



Can Public Art Increase Civic Participation?



By [Lansie Sylvia](#) on May 10, 2016 | [NONPROFIT-MARKETING](#)

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In 2015, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the historic Voting Rights Act, yet voter participation rates in the U.S. are at historic lows. Instead of being an exuberant celebration of civil rights, [the experience of voting is often frustrating](#), bureaucratic and dreary.

In Philadelphia, many polling places are difficult to find, hidden deep in the recesses of schools, churches, and community centers. The required paper signage identifying polling places must only

be posted by the entrance of each location, which means they are often located on side streets out-of-view for anyone on the sidewalks. These frustrations are causing barriers to entry for first-time voters, senior voters who've had their polling places change year to year, new Philadelphians, recent immigrants and more.



Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation through their Knight Cities Challenge grant, Next Stop: Democracy! (NSD) aimed to improve the voting experience and increase civic engagement using public art. Here's My Chance (HMC), a creative agency that works exclusively with nonprofits and socially responsible businesses, produced the project. Working with the Knight Foundation, Mural Arts, Committee of Seventy and other key nonprofit partners, HMC created a completely new way to look at, and impact, voter turnout and experience here in Philadelphia.

Over the course of our 24-week voter engagement campaign, NSD hired 60 artists to create 60 “Vote Here/Vote Aqui” signs. The artists came from more than 20 different Philadelphia neighborhoods. The signs were placed at key polling locations around the city on Election Day in 2015.



Through the support of Larry Krain and Krain Outdoor Advertising, we were able to post 10 billboards throughout the city with our hashtag #VoteNov3rd. By using creative signage and art markers to indicate polling places and help voters find their way, the project brought back a sense of warmth and vibrancy into Philly’s civic spaces, and encouraged citizens to robustly exercise their civil rights.

As Project Director of NSD, I have the privilege of presenting about our project during the Public Service segment at [MCON 2016](#). This “millennial conference” gathers leaders, activists and social entrepreneurs to “act and find creative solutions for social issues.” Today, I’m thrilled to give a little preview of my key takeaways to npENGAGE’s readers.

Involve Artists from the Very Beginning

We wanted to breath life back into Philly’s voting process. In order to do this, we knew that we had to increase civic engagement both on and offline, so we recruited local street artists to help. We targeted street artists specifically because of their amazing ability to take something abandoned or overlooked and transform it into something beautiful and attention grabbing.



By creating and distributing signage made by these local artists across the city to show voters where polling places were located, we infused Philly's voting process with excitement, joy and energy. The artists who participated felt a greater sense of connection to their communities. By using social media, a new generation of citizens became excited about voting. And finally, by exclusively using Philadelphia-based vendors for every element of the project, NSD contributed positively to Philadelphia's economy.

Use Art to Tackle the “Big Issues”

We specifically recruited Sonia Petrusse and Austin Seraphin, the team behind “Braille Street Art,” to create a sign that would generate awareness around the city's polling infrastructure, which is desperately in need of modernized accessibility. As of 2015, the Philadelphia Office of City Commissioners has deemed only 44 of the city's 1,687 designated polling places fully accessible. Seraphin and Petrusse's sign offered two different types of braille, tactile elements meant to be touched, and raised lettering.

We also worked with the Mural Arts' Restorative Justice Program, specifically with The Guild. The Guild is a paid apprenticeship in which participants are mentored by professionals and trained in industries such as building repair, mosaic tiling and masonry.



Working with young men on probation as well as current inmates at Graterford prison, NSD conducted voter information workshops to dispel common myths about incarceration in voting. These men then created signs for our project. Our team even visited inmates at Graterford to review their art submissions and talk more about our goals. It was an incredibly moving experience for all of us.

Define Success and Then Measure, Measure, Measure!

We hired a research team from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication to design the evaluation metrics for the project. They recruited and trained more than 100 volunteers to conduct surveys with voters to discover whether our intervention increased voter turnout and improved voter experience. We placed three signs at 20 different polling places throughout the city, and then also have 20 control locations. From 7 a.m.-8 p.m., our volunteers were out there gathering data.

When we surveyed the 60 artists involved in creating signs for NSD, we received the following results:

- As a result of creating a sign for NSD, 60% of artists sought out more information about this year's municipal election in Philadelphia on November 3, 2015.
- A whopping 93% of artists also indicated that by creating a sign for NSD, they talked more to other people in their life about the 2015 election.

- Sixty-one percent of the artists were more likely to vote because of their participation in the project, and 72% actually turned out and voted..

This is staggering when compared to their previous records: only 40% of the artists voted in the municipal primary back in May 2015, and 11% had never voted at all. One-third of all the artists said that because of their involvement with NSD, they would definitely participate in another art and elections project.

“I think bringing in artists to raise the awareness of the locations was an extremely smart move. For me personally, I definitely spoke of the election a lot more than I would have had I not created a sign,” said an NSD artist. “Anyone within my immediate circle of friends and family definitely knew about the project and thought it was an amazing idea.”

Commit to Constant Communication

Throughout the process we documented our way, creating and distributing 525 tweets, 102 Instagram posts, 112 Facebook posts, 21 emails, and countless correspondences with press and media. In all, we built an engaged following of over 2,300 dedicated individuals across social media and on email. Via these different channels, we reached a huge number of viewers. We reached 135,961 people on Facebook and 92,918 on Twitter. There were more than 600 original posts on Instagram using the project’s hashtag. Our mailing list of 800+ subscribers had a 36% Average Open Rate (compared to 20% Industry Average.)

It’s clear that the project’s presence on and offline inspired greater interest, conversation and civic engagement in Philadelphia. Numerous local and national news outlets covered the project, including The Daily Pennsylvanian, WHYY, Newsworks, PHL 17, Billy Penn, Philly.com, Al Dia, Philly Voice, Next City, Philebrity, South Philly Review, Spirit News, Geekadelphia, Technical.ly Philly, Philadelphia City Paper, The Philadelphia Citizen, The Temple News and Philly Mag.

Celebrate Your Accomplishments

The result? Today, Next Stop: Democracy! is by far one of – if not the – most talked about Knight Cities Challenge winning project, and arguably the most effective at expanding its reach and influence into the digital space.

When comparing the [Search Engine results](#) from any of the “past projects” touted on the Knight Cities Challenge website, you’ll see that NSD is currently the most talked about Knight Cities’ project by a multiplier of at least 3x; we had more than 3,000 mentions on the Web, whereas the next most popular project had only 812 mentions.

One of our 60 participating artists, Mike Jackson, exemplifies the effect of our efforts with this statement he made on his personal blog:

While working on my sign, I felt like I was a part of a movement. Every brush stroke was a reminder of why my wife and I bought a house in Philadelphia. We're responsible for what Philadelphia will be. It's just one sign, but it's my best effort. A city of people giving their best is a city worth living in.

Lansie will be sharing her story at MCON 2016, which will be taking place in Washington, D.C. To learn more about MCON, [check out this post by Derrick Feldmann](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

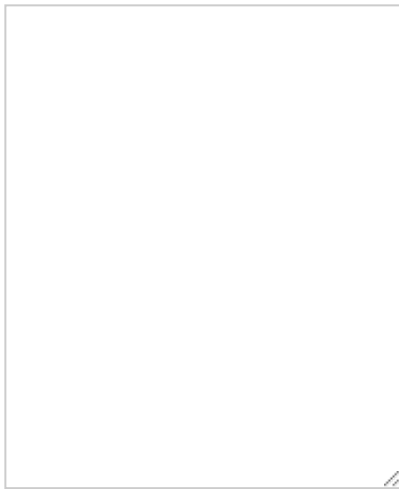
Lansie Sylvia

Lansie Sylvia is a tornado of curls, sparkles, and big ideas. As Director of Engagement for [Here's My Chance](#), a creative agency that works exclusively with nonprofits and socially responsible businesses, she leads the agency's external communication strategy and builds new community partnerships. She currently serves as HMC's Project Director for [Next Stop: Democracy!](#), a public art project to improve the voting experience in Philadelphia, funded by the Knight Foundation. Before receiving her M.S. in Nonprofit Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice, Lansie completed an AmeriCorps Year of Service in Providence, RI. Her go-to karaoke song is "This Is How We Do It" by Montell Jordan. Connect with Lansie on Twitter or

Instagram [@fancylansie](#) or via [LinkedIn](#).

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