

Progress Report for Calendar Year 2014

Referee PAC was created in July of 2013 by Dr. Elizabeth Jensen (Treasurer) and Mr. David Mullinax (Assistant Treasurer) for the purpose of making elections more ethical.

This approach has 3 significant components:

- (1) Voter information on office holders elected to serve them at all levels of office from the President of the US to the local water board is listed in a single database.
- (2) A campaign materials evaluation group of "Referees" to discuss and vote on any materials determined to be ethically questionable.
- (3) Links between the unethical materials and the elections affected for voters to consider in their decisions. The office holders information page for each voter's precinct contains the links to the relevant races with resumes for the candidates provided. The idea was that these are applicants for the job.

In January of 2014, Referee PAC had 27 voters signed up for its services (covering 20 precincts and ~24,000 voters), 3 Referees, and the resumes for ~400 candidates for office in the primaries. By the end of the calendar year, the "Wall of Shame" had picked up 3 political organizations, and the voter information website had received several thousand clicks. The impact on actual votes is non-significant relative to the background.

The indirect impacts of the PAC were more significant regionally. For example in May of 2013, the Harris County Registrar was not posting the political subdivision elections that had not been provided to them with information. This was something Dr. Jensen had brought to their attention in 2010 to the same personnel as we later ended up contacting as part of PAC functions. May of 2014 was the first election cycle in which all of the political subdivision elections were listed as possibly occurring in the voter's area by the Registrar. The affected population was all voters in Harris County, a few million people. While this may not be directly due to the PACs activities, the timing is fortunate.

Similarly but on a smaller scale, several of the political subdivisions continue to announce their elections in non-standard locations. For example, Emergency Services District (ESD) #7 posted its May election on a few sheets of 8.5X11 paper taped to the glass of its building facing a 5 lane road with the average speed around 55 mph (Harris County Registrar noted that an election was occurring but the voter was supplied with no details in ESD7's website). This situation having been discovered by the PAC a few days before early voting, the PAC ended up posting the election on its website to increase awareness of this important organization. Shortly following the inquiry by the PAC, a local community leader emailed notices of the election, bringing the turnout up by a large factor. The email contained no direct reference to the PAC, but the timing was fortunate.

ESD#11, while posting its election in its website, was similar to many organizations of its scale size having no information on the commissioners currently serving as well as any information on the candidates running for office. We had to contact the lawyer for each organization to obtain the candidate contact information, a common circumstance with most political subdivisions. Today, both organizations (ESD#7&11) have links through their website to the names of the Commissioners, and a raised awareness of the responsibilities that voters hold in their management. This affects the voters in their services areas, some tens of thousands of people.

Referee PAC raised \$7,755 and spent \$6,683. The majority of the money was spent developing a backend database to enable expanding voter services. Among these services included improving the Wordpress theme integration, designing the template for each webpage, researching online payment options (Braintree charges no fees for the first \$50k), configuring the website to accept donations through Braintree, making the website more mobile-friendly, designing the new database, coding the control panel, and adding a financial feature to handling reporting compliance on contributions. Our software engineer was hired away before the last few bugs in the database could be worked out, to an organization that forbids working with other organizations on personal time. Our pay rate and instability is only acceptable to people who see a communal reward and are available to work on their personal time. We have hired a computer science student to follow through with her notes and complete the final fixes.

Other expenditures included purchasing magnets with voter information to sell for advertising space (including sales taxes). This strategy appears to have increased use of our services in the Montgomery County area, as observed by steadily increasing clicks on the website for local (downballot) elections from the February primary, May off-season, and November off-year elections.

Other PAC personnel that assisted with the effort included a recent university graduate (scientist) and a student from Wunsche High School. The scientist assisted with the initial lookup of offices serving the locations for 30 more voters interested in our services; as we have discovered, this is a complicated effort requiring dedication and perseverance.

The PACs ethics arm received several inquiries from candidates and area voters; only the 4 evaluated by the Referees were deemed to have sufficient information for a rigorous discussion. The inquiries were roughly double the amount investigated.

2015 Plans

Referee PAC has recently been fortunate enough to retain the services of a post-doctoral scientist. Besides conducting an initial analysis into the voting statistics of independent voters in the areas served by the PAC, she is also preparing a "Bond Proposing Guide" for government organizations interested in persuading voters to support bond initiatives.

Referee PAC will continue to expand; however, the rate is largely determined by steady, reliable funding. After Harris and Montgomery Counties combined placed \$1.5 trillion worth of bonds on the November ballot, the Wunsche High School student investigated and found that half the organizations didn't have phone numbers that were easy to look up on the internet. As a result of the obvious dearth in any justification for the bonds, the PAC was forced to add them to the voter services. Organizations placing bonds on the ballot will be required to submit/publish details on the purpose and scope of the bonds in compliance with our "Bond Proposing Guide", or we will advise voters of critical details lacking in the evaluation of the measures.

Finally, we are taking steps through voter outreach and publishing to raise Referee PACs recognitions in areas that it serves.

Voter Outreach Presentation

Among the available materials on the website, we have a voter outreach presentation geared towards young adults:

<http://refpac.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/RefPACPres.pdf>