**Count US Indiana: An Inspiration for Civic Engagement**

As a first-year nonprofit, I am delighted to highlight our group’s efforts to inspire others to act. Count US IN is Indiana’s first 501(c)(3) nonpartisan, nonprofit movement whose mission is to uplift citizens’ voices and foster more inclusive and equitable political participation. Following the 2008 *Crawford v. Marion County* [Indiana] *Election Board* landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, Indiana legislated one of the nation’s strictest voter-ID laws. That law created an unnecessary voting barrier for America’s historically disenfranchised communities.

By showing that everyone’s voice matters, Count US IN encourages a more substantial and diverse voter turnout while educating and emboldening the statewide community. We empower people whom the U.S. power structure historically has suppressed. Those groups are Black, LatinX, Asian, Native American, women, LGBTQIA+, those who live with disabilities, students, seniors, immigrants, individuals distressed by poverty, those affected by incarcerations, and working-class members.

Although our new organization is Indiana-based, Count US IN has already gained a national following of individuals who have engaged in our virtual training on voting rights, resources, and education. The subsequent five sections, which include significant--yet productive--overlap, describe the tactics that exemplify our early strategy for achieving our overall goal to engage more Hoosiers in the voting process. The article concludes by summarizing how our organization plans to continue pursuing its objectives.

**Voter Registration**

Count US IN’s first applicable goal is to register 2,000 voters. As we add more volunteers and staff, we may raise that standard. We already have recruited dozens of volunteers to help us canvass residences and businesses to share voter registration information and resources. We organized a table at the local Fort Wayne YMCA branches to do likewise. On Indiana University and Purdue University campuses, we advocated voting rights and participation and organized voter registration and virtual and in-person outreach. Besides continuing these efforts, we will partner with other community organizations to reach more eligible voters.

Through our coalition partnership with When We All Vote, Count US IN created an online portal tool to enable people to register. That multilingual portal takes our web users directly to Indiana’s voter registration website. It allows voters to print mail-in registrations with their stamp costs covered.  This tool helps us track our progress to report to volunteers and donors.

**Distributing Voter Resources**

Count US IN focuses on distributing critical voter information. Our website has multilingual resources to register voters and cover costs for stamps, transportation, official documents, voter ID, printing, and a voter hotline. As we grow, our opportunities to develop valuable partnerships will expand. Our early partners include the American Association of People with Disabilities, Indiana Disability Rights, Indianapolis Public Library, Students Learn Students Vote, Alliance for Youth Action, National Voter Registration Day, VoteRiders, and When We All Vote.

Those organizations have helped us to spread our message via virtual training and other events. We have community volunteers who are non-English native speakers, primarily Spanish and Burmese, to translate our resources. Notably, Indianapolis is home to one of the world’s largest Burmese populations (https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/fact-sheet/asian-americans-burmese-in-the-u-s/). We also hosted a virtual concert, which highlighted the following points about how various citizens, students, and activists were fostering inclusive, equitable political participation:

* how they were helping prepare their communities to vote,
* why increasing diverse voter registration and turnout was essential to them,
* what motivated them to vote, and
* the crucial deadlines and other information for registration, voting, ex-felons, the LGBTQIA+ community, and checking voting status.

To protect our democracy, Count US IN was thrilled to have partnered with Fight Back Table’s “Count Every Vote” initiative. That initiative included such notable organizations as Democracy Alliance, Color of Change, MoveOn, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and People’s Action. We ensured that more than 30 people attended the “Count Every Vote” training, which trained them to inform others of their voting rights.

As a first-year organization during Indiana’s 2020 primary elections, Count US IN hosted the National Lawyer Guild’s “Know Your Rights” training of 28 in- and out-of-state citizens to become qualified legal observers. Just after gaining our 501(c)(3) status and just before the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the US, our vice president, Myles Trowell, visited university campuses to conduct outreach. Since then, our president, Jalyn Radziminski, has been visiting high schools virtually. For Hispanic Heritage Month, we built our voting-rights presence. Founding Board member Herlinda Salazar spoke remotely to a national audience about the LatinX voting-bloc power.

**Building our Volunteer Base**

We recruited dozens to join our virtual committee meetings and voter registration work. Relevant to this article’s earlier section on our voter registration efforts, the “National Voter Registration Day” organization sponsored Count US IN by supplying us with personal protection equipment and multilingual posters. In Fort Wayne and LaGrange, we found 18 volunteers to help us register first-time voters. Three were multilingual and therefore created voter-information posters with Burmese, Spanish, and Japanese translations. That information included *Quick Response* codes (i.e., two-dimensional barcodes) and websites to direct citizens to register and advise them of their rights. Our website users can scan the codes to access our When We All Vote portal.

We also developed vibrant student internship and ambassador programs. Three of our volunteers led dozens of students from cultural groups and centers at Indiana University Bloomington and Purdue University in Lafayette. Alliance for Youth Action donated $350 for this specific effort.

For those unable to help in-person, we have created digital opportunities. Our website enables anyone to access our interest form. They will then be on our email list to join upcoming volunteer opportunities. We even invite them to join our virtual Outreach Committee meetings.

As a first-year organization, Count US IN amplified Fight Back Table’s 2020 Election Defender training by sharing their information with our social media followers. In Bloomington and Fort Wayne, we coordinated 31 Defenders and four Lead Organizers for four high-priority polling places with Fight Back Table’s $15,000 awarded grant. **Furthermore, we achieved that in a mere three days!** For those unable or uncomfortable with volunteering in-person due to COVID-19, we maximized their massive online support.

Count US IN garnered such community election-site interest that other volunteers donated their time without any compensation. Each location’s Lead Organizer shopped local stores for necessary supplies. We offered snacks, water, coffee, protective masks, sanitizer, and Election Protection literature to voters who needed encouragement to continue waiting in the long lines. Moreover, we informed voters of their rights and the Election Protection hotline when necessary.

Our Election Defenders witnessed the following specific voter-suppression examples firsthand or reported these events as voters shared their experiences:

* A pick-up truck displaying campaign signage supporting a specific presidential candidate violated the legally allowed proximity to Bloomington High School South’s entry.
* Although one voter had a power of attorney, election officials refused to allow him to vote. Therefore, Count US IN gave him the Election Protection and Indiana Election Division hotline numbers.
* Election officials sent six Black women, who were registered voters, to a different site, despite their having voted at that location in the 2020 primary.
* Because of COVID-19, election officials closed hundreds of statewide polling sites. In Allen County alone, they reduced the number from 118 to 70. Multiple voters exclaimed that they received neither prior notice nor posted notifications at their voting locations of where they should vote.

Months before the 2020 general election, Jalyn approached the Allen County Board of Elections to ask how Count US IN could help with the problematically reduced polling locations. They responded by asking if we would work the voting sites to redirect voters. When Jalyn followed up to request a list to coordinate our volunteers, they would not respond further.

* Because one voter did not vote for two election cycles, election officials purged his registration.

Regarding the last bullet point, the State of Indiana had been using former Kansas Secretary of State (and de facto head of President Trump’s failed voter-fraud commission) Kris Kobach’s Interstate Crosscheck system. An August 25, 2020 article entitled “Judge Permanently Halts Indiana’s Illegal Voter Purge Method” explains that situation (https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/judge-permanently-halts-indianas-illegal-voter-purge-method). *The Guardian*’s nationally acclaimed investigative reporter, Greg Palast (2020), detailed how Kobach’s racist system targeted seven million voters of color in 30 states (https://www.gregpalast.com/wp-content/uploads/HowTrumpStole2020\_Palast.pdf). Through Kobach’s initiative called “use it or lose it,” Palast discusses the massive increase in voter purges.

To explain why Kobach’s Interstate Crosscheck system is considered racist, I must first describe his background. He drafted Arizona’s infamous SB1070 Act, which the ACLU labeled the “Driving While Brown” law. He was the legal advisor to Arizona’s scandalous Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was found guilty of criminally violating Hispanic Americans’ civil rights. My 2019 dissertation, How Can Truth-Claims of Voter Fraud Influence Public Policy? A Political Discourse Analysis highlights Kobach’s specific White Supremacy connections (http://bit.do/Greg\_Williams-dissertation-voter\_fraud\_disinformation).

Kobach also created a database that tracked Muslims as they traveled across the US. President George W. Bush found it disturbingly racist enough that he ordered its termination. Nonetheless, Kobach suggested the Muslim travel ban that Trump adopted (https://www.gregpalast.com/wp-content/uploads/HowTrumpStole2020\_Palast.pdf).

Kobach’s Interstate Crosscheck searches for voters registered in multiple states -- “potential double voters” -- and removes the voter rolls’ “duplicates.” The names that the system produced overwhelming were ethnic Black and Brown. For example, Georgia’s primarily accused perpetrators shared the name “James Brown.” In Georgia alone, 288 voters with that name ostensibly registered in other states. Kobach’s system does not account for middle name differences or even for such a common first and last name or for “Sr.” and “Jr.” designations. Other commonly purged voters’ names were “Mohamed,” “Michael Jackson,” and “Rodríguez” (https://www.gregpalast.com/wp-content/uploads/HowTrumpStole2020\_Palast.pdf).

Indiana law requires its voters to receive advanced notice of purges. Then two federal election cycles must pass before officials may remove them from the voter rolls. This “purge” policy already raises ethical questions. Furthermore, the last bullet point underscores the incident that appears to conflict with Indiana’s election law and may serve as a future investigative point for Count US IN.

ABC21 WPTA afforded live coverage of our McMillen Park Community Center polling site’s efforts to protect democracy, interviewed our Election Defenders and posted it to Facebook. One of Count US IN’s student interns, Alyvia Luong, a professional photographer, took location photos. On our behalf, another local photographer also volunteered his services. Although we paid our temporary organizers well, we efficiently kept within our defined budget and effectively delivered our strategic voter plan to protect democracy. We organized three four-hour shifts with at least two Election Defenders for each rotation. To illustrate our remarkable organizational efficiency and effectiveness, we managed to stay well under budget.

**Educational Events**

Count US IN often hosts online digital campaigns and events. We also have hosted other educational events concerning voting, all of which our bilingual Board members translated for the community. Co-sponsoring with the Indianapolis Public Library, we hosted four educational presentations that generated citizens’ spaces to get critical answers. The topics encompassed voter-ID laws (Portia Allen-Kyle), vote-by-mail (Reba Hoeschler), voter suppression (Greg Williams), and mass incarceration (Viggy Ganapathy). Board experts representing Voting Rights Lab, VoteRiders, and democracy institutes made the presentations, and Herlinda translated them into Spanish. To diversify voter turnout and overall civic engagement, we are accustomed to hosting speakers who address common voting obstacles and suppression, overcoming these barriers, and organizing outreach and educational efforts.

With less than one month to plan a statewide, moderated 10-candidate forum, Count US IN organized a virtual space. This event generated enormous attention across Indiana’s electorate and both the traditional and social media channels. Therefore, we created community feedback and resource-matching forms. If folks have relevant community-interests that they would like us to address or need help individually, they can complete other forms on our website.

Count US IN has begun lively discussions around how we might address Indiana’s suppressive gerrymandering of voting districts, the power of the LatinX vote, and educating and empowering voters, in general. As a follow-up to our successful candidate forum, we are contemplating how we can use the nonpartisan, nonprofit Vote Smart’s “Political Courage Test” to educate voters on candidates campaigning for offices and their elected officials running for reelection. Another consideration is educating potential voters on voting at every government level, such as local polling sites, election deadlines, and voter registration regulations.

Count US IN is creating a fellowship program to help address these issues and more. For example, we have partnered with Humanity in Action’s (HIA’s) Racial Equity Grant to create fellowships to uplift people who identify as Black, live with disabilities, or are impacted by incarcerations. HIA is an international nonprofit that educates and links young people looking to lead human- and minority-rights issues. In the 2020 COVID-19 and #BlackLivesMatter climate, those populations were most shaken. With additional funds, we will develop other fellowships and leadership opportunities for LatinX, Asian, and others in the BIPOC population to give those communities unique spaces to uplift their voices. Thus, Count US IN will provide multicultural opportunities to debrief together.

**Fundraising**

Count US IN’s fundraising efforts are supporting our significant community impact. On our Fundraising webpage, anyone can view how we have allocated every raised or donated dollar. Since Count US IN is a 501(c)(3) organization, we gladly can give tax write-off letters to our donors (https://www.mightycause.com/story/Countusin).

**We spent only $5,500 or 37 % of Fight Back Table’s grant!** Count US IN will devote that balance toward future primary elections to continue nonpartisan education and election protection initiatives. We established a budget, ensuring a pathway to paid internships and additional payments for administrative staff. Count US IN has begun conversations with various national organizations about grant funding and institutional support. These areas range from (a) programmatic financing, (b) procurement of such tools as Customer Relationship Management and Website Management, and (c) national partnerships that can facilitate leadership support.

Count US IN’s long-term viability goals include soliciting first-time donors and converting them to sustain our sponsors’ efforts, building a sustainable model for continued growth, and supporting our staff. As we meet our programmatic goals, we will continue to relay these wins to Count US IN supporters and build a durable organization in the coming years. These aims are all part of our fundraising strategy to grow our mission, inspire our audience, and scale our organization for future success.

**Final Word**

By any reasonable standard, Count US IN’s list of first-year nonprofit accomplishments is remarkable. Moreover, we plan to increase next year’s output. We will continue to develop strategic partnerships with organizations that advocate rights for Americans with disabilities, students, and other voting-rights interest groups. As we pursue and receive more grants, we plan to expand our staff and coalition and spread our message via training and other events. We also will continue hosting educational events and leading widespread voter registration and outreach.

As Count US IN continues to expand its capacity, we seek a more intersectional approach to facilitate and educate our community on *integrated civic engagement* to diversify political participation. Integrated civic engagement acknowledges different means of political participation such as voting, calls-to-action, mutual aid, protesting, and so forth. To create a healthier democracy, we will be listening to citizens who need to ensure that we address them.

(https://www.prismreports.org/article/2020/6/29/integrated-civic-engagement-is-essential-to-electoral-justice).

Count US IN has recruited an incredibly accomplished and diverse Board of Directors and advisors from instate and across the nation that bring a comprehensive level of experience and knowledge base of organizing, outreach, research, law, and fundraising for voting rights. Our team members are comfortable interacting with the press because of our growing national presence and nonpartisan reputation for voting-rights expertise. Although our organization is young, Count US IN has proven to succeed with minimal time and financial resources.

We continually seek other similar local and national partners and individuals to help us distribute voter information. If anyone wants to promote inclusive political participation and diverse voter turnout, educate citizens on voting rights, combat suppression, or cultivate partnerships to create equity, please let us know. We seek volunteers to help us empower others, and we offer tools to increase voter turnout, especially of historically marginalized and youthful communities.