

Chapter Spotlight: Virginia SSN Builds Trust in Elections at Local Level

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Bobbi Gentry, Virginia SSN chapter co-leader

When the Scholars Strategy Network announced a [new grant opportunity](#) to fund projects meant to increase trust and participation in elections, [Virginia SSN](#) chapter leaders [Bobbi Gentry](#) and [Benjamin Blankenship](#) immediately knew they wanted to apply. Like many other communities in America, they noticed an increasing distrust in U.S. elections in their little pocket of Virginia - the Shenandoah Valley - and wanted to do something about it.



Benjamin Blankenship

With funding in hand, the duo quickly set out to launch an ambitious slate of programming for their community, with events and tabling scheduled in the lead up to the approaching midterm elections and into the new year. Aptly titled The Valley Votes Project, Gentry and Blankenship hired a web designer to create [a website](#) that houses resources, information, and recordings of their events to make it easy for community members to register to vote, learn about elections, and get involved. And to spread awareness of their work, Gentry [spoke with local TV news](#) who covered their efforts.

Their first event, [The Valley Votes Securely](#), was organized to explain the security around elections in Virginia and beyond in order to restore trust and counteract arguments that have been made following the 2020 election. The event featured a former election administrator from Massachusetts, a local professor who has written on election integrity in the US and abroad, as well as Gentry and Blankenship who discussed trust more broadly and the state political context.

Their next event - The Valley Votes Confidently - is scheduled for October 11th and will feature Judd Choate, the Director of Elections in the Colorado Department of State to discuss a recent survey about election trust in Colorado. And to close things out before the midterms, their third event this year will bring in elected officials to talk about the value of elections and encourage people to vote on November 8th. Additional events are planned for 2023 to follow up on the election and continue their outreach.

"The purpose is really to improve trust through education by offering a variety of events to clarify and understand what happened in 2020, but also to understand where people are today," said Gentry.

Beyond educating the public and building trust, these events will also allow Gentry and Blankenship to gather data via pre- and post-attendance surveys to determine the effectiveness of their events and ideally inform the work of others.

"If you look at the pattern in the entire country in terms of where trust is deteriorating in elections, it is communities just like ours - more rural places where economic booms and prosperity haven't necessarily reached all parts of our community, more working class, more right of center, more white, all those things," said Blankenship. "So, I think that if we can show that events work here and help build trust here, then maybe that formula can translate to other places where we see issues with trust in elections as well."

Virginia is also uniquely positioned to benefit from regular election related programming given their election calendar. "Virginia is a special place in that pretty much every single year there's an important election happening," said Blankenship. Last year saw a gubernatorial election that brought national attention, and following this year's midterms voters will select their representatives for the state legislature in 2023.

A final component of the project is to increase civic engagement, both among college students on their respective campuses as well as in the larger community. Via social media accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, the chapter leaders have reached the community with information about registering to vote and the upcoming midterm elections. And each leader is working with a team of students to table both on campus and at businesses across the community to register voters and provide election related information.

Beyond national and statewide elections, Gentry and Blankenship hope their work will encourage more participation at the local level. "There's a real opportunity to make policy change at the local level," said Gentry. "It's not just federal elections, but it's also local elections that impact our day to day lives and the policy decisions that people are going to make right in our own backyard, like how we run our education system."



Bobbi Gentry