

NINA MOINI: Early voting for the November midterms begin tomorrow, Friday, and ahead of this year's elections, a Minnesota organization has been working behind the scenes to build out what they're calling a democracy protection initiative. The effort evolves out of the response to this winter's surge of federal agents. COPAL, an organization centered on supporting Latino communities across the state, launched the Immigrant Defense Network, or IDN, last year. IDN trained some 30,000 constitutional observers to document and record interactions between ice and Minnesotans during the surge. Now they're leveraging the learnings to train what they're calling democracy protectors.

Francisco Segovia, executive director of COPAL, is here to tell us more about this continued work. Thanks for your time this afternoon, Francisco.

FRANCISCO Thank you for having me on your show.

SEGOVIA:

NINA MOINI: I gave a little background there on all of the work that's been happening over several years but a heavy work in the last year or so. What was the opportunity you saw to continue this work and to create a network of what you're calling democracy protesters? How is this an extension of that work?

FRANCISCO Well, it is an opportunity to keep working with people and understanding that any society, any democratic society, functions only when people participate in the processes and decision making. And for the experience that we had during the Metro Surge I think allows us to understand that people-- keeping people together, dreaming for a greater future, and solving societal issues is essential. So we took that initiative that after training and meeting thousands and thousands of people across Minnesota, the big question was what is next and then why not.

A next step is to ask people who had the privilege of helping at that moment to participate in supporting immigrants who are already US citizens and can vote to ensure that community members, again, immigrants or people of color who are already citizens, can participate in this process that make our society democratic.

NINA MOINI: Are you concerned about ICE being at polling locations? There's no indication of specifically where anything could happen, but we know that there are people who go out to polling sites. There always have been. Can you talk a little bit about some of the concerns and how you feel democracy protectors can make themselves useful in that situation?

FRANCISCO Sure. Back in 2024, December, we didn't what was going to happen, and we organized the IDN. And so we had to think ahead based on what we see and what we hear coming down from the federal government. So what we're thinking today is many, many people including myself who are US citizens, we carry with us our passport, afraid that sometimes we can be stopped, not because whether we have papers or not. It's because who how we speak English with accents or how we-- or appearance.

And so what we project or believes is that it will take only one report that ICE is close to a polling place to discourage people from going to vote because the fear remains in our communities. And, again, it is not about papers because so many people were afraid to go to the stores, to schools and other regular things, afraid of being detained and regardless of their status. So understanding that experience that we had why not to prepare in case that happens.

NINA MOINI: Can you talk a little bit about what the trainings look like to get people prepared to be democracy protectors? Is it similar-- is it the exact same to that of what many people called constitutional observers during the height of the Surge when people to your point were being sometimes pulled over or pursued or asked questions just based on their appearance?

**FRANCISCO
SEGOVIA:** That's a good question. And we have been creating these materials as we go and being creative. So the idea was here that, first, people have rights, and people can exercise their right to vote. And we understand that sometimes people can get confused, they don't where to vote, or they need a ride.

Oftentimes the people who are unable to vote are related to working different hours, accessibility and other things that may impact their ability to vote. Any democracy functions when people participate. And we believe that our job and we are asking the constitutional observers to support those individuals that for whatever reasons or whatever obstacle they may have, they cannot show up to the polls.

The state of Minnesota is one of the best states in what relates to voting because of the laws that we have in place. However, we have to take advantage of it. And so we are asking the people who have supported us before with constitutional observers to become phone bankers, to invite people to vote.

This is non-partisan work. So we ask them to help with phone banking. We are helping them-- or asking them to help with becoming available the Friday before election to help us to-- we are opening 24-- 20 halves, 20 locations in 20 different Senate districts, and those halves will be where volunteers will be available for offering transportation, provide information about where to vote if it's needed or if anyone is being challenged because there is a mistake with the last name or anything else that people are that-- how will be available to support.

So we are asking constitutional observers now, democracy protectors to join us and participate into, like I said, phone banking, door knocking, inviting people to vote or be available on those halves. It's 20 halves and from Friday to Tuesday is going to take a lot of people to sustain them.

NINA MOINI: And the hubs are just places with high maybe Latino and immigrant populations. Are they close to polling centers? I just want to get clarity around this because some people listening are going to think what if this becomes disruptive and there are clashes, then at polling places where people are just showing up to exercise their right to vote, are people going to have whistles?

How disruptive of a scene is it going to be? We don't want people to be afraid to come out and vote because they fear any type of clashes going on. So what can you say to people just about the role of these either constitutional observers or democracy protectors as it pertains to polling locations?

**FRANCISCO
SEGOVIA:** Yes. There is already a law in place about how far you can be from polling places, and we are not by any means to be located. We need to centralize these places. We have so many-- in every Senate district, there will be several polling places.

So the idea is to locate them in a centralized location within the Senate district and within what the law states about how many feet you had to be away from polling places. And it's not about disrupting or whistles. It's like a help desk if you want to put it that way or a help hub where anyone can come for help.

It is obvious that if the ICE are-- and ICE is not supposed to be or arrive to polling places. That is a law that established that they cannot do it. However, we understand that we have so many laws, and they are not following those laws. So our hope is that they don't show up.

And still people may have-- independently if they show up or not, people have always questions and always as we have been doing this work, people always ask, hey, I need a ride. I don't where to vote. And that's why we also have our help number where people can call, and we will provide that support.

NINA MOINI: Francisco, just lastly, if anybody is listening and they are a citizen and they are well within their rights to go and cast their vote but they are worried, what would you say to someone in that situation as a starting point now ahead of the election?

FRANCISCO
SEGOVIA: I think it's important that people exercise their right. I understand we all are afraid. I was scared oftentimes when I had to go to a place where use my phone to record because ICE was present. So it is normal to be afraid, but it's important that if we want to live in a society where every human, every person is respected. And exercising your right to vote is one of those steps that any citizen should do, and that's why we are there to support them to achieve that.

NINA MOINI: Francisco, thank you very much for your time and your perspective. We really appreciate it.

FRANCISCO
SEGOVIA: Thank you for your time as well.

NINA MOINI: Francisco Segovia is executive director of COPAL.