to share resources and coordinate their efforts. This would involve the development of common standards for data collection and a system for data sharing, as well as the creation of a common brand that can complement other, more localized, brands that organizations are using in their communities.

According to Wimsatt, implementing this civic engagement strategy would require a new kind of leadership that combines “one part artist, one part facilitator, one part volunteer coordinator, one part movement coach and connector, and one part community builder.” Progressive organizations currently hire people to do outreach for arts events or register people to vote at arts events, but Wimsatt believes that there is a

need for a entire field of people whose job is to integrate the work of arts projects, political artists, civic engagement groups, and base-building organizations.

One of the challenges facing such an effort is “getting people to buy into working together and thinking about each other as a team, rather than competing” for scarce resources. This is, in large part, due to the lack of financial resources available for this kind of work. There are very few funders who “have a vision for what could be done” with the right amount of resources. As a result, the progressive movement has created “a bunch of small competing entities, none of which have (the resources) that they need to succeed.” This often results in the duplication of efforts among organizations and depleted staff.

“We have all these great puzzle pieces,” says Wimsatt, “but not the resources to put together the puzzle.” With the right person to lead such an effort and some of the financial resources to get it off the ground, Wimsatt is hopeful that the League can play a critical role in the development of such a strategy in time for the 2008 election. He believes that with \$1 million a year it would be possible to put the puzzle together and “create an incredible, multi-level, multi-organization, national youth art and culture civic engagement strategy that would blow people’s minds.”

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