

Providing Protection at Polls During the U.S. 2020 Elections



NP volunteers providing proactive presence in the Twin Cities, MN, November 3, 2020

Throughout 2020, civilians around the world prepared for and participated in tense elections. The Presidential election in the U.S. was no different. Political polarization had reached an all-time high, uprisings in support of racial justice and in defense of Black lives occurred throughout the country and a months-long pandemic continued to disrupt daily life. While elections all around the world can be a flashpoint for violence, they are also an opportunity for people to make their voices heard and build trust in political institutions—**to come together through dialogue,**

community engagement and shared hope for the future.

Around the world, NP's **work is about building empathy, strengthening relationships in communities and making sure all voices can be heard** in peace work and civil processes. This is truer than ever as election cycles take place amidst violent conflict and an unprecedented global pandemic.

Approaching the 2020 elections, communities around the United States anticipated unprecedented threats and a serious flashpoint for violence. Drawing from extensive experience with violence prevention in elections around the world, Nonviolent Peaceforce could offer valuable support in bolstering early warning early response networks, dispelling rumors and providing direct protection. "We wanted to come to the United States because there's so many indicators of ongoing violence [we see in other countries]: political polarization, economic difficulties, racial injustice," said Marna Anderson, Director NP USA.

This rang true in Minneapolis, the city where George Floyd was murdered in May of 2020, and local uprisings catalyzed protests around the world. The targeting of civilians by law enforcement raised real concerns about lack of accountability to state-sanctioned violence, and conversations around the future of law enforcement began to reach a stalemate. As election day approached, voters wondered about the return of white supremacists and other provocateurs that had fled their city only months earlier, as well

as the targeting of historically disenfranchised voters.

The new Nonviolent Peaceforce program in the United States was approached by several community organizations, including a local union and several nonpartisan voter advocacy organizations, to begin organizing voter and poll protection in Minneapolis and mobilizing nonpartisan teams. In the weeks leading up to the elections, Nonviolent Peaceforce trained 100 poll captains in de-escalation, nonviolence, and unarmed civilian protection. On November 3, **250+ volunteers who mobilized across the Twin Cities, MN** to have a proactive and de-escalatory presence and prevent harm or threat of harm to voters and ensure that everyone had the right to vote **free from intimidation and harassment**.

While the expected threats, including targeting of marginalized voters, counter protests, and displays of intimidation, did not materialize *en masse*, the trained volunteers quickly became a community asset. NP staff's careful community mapping meant each team was strategically placed at a potential hot spot, contributing to a proactive presence. Each team was plugged into an extensive early warning early response network, and was able to anticipate advancing threats as well as dispel rumors circulating online and in communities. Neighbors engaged with one another as they approached the polls and cast their votes, building the type of relationships at the foundation of real security.

Voters themselves experienced an outpouring of support for protection from violence. "Thank you for sending some poll helpers into my neighborhood yesterday. [...] Thanks for your role in making voting peaceful and tranquil," one neighbor expressed.

While tranquility was largely the theme of the day, high tensions made the volunteers' presence necessary.

One of the volunteer poll protectors, was able to draw from her training to have the skills and confidence to prevent violence when an incident arose. Late in the day a truck with Trump flags appeared outside one of the polling places. **Tensions were running high**, and neighbors were concerned about election tampering and potential violence from all sides. Voters became more and more escalated and several approached to confront the driver. After taking the time to center herself, one volunteer, Amy, was able to **help de-escalate the potentially violent conflict** using one of the distraction tools she had practiced. The driver left the polling site shortly thereafter.

NPUS can continue help build a future where everyone can vote free from intimidation and harassment, where all voices are heard in political processes, where civilians can build relationships and understanding before violence begins.