



**American Friends  
Service Committee**

*Southeastern Regional Office · American Friends Immigrant Services*

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**SMART VOTE,**  
**STRONGER COMMUNITIES:**

Empowering Immigrants and Refugees  
Through Civic Engagement

*Sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)  
Quaker Values in Action*

## **Introduction**

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Smart Vote is a project of American Friends Immigrant Services (AFIS) based out of Miami, FL. AFIS is the Miami branch of American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. The Miami branch's mission is to strengthen understanding and respect around cultures, increase awareness of issues surrounding immigration and immigrant rights, and empower the immigrant and refugee communities to exercise their civil and human rights.

Smart Vote aims to empower and inform the immigrant community specifically in order to promote conscientious civic involvement. This project grew from the observed need to inform immigrants of their reciprocal relationship with the social, political, and legal developments in the local community. The immigrant community both has an impact on and is impacted by such developments. As a result, this community needs to be an active and informed participant in civic engagement. Smart Vote provides an outlet through which this engagement may be attained.

Smart Vote seeks to foster informed community involvement through the following means:

- Educating naturalized citizens as to how to make informed voting decisions, rather than following a charismatic persona or peer voting patterns;
- Engaging with local communities to create awareness surrounding proposed bills, leaders and political candidates, and other civic matters;
- Fostering awareness as to the importance behind making informed decisions; and
- Aiding immigrants who are interested in becoming naturalized U.S. citizens so that their voices may also be heard through voting and civic engagement.

Because the immigrant community represents a population vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization in a variety of sectors, it is critical that information and interaction is promoted amongst this community. Local empowerment provides a bottom-up approach to promoting immigrant rights and increasing awareness on the issues surrounding immigration, both of which are conducive to AFIS's mission and AFSC's overall goals of equality and social justice. Smart Vote helps to create informed, engaged, and conscientious communities.

## **Smart Vote: Program Goals**

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The Smart Vote project aims to promote civic engagement amongst immigrant communities via several outlets. One of these outlets is preparing and aiding those individuals interested in becoming naturalized U.S. citizens through the naturalization process. This can be a lengthy, difficult, and sometimes discouraging process. AFIS offers

support and information for those undergoing or planning to undergo the U.S. naturalization process.

The most effective means of offering aid is through citizenship classes. These classes seek to:

- Promote civic engagement among the immigrant community;
- Promote information on local issues and electoral choices;
- Provide services and information in preparation for the U.S. Naturalization Test;
- Improve English proficiency and literacy skills;
- Build a conscientious immigrant community and support network; and
- Promote equality and social justice through education and empowerment.



Founder and director Paul Mondesir with former students, now naturalized U.S. citizens.

These classes are not only empowering through their informative influence, but also through the community that they build. Furthermore, they establish a double-edged approach to immigrant rights and empowerment – they offer a channel through which immigrants may become citizens and prospective voters, as well as inform such prospective voters as to the civic process and the necessity of their civic engagement.

## **Implementation and History**

AFSC first launched the Smart Vote Program in August 2011. This program grew from the observed need to inform and educate potential voters on how to make knowledgeable decisions regarding voting agendas. This objective seeks to empower voters to make informed opinions based on issues and political agendas, rather than to blindly vote for a charismatic candidate, vote for a candidate based on their peers' voting choices, or not vote at all. As a result, Smart Vote not only promotes civic engagement, but does so from an educated stance.

However, the ability to educate individuals on voting issues becomes a disenfranchised tool if the individuals are unable to vote. Smart Vote founder Paul Mondesir also recognized the need to create voters within the immigrant and refugee community. South Florida is

home to the largest Haitian community in the United States, with an estimated 34.2% of the U.S.'s Haitian immigrant and refugee community residing here. Approximately 79,000 Haitians living in South Florida are Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), about half of whom are eligible for naturalization as U.S. citizens<sup>1</sup>. By encouraging and aiding these individuals in the naturalization process, the Smart Vote initiative also empowers the immigrant and refugee community to engage in voting and political processes. As a result, the program began to offer citizenship classes to aid those applying for naturalization.

The citizenship classes have become Smart Vote's primary avenue of outreach to the target community. The main objectives of these classes are to:

- Teach U.S. civics and history to students so that they are aware of the Naturalization Test's content;
- Improve students' English proficiency and literacy skills, which is of particular importance, as an estimated 65-80% of students cannot read or write in their native language;
- Provide support, motivation, and inspiration through a positive community environment for those undergoing the naturalization process.

These classes are held at a community center in Ft. Lauderdale, FL at no expense to the student. Furthermore, there is no registration, required attendance, or timeline in which students must participate; the flexibility of the program encourages students to attend according to their own availability and needs. All these factors make the classes very openly accessible to potential students, and the results are clear. In August 2011, Smart Vote's citizenship classes were first held with only 3 students. Today, classes consistently fill beyond capacity at 45 students, with more lined up at the door.

## **Citizenship Classes Today**

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The necessity for these classes is palpable. Classes are offered twice a week and are still unable to meet the demand for the number of students wishing to attend. Word has spread about the availability and effectiveness of these classes. While the majority of the students reside locally in Ft. Lauderdale, there are others who travel from all over the South Florida region in order to attend.

On average, approximately 10 attending students pass the U.S. Naturalization Test each week. This figure equates to roughly at least 260 students becoming naturalized U.S. citizens to date<sup>2</sup> since the start of the program a mere 6 months ago. During the week of

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates calculated according to data provided by Aaron Terrazas, Migration Policy Institute, "Haitian Immigrants in the United States". Published January 2010, accessible at: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?id=770>.

<sup>2</sup> As of March 9, 2012, when this report was written.



This woman traveled from Port St. Lucie to the classes held in Ft. Lauderdale, a journey more than two hours by bus. She passed her Naturalization Test in February 2012.

March 5-9, 2012 alone, 12 students passed the U.S. Naturalization Test compared with only 2 who did not pass, and this is by no means a case of solidarity. These students frequently return to the classroom to offer their stories as motivation and testament to what can be achieved, reinforcing the efforts of Smart Vote’s citizenship classes and the supportive community it creates.

Some of the primary hurdles to overcome in administering these classes lie in language and literacy acquisition. Not only is improving English proficiency a chief and necessary concern, as many students are native speakers of Haitian Creole and/or

French with limited exposure to the English language, but a majority of the students must also be taught basic reading and writing skills. As this factor can be especially challenging to students, founder and instructor Paul Mondesir’s primary challenge lies in building student confidence, prolonging student interest, and creating and implementing new techniques for knowledge acquisition.

By creating pathways and modes of assimilation, students can better remember the necessary components of the U.S. Naturalization Test. For example, students are taught the phrase “civil rights leader” in learning about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In order to help students remember this phrase, the following assimilative methods are used:

- “Civil”. If an individual does not belong to the military, s/he is a civilian and, thus, part of *civil* society.
- “Rights”. When giving directions, the opposite of turning left is turning *right*.
- “Leader”. Think of a prominent figure, like a church or political *leader*.

By combining these three examples, students can remember the phrase and associate it with one of the U.S.’s prominent historical figures. Furthermore, Paul’s method of teaching literacy relieves student anxiety by reducing language to its essence – a set of symbols and designs. By simplifying the characteristics of written language, reading and writing becomes a much more accessible feat for students.

Periodically administered practice exams reinforce these methods. Students score an average 6 out of 10 – the score needed to pass the U.S. Naturalization test – on practice exams testing U.S. civics and history knowledge. Additionally, students score an average 6.7 out of 10 on practice reading and writing exams, which is a notable accomplishment for those who enter the program practically unable to read or write.

The need for Smart Vote’s citizenship classes is felt in the community and growing. Between the accessibility and flexibility of classes, potential students’ interest and demand for these classes currently exceeds the ability to supply. With the success rate that Smart

Vote has thus far experienced in regards to students passing the U.S. Naturalization Test, word is spreading about the program's effectiveness. As a result, Smart Vote continues to fulfill its goals in addressing the region's immigrant and refugee community – inform, motivate, and empower. These goals not only fulfill those of Smart Vote, but also the mission of AFIS and AFSC in promoting social equality, peace, and humanitarian service.

## **Proud to be a U.S. Citizen – and Able to Vote!**

It is one thing to hear the overall success of a program and see its progress in numbers and statistics. However, it is also necessary to observe the qualitative results of a program that cannot be told solely through numbers. While reporting statistics helps gauge the span of the program's effectiveness, this also separates the humanity of the program and de-humanizes those persons affected. To complement the aggregate results of this report, included are some personal accounts of the necessity of the Smart Vote program, its citizenship classes, and the dedication afforded to it by its founder.

### ***Smart Vote's First Voter***

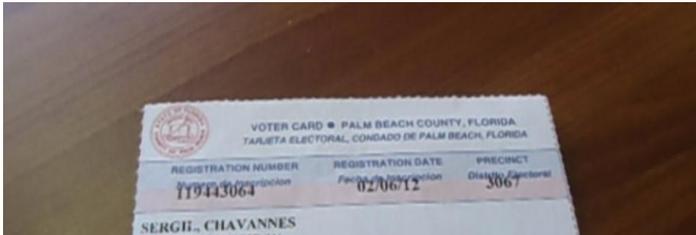
Chavannes is a 33-year old man who, with the help of the Smart Vote program, became a U.S. Citizen in January 2012. A resident of Lake Worth, Florida, he first applied for naturalization in November 2011. Less than 3 months later, the process was complete. Chavannes, who heard about the Smart Vote program and its citizenship classes from his sister, returned to the classroom on March 7, 2012 to tell his story.

Chavannes first applied for naturalization the third week of November 2011. On January 6, 2012, he took his Naturalization Test. The rapidity of the process is particularly noteworthy, as lengthy application periods typically deter and discourage prospective applicants. Between the time he first applied for naturalization and the date of his exam, he attended the citizenship classes offered by the Smart Vote program roughly once per week. During his biometrics appointment in December 2011, Chavannes received the signature study book and CD from USCIS in order to prepare himself for the exam. He says he spent an incalculable amount of time studying for the exam over the course of the next month, using a variety of techniques to study and absorb the information. His efforts were well worth the trouble.



Chavannes with his voter's registration card. Chavannes is the first example of a Smart Vote student to become a U.S. Citizen and also register to vote, bringing the goals of the program around full circle.

On January 6, 2012, Chavannes passed his Naturalization Test with flying colors. He answered all 8 of the questions asked of him correctly, and passed both his reading and writing exams on his first attempt. Among the questions asked of him were to name 3 of the first 13 states in the union, as well as two U.S. national holidays. By the third week of January, Chavannes received his Naturalization Certificate. His sister also underwent the same process, using the Smart Vote program to help her prepare. His father is currently awaiting his naturalization interview.



Chavannes' voter registration card, the first of the Smart Vote program.



When asked how he feels about completing his interview and naturalization process, Chavannes answered, "Great, because now I am part of the U.S. family." As a citizen, he can now apply for federal jobs. Because he does not have any immediate family in Haiti, he does not plan to petition for any family members to join him here in the U.S.

However, the highlight of Chavannes' story is that he is the first alumnus of the Smart Vote program to register to vote. He registered on February 6, 2012, and brought his voter's registration card with him when returning to the classroom. He is excited to vote in the next election. This is the first example of a member of the program utilizing their citizenship to vote and have their voice heard in the community. Hopefully Chavannes' example will prompt other prospective citizens to use their newly acquired status in a similar fashion.

### ***Overcoming Illiteracy***

On March 8, 2012, this Haitian couple passed their naturalization exams. Their victory was of particular importance to Paul and his motives in initializing the Smart Vote program. The woman, nearly 70 years old, was unable to read or write before attending Smart Vote's citizenship classes. Her determination and persistence is what allowed her to overcome this hurdle and complete the naturalization process. Through the practices, motivation, and support offered by the Smart Vote program, she was able to obtain the basic literacy skills necessary to pass the U.S. Naturalization Test. She and her husband, residents of the U.S. for many years, were finally able to realize their dream of becoming



U.S. citizens, affording them greater opportunities and freedoms. They returned to class that night to tell their success story, attributing the goals of the Smart Vote program as a major contribution to their success.



Similarly, another young man's determination allowed him to overcome the literacy hurdle. Through practice, a strong mentality, and the inspiration offered by Strong Vote, he was able to pass the U.S. Naturalization Test and the challenges presented by the written exam. He is currently awaiting his Naturalization Certificate.

## **The Future of Smart Vote**

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These anecdotes and tales of success are only the start of the Smart Vote program. The ongoing and growing demand for these citizenship classes is not likely to cease, nor is the necessity of the program. Smart Votes and its objectives facilitate routes for full integration into U.S. society by not only aiding those going through the naturalization process, but also by creating more informed and aware naturalized citizens.

By promoting strengthened community and civic engagement, Smart Vote furthers the goals of empowerment and immigrant and refugee rights proffered by AFIS. These underlie the mission of AFSC in promoting universal social justice, equality, and humanitarianism. The future of the Smart Vote program lies in extending its outreach to the target community. The question lies not in how influential this outreach will be, but to what degree it can be extended.