



**Welcome Remarks - Minnesota State Student Voter Summit -
Leela Strong, Newhouse Director, CIRCLE**

Hello, everyone. It's a privilege to be with you today as we launch this year's Student Voter Summit. I want to begin by thanking the organizers, our generous hosts at the University of St. Thomas, and my friend Michael Wall for the warm invitation to join you.

Minnesota has a lot going for it, and one of its standout assets is the leadership inside your Secretary of State's office. Having a Secretary like Steve Simon and a Youth Outreach Specialist like Michael Wall, both relentlessly focused on expanding youth participation in our democracy, is rare and valuable.

At CIRCLE, and across the youth civic engagement field, we deeply appreciate partners like them who match our commitment to building stronger, more representative participation. I'm equally grateful to all of you for showing up today and for bringing that same commitment. That's not something we can take for granted anymore. Throughout the day, we'll dig into some of the headwinds we're all navigating. But I also want us to celebrate what's working, strengthen our community, and energize each other for the road ahead.

So, let me share a bit about CIRCLE and why I'm so eager to speak with you. CIRCLE, based at Tufts University, is the country's leading nonpartisan research center focused on youth voting and civic engagement. We investigate whether young people are participating in our democracy, how they feel about the political system, what barriers they encounter, the impact they can have, and what it takes to ensure every young person has the information, motivation, and support to become an active, engaged citizen. We collaborate with partners across the country, from Secretary of State offices to grassroots youth-led organizations, equipping them with insights that sharpen their work to reach young voters.

So, when I speak with you today, and when we sit down later to exchange knowledge and shape strategy for strengthening student voting in Minnesota, that is CIRCLE's reason for being.



It's why we do this work: so that students, teachers, administrators, election officials, community members, and the full ecosystem that supports youth in democracy can take informed, effective action.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that this year marks a different chapter for us. For a decade, CIRCLE produced detailed research that gave more than a thousand colleges and universities a clear picture of their student registration and turnout rates, along with national findings that informed all of higher education.

In a typical year, I'd be standing here ready to celebrate fresh numbers from the 2024 election with you. And I'd probably be congratulating Minnesota, because this state consistently ranks among the very best for student voter turnout.

This year, a federal decision has disrupted that work in ways that are significant. I'm limited in what I can say about it, and frankly, that limitation is itself a signal of the challenges we face in this moment. It underscores how much effort it will take to overcome every barrier placed in our way.

So here's what I need you to know: We are not stopping. We are not pausing the mission to understand and advance youth participation. We are not stepping back from partnering with young people, leaders, and institutions that want to build the stronger democracy we all deserve. And we are not slowing our search for new ways to support the colleges and universities that lead this work.