

SPECIAL REPORT

The future of elections and democracy in Minnesota

by Secretary of State Steve Simon



These comments are excerpted from a speech given by Secretary of State Steve Simon on February 28, 2023, to the University of Minnesota Retirees Association. These excerpts were edited for length and clarity.

Simon is a graduate of the University of Minnesota Law School, started in private practice, and served as Assistant Minnesota Attorney General, in the Minnesota House of Representatives for ten years, and now is in his third term as Minnesota's twenty-second secretary of state.

As Secretary of State, I have an office with many responsibilities. We have a lot of duties, either in the constitution or Minnesota statutes, but there is no question about it, the biggest duty, the one that garners the most attention and attracts the most interest and scrutiny, is the duty revolving around elections. We serve as state chief elections officer.

What it does not mean: we in the Office of the Secretary of State don't count votes, we don't own any of the elections equipment, and we don't hire or train or pay any election judges. All those things happen at the local level—county, city, and township level.

We oversee that system and knit it together. We certify the elections equipment. We run the databases that are the spine of the system. We provide the guidance, both legal and policy. We do the legislative work at the state Capitol and at the US Capitol. So I like to say we in our office are in the democracy business.

I think you would probably agree with me that it is a heck of a time right now to be in the democracy business. There has been a lot out there for the last few years swirling around elections and voting and democracy, starting at the national level, but even at the state level, and it affects us all, no matter where we sit or stand politically.

Despite that swirl, despite that controversy, despite the very possibility of some real challenges, in the long-term I am an optimist about democracy in America and in Minnesota. I'll explain why. We have all been through a lot over the last few years but the challenges we have endured really prove that our democracy is resilient. But resilient doesn't mean indestructible. Democracies can bend, but they can also break. We never want ours to break. We came close in 2020 to a breaking point. We faced gigantic challenges just from an administrative standpoint.

On January 1, we were already heading into what was going to be a very intense, knock-down, drag-out presidential election, given the titanic personalities involved, the stakes, and all the rest.

In March, everything changed when COVID hit. That's when a once-in-a-century pandemic upended our lives. It affected our health, our jobs, our schools, our families, and our democracy as well. We who do elections were confronted with multiple once-in-a-generation challenges. We and my colleagues around the country were wondering, "How are we going to pull this off?"

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Our Minnesota presidential primary was on March 3, 2020. If it had been two or three weeks later we would have had to postpone it, as a couple other states did. There were three principal challenges:

1. We didn't know how long it would last.
2. We didn't know a lot about this virus.
3. We didn't know where this was headed.

One of the things we were worried about was election judges. It takes about 30,000 election judges to pull off an election in Minnesota. It is a vital position, and we were worried about recruitment. We thought we would have a real crisis on our hands, but we doubled down on election-judge recruitment and we also made a concerted effort to get resources, such as PPE, to voting sites.

We were also worried about possible conflict, if not violence, in or around polling places. The third and maybe most important concern was the voters themselves. Were voters going to stay home? We had a very simple strategy, and that was to emphasize the option to vote from home. That's a key part of our statutes. The vast majority voted from home or otherwise remotely by absentee.

When the dust settled on the 2020 election, despite the pandemic and despite the optics and the worries, Minnesota for the third time in a row was number one in America in voter turnout. It's extraordinary that we did that in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic.

How does Minnesota do it? What is it about Minnesota that puts us at the top of the list in terms of voting turnout in almost every election? I think it's primarily two things: laws and culture.

Laws. We are fortunate in Minnesota that we have laws on the books that largely value voters, and they were put there over the years by both political parties. Election-day voter registration, sometimes called same-day registration, has been on the books since 1973. Only fifteen or sixteen states have it. You can go into your polling place on election day and register to vote. In Minnesota we also have online voter registration. You can go to our website (mnvotes.gov) and register there. We have the no-excuses ballot. That ultimately saved the 2020 election. Fifty-eight percent of Minnesotans voted absentee in 2020. Only forty-two percent voted in person. In this legislative session, I am championing automatic voter registration for everyone, pre-registration for sixteen- and seventeen-year olds, and restoration of the right to vote for those who have left jail behind.

Culture. I mean a habit or a way of doing things. Our culture in Minnesota is to believe that elections are consequential, that they have real downstream effects, that they are to be taken seriously. We have some really good corporate citizens who have for years pushed civic engagement. One example of Minnesota culture is the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Minnesota spoke with one voice, unanimous, with all of our DFL and Republican senators and representatives voting for the Voting Rights Act. When it comes to the big issues, we Minnesotans have tended to be on the same page as one another

What's the trajectory for our state? We're in pretty good shape in the long run, but we do face some dangerous threats. The number-one threat to democracy today is the cloud of election disinformation. Disinformation is a deliberate distortion of what the system is, and when that distortion is done for political or financial purposes, sowing confusion, it corrodes well-earned confidence in the system, and in its most extreme, can lead to violence.

How should we act? First, when confronting disinformation, we have to lead with the truth. The second strategy is to be empathetic. There are good people in this state who have bought into disinformation. If someone you know or like or trust or respect passes on a judgement about something, you're more likely to believe it or take it to heart. Polling done about a year ago showed the largest group, thirty-eight percent, don't know what to believe. With that thirty-eight percent, empathy can go a long way.

Third, and most important, is to be as transparent as we can be. Talk about the guarantees of trustworthiness of elections. If someone has a suspicion, they can come in and take a look. If we address disinformation and come back to a common understanding of the facts of what the system is, disinformation is less likely to be weaponized.

That is my hope. I am a long-term optimist. I know those are big challenges. I see them every day and they play out in some disturbing ways. I know that we can overcome them. Does democracy feel like it has been a little dinged and dented over the last few years? Yes, but the institutions that we have in place nationally and in Minnesota were built to last and they have. Democracy has held despite some real threats and challenges. And I have every reason to believe that in the long haul, it will as well. We have been through a lot worse in our nation's history, and there's no reason to believe that we in Minnesota can't once again, not just pass whatever test is before us, but ace that test as well. I want to thank you for being partners in the democracy business.



Many bills passed or are in progress

by Sen. Clare Oumou Verbeten

Hello SD66 DFLers! The DFL Majority has been hard at work this legislative session. I'm excited to fill you in on the legislation I'm championing at the Capitol.

I recently passed my first and second bills from the Minnesota Senate floor. [SF 1213](#) fixed a loophole in the law to allow Minnesota State faculty teaching summer courses to be represented by unions in collective bargaining agreements. This bill primarily impacts adjunct faculty and gives them access to the same benefits as their colleagues, like minimum pay, tuition waivers, paid leave, professional development resources, and more.

My second bill, [SF 133](#), protects victims from the coercive practice of labor trafficking. Labor trafficking is the practice of using blackmail or other means of social pressure to coerce someone into doing labor that they would not otherwise consent to. The bill passed the Senate floor unanimously.

I'm continuing to work on essential changes to our criminal justice system. I am proud to report that [SF 2495](#), which bans the use of deception in police interrogation, has passed out of the Judiciary Committee to the floor. I'm also authoring [SF 839](#) which establishes a Public Safety Innovation Board, [SF 1241](#) which bans the use of private prisons in Minnesota, and [SF 3007](#) (Minnesota Connecting Families) which makes calls made from prison free of charge.

Minnesota Connecting Families ([SF 3007](#)) was featured in this [Star Tribune article](#). I have been partnering with the Department of Corrections and [Worth Rises](#), a national leader in the prison phone justice movement, to offer this legislation. The Governor and Lt. Governor included money in their budget proposal to cover the cost of phone calls in state prisons. This is simply the right thing to do as it keeps families together. Communication with loved ones also maintains the essential bonds incarcerated individuals need to ensure they are successful and thrive after release.

Earlier this month, I toured the Shakopee Women's Correctional Facility alongside Senators Seeberger, Pratt, and Mann. My office scheduled this visit to speak with women at the facility currently incarcerated on charges of aiding and abetting felony murder. My bill, [SF 1478](#), reforms this outdated aiding and abetting law. Currently, Minnesotans can be charged with, and convicted of, murder even if they did not kill anyone, did not intend for anyone to die, and did not anticipate that a death would occur. This law disproportionately impacts young women of color. It was powerful to listen to the stories of women like Maureen, Megan, and Briana. [You can read their stories here](#). These women are hopeful that passing this bill into law will help them, and others like them, face justice based on the severity of their actions, not the actions of somebody else.

There is so much more work to be done, but I'm proud of what we've already accomplished in these few short months. I am filled with so much gratitude for those of you who have reached out to my office or have stopped by the Capitol. Please contact my office any time to request information or provide your input. For those requests, or any others, reach out to my legislative assistant, Tristan. He can be reached at tristan.voegeli@senate.mn or at (651) 296-8866.

I hope to hear from you soon!

We are delivering in the Minnesota House on many important issues

by Rep. Athena Hollins, SD66B

Greetings neighbors! It's been an exciting time in the Minnesota House. We recently passed the 100-day mark of the DFL trifecta leading and governing with our progressive values and agenda guiding our way in promoting a people-centered, multi-racial democracy. As Majority Whip, it's my job in the House to make sure that we have all of the votes that we need to ensure that our bills get passed and on Gov. Walz's desk. It hasn't always been easy, but the amount of work we've been able to accomplish to this point has brought me so much joy in knowing that we have begun to deliver on so many issues that impact our friends, families, and neighbors that my colleagues and I have organized and campaigned on.



In case you have missed it, here's the highlight reel of the bills that we've passed and have already been signed:

- Codified reproductive freedom in Minnesota in response to the Dobbs decision in the Supreme Court
- 100% clean energy by 2040
- Funded meals for every student so all our children can focus on learning
- \$315 million in infrastructure investments
- Driver's licenses for all
- Banning natural hair discrimination

That's not all. After Gov. Walz's State of the State, I'm fired up to continue to lead our work on making Minnesota a trans refuge state, passing comprehensive gun control, taking bold action on childcare access, affordability, and empowering and respecting providers in a way that recognizes that they are the workforce behind our workforce. There's no doubt that there is still more work to do to make Minnesota a more just and equitable place, but I'm incredibly proud of the work that we have done, excited for the work ahead, and ready to organize together with all of you to continue the progress we are making as a state.

Our messages include solidarity, unity, and accountability

by Rep. Leigh Finke, SD66A



This is an excerpt from Rep. Finke's latest [legislative update](#).

Last week, we continued to pass our budget bills off the Minnesota House floor. I am proud to support budget proposals to ensure Minnesota is the best place to work, live, and raise a family. Key themes and messages from this week include solidarity, unity, and accountability.

In the past week, two local mosques were violently attacked, resulting in fire damage to both. There continues to be an increase in legislative attacks against LGBTQIA2S+ communities and senseless acts of gun violence across the nation. DFLers stood together in strength as they condemn these hateful acts and boldly say, hate has no home here. *You* belong here.

(Continued on next page)



Here's the latest from the Capitol:

Our three newest laws

Last week, Gov. Walz signed three bills into law, all of them making Minnesota a more welcoming, science-following, rights-protecting state. We banned conversion therapy, protected access to abortion, and did the same for gender-affirming care by making Minnesota a safe state for trans refuge. These vital new laws loudly proclaim Minnesota will take you, as you are, with open arms.

Signing the trans-refuge bill into law is monumental to our trans community, especially our trans youth. The criminalization of our existence by extremist Republicans across the country is mounting, and when our community is mentioned in the headlines, it's often about hate-motivated attacks,

dehumanizing fabrications, and attempts to diminish our right to live. But today is a good day in Minnesota. As a state, we stand on the right side of history by boldly welcoming and celebrating our trans community. In a time of vulnerability and fear, we choose to love and accept our neighbors and relatives for who they are and who they will become. I want to thank Sen. Erin Maye Quade for leading this bill in the Minnesota Senate.

This is also a time to celebrate and acknowledge the influential organizers behind this movement, our youth. Our beautifully weird, eclectic, and fabulous queer agenda is to continue to show up in spaces that were designed to shut us out, and we'll continue to be joyous. Our joy is an act of resistance, and we won't rest until all our liberation efforts succeed.

Budget bills

These past few weeks have been long, some nights going up until midnight. While this time during the legislative process is most daunting, I find great joy in knowing we're passing many overdue bills. Minnesotans deserve relief and support now. That is why I was proud to vote to pass these bills.

Minnesota's largest tax cut

Collectively, the bill delivers the largest tax cut in state history with credits, rebates, and other provisions designed to maximize benefits for workers, families, and seniors. It also addresses years of rising property taxes and underinvestment in local communities. The House DFL tax bill reforms our tax code to improve fairness and equity across the board. Between 2018 and 2021, the adjusted gross income of filers of those earning less than \$20,000 annually fell by 9 percent while the AGI of filers over \$500,000 grew 117 percent. Minnesotans expect those who profited most during the pandemic to pay their fair share. With a worldwide reporting requirement for multinational corporations hiding income in offshore tax havens and a millionaire tax on the top 0.8 percent of all earners, we will have the necessary revenue to invest in children, families, homeowners, seniors, and the most vulnerable Minnesotans now and in the future.

Jobs and labor budget bill

For Minnesota to maintain its strong economy, it's vital we support working parents by ensuring our kids have top-notch childcare. But in Greater Minnesota, affordability isn't the only barrier to accessing childcare—availability is also a critical problem. Our budget bill invests in our childcare system to support our families, enrich our kids, and make sure childcare staff earn a living wage.

Legalization of adult-use cannabis

Advocates and changemakers have been working on this legislation for nearly a decade. The versions constantly changed to reflect the need and justice for our BIPOC communities. I am beyond proud of my colleagues for finally passing the bill off the Minnesota House floor. Minnesota's current cannabis laws are doing more harm than good. By creating a regulatory framework, we can address the harms caused by cannabis, establish a more sensible set of laws, improve our healthcare and criminal justice systems, and ensure better outcomes for communities. Minnesotans deserve the freedom and respect to make responsible decisions about cannabis use themselves.

Human services budget bill

Communities are facing an urgent need for dedicated, compassionate individuals to provide care for people with disabilities, seniors, and vulnerable Minnesotans. With a tight labor market and demographics shifting, Minnesota House DFLers are stepping forward with solutions to ensure everyone can live in their communities with the care and dignity they deserve while ensuring workers are supported on the job. Moreover, we must protect the working rights of our long-term care facility workers and invest in nursing homes. We cannot continue to expect workers to provide quality care when they are not making a livable wage.

Ramsey County is working hard to provide the best possible service for everyone

by Commissioner Trista MatasCastillo



Happy almost-spring SD66 DFLers! Even if the cold rains and floods right now don't feel quite like the season of renewal yet, I am full of optimism for this year. At Ramsey County, we have been hard at work throughout the winter to eliminate backlogs in our systems and to provide the best possible service for everyone who lives or works in our communities.

I have been busy over the last few months talking to legislators about Ramsey County's need for more County Program Aid (CPA). Ramsey is the smallest and densest county in the state of Minnesota, and we have more residents living in poverty than any other county. For decades, Minnesota has recognized that asking local governments with vastly different tax bases to fund their programs solely on the basis of property taxes entrenches inequality and puts a disproportionate burden on low-income communities.

CPA, which the state provides to counties according to a complicated formula, is a foundational part of Ramsey County's budget. Unfortunately, the state's investment into that fund and also into Local Government Aid (LGA) has not kept pace with inflation or other rising costs, putting the squeeze on our residents. I'm excited that the recent House Tax Omnibus includes a substantial bump in CPA and LGA, and I want to encourage each of you to talk to legislators and tell them to invest some of the surplus in this vital public support.

Speaking of property taxes, I want to take a moment to talk about how that burden is distributed. Every year, the Board of Commissioners sets an overall levy number, which is then distributed to individual properties in the county according to their value and at different rates depending on whether the property has a commercial or residential use. The value of your property is determined by the Ramsey County Assessor each year, and their judgment ultimately has the biggest impact on how much you have to pay each year.

Unfortunately, by the time most people receive their proposed property tax bills, it is already too late to challenge or appeal the appraised value of your property. That's why we are making a deliberate push this year to make people aware that now is the time to make that appeal. If you think your appraised home value is out of line with what you would get if you sold your home, contact the Ramsey County Assessor's Office at (651) 266-2131. An appraiser will get in touch with you within three days to discuss your concerns and review your property.

As always, my office is ready to assist with any issues you might have with the county. Please reach out to me at (651) 266-8360, or via email at Trista.Matascastillo@ramseycounty.us.

Historic funding for the environment and natural resources might be coming

by Gwen Willems



Rep. Rick Hansen (DFL-South St. Paul), chair of the Minnesota House Environment and Natural Resources Committee, sponsored HF2310 - Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Budget Bill. With Minnesota having a huge budget surplus, the committee planned expenditures of \$670 million dollars, which would make it the largest one-time investment in the environment in the history of the State of Minnesota.

Rep. Hansen described the bill as a problem-solving one, funding agencies (Pollution Control Agency, Department of Natural Resources, Board of Water and Soil Resources, and other organizations), protecting Minnesotan’s health and environment from pollution, and finally fixing issues that have been identified for years, such as emerald ash borer, PFAS, chronic wasting disease, neonicotinoid pesticides, and invasive species. It also addresses environmental justice issues. The bill passed the Minnesota House, with two amendments.

Among the agencies, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) requested \$35 million from the general fund to help modernize hatcheries, shore-fishing sites, and piers. “The DNR also wants hundreds of millions more for infrastructure projects funded through government borrowing,” according to *MinnPost* (April 7, 2023). “Altogether, the money includes initiatives to modernize and upgrade state park roads, buildings and trails, camping infrastructure, boating access, fisheries, streams, and water-related infrastructure like culverts and more.”

Opponents of the proposed budget are concerned about the level of spending and whether it raises the ongoing level of funding. Opponents also do not favor the proposed increase in fees for residents, such as park fees, fishing and hunting licenses, and watercraft fees. As an example of needed one-time spending, Rep. Hansen pointed to the 94 million trees that would be planted to deal with emerald ash borer.

The bill’s counterpart in the Senate did not include any of the fee increases. According to *MinnPost*, “Hansen’s counterpart, Sen. Founq Hawj (DFL-St. Paul), said the lack of fees helped make the legislation fiscally responsible.”

Watch for final developments. Legislative conference committees on this and other omnibus finance bills are planned for Monday, May 1.

Gwen is co-chair of the Capitol Region Watershed District Community Advisory Committee.

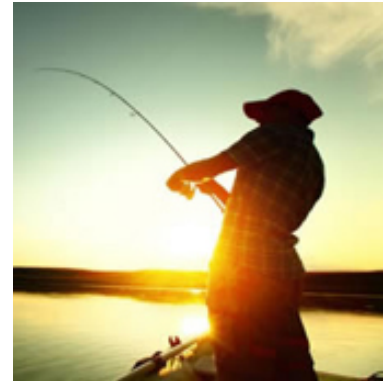


Photo courtesy of the DNR

Biennial State DFL business meeting held in Moorhead

by **Gwen Willems**

The latest State DFL business meeting was held in person on February 11 in a theater at Minnesota State University – Moorhead.

In addition to typical reports and consideration of bylaw amendments, speeches were given by special guests. These included Sen. Rob Kupec (04), Rep. Heather Keeler (04A), outgoing Outreach and Inclusion Officer Cheniqua Johnson, who resigned to run for St. Paul City Council, and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan.

The most significant action was election of Minnesota DFL officers for the next two years. Despite two nominations from the floor, all listed on the prepared slate known as “DFL United” won. Elected officers are:

Chairman: Ken Martin

First Vice Chair: Marge Hoffa

Second Vice Chair: Shivanthi Sathanandan

Treasurer: Leah Midgarden

Secretary: Ceri Everett

Outreach and Inclusion Officer: Bahea Manasra

Unfortunately, the meeting was poorly attended, with only 289 reported by the Credentials Committee, including just three participants from our senate district. This was not surprising, considering the costs in time, mileage, and possible lodging. The site was barely accessible, with sheets of ice on the parking lot, no center aisle in the theater, and poor access to floor microphones.

Hopefully, future statewide meetings will be more accessible. Ken Martin set up a Task Force on Hybrid Meetings to explore ways to make the Minnesota DFL State Central Committee (SCC), State Executive Committee, and State Convention meetings accessible via a hybrid format with members being able to participate both virtually and in-person.

The latest SCC meeting was held exclusively online on April 29, with 346 participants counted at the beginning. The most debated agenda item was consideration of a bylaw addition that codifies the Minnesota DFL allocation procedure to match that used for allocation of representatives in Congress. The method used has varied in the past. This particular procedure would have given SD66 two fewer State Convention delegates and one fewer State Central Committee delegate if it had been used in 2022. The bylaw addition was approved.

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