

CIVIC POWER

The Role and Impact of Independent Political Organizations in Expanding the Electorate and Building Governing Influence

An Analysis of Civic Power Programs in 2024 and 2025

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, the civic infrastructure built by and for multiracial working communities in the U.S. has atrophied. As a result, we find that increased levels of *civic participation* have not translated into symmetrical levels of *civic power* needed to implement the policies that reflect these communities' values and interests. **We thus find ourselves in a power crisis that is not resolved through increased civic engagement alone.**

Running counter to these trends, a cohort of state-based civic associations, also called independent political organizations (IPOs), began to emerge in the 2010s.¹ These organizations aim to convert individual participation into organized civic power to achieve the agendas their constituents want.

Through a unique research collaboration involving academic and movement researchers, the Pro-Democracy Campaign, and 26 IPOs, we assembled an unprecedented collection of independent sector electoral and organizing data in 2024.² Our goal was to assess the distinct value and electoral impact of IPO voter mobilization programs, if any, and discern whether and how they translate voter participation into durable civic power capable of shaping policy and governing outcomes. This is the first major study of its kind that looks comprehensively at civic associations' programs across states, examining both their electoral and organizing programs over an 18-month period.

We sought to answer the following questions:

- What unique role, if any, do IPOs play in voter outreach programs and what is the impact of those efforts?
- How can constituent-based organizations grow and wield their civic power during a national election season?
- What, if any, are the similarities and differences across organizations and state contexts?

- To what extent were these organizations able to translate raw volunteerism and voter engagement into the power needed to influence governing at the local, state, or federal levels?

Using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, the research team analyzed the programs of 26 organizations in 10 states.³ These included 23 state-based organizations and one national organization operating in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin that received significant funding and intensive technical assistance from the Pro-Democracy Campaign for their electoral and organizing programs. The study also incorporated data and analysis from state power organizations in two other states, Ohio and Missouri.

Through a collaboration with the Democratic Data Exchange (DDx), we compared the voter contact programs of these state IPOs with other Democratic party and progressive candidate, labor, and independent expenditure programs in the Exchange, including the Harris-Walz campaign. Overall, we found that the **state-based IPO programs were more likely to target and reach racially diverse, young, and infrequent voters compared to more well-funded party and candidate-driven voter contact operations. These increasingly contested segments of the electorate are pivotal to electoral outcomes and long-term political trends in the US.**

The IPOs in this study were also more likely to use direct, person-to-person contact modes like phone calls and doorknocks (over text messages), and they achieved significantly higher contact rates. **The result: in 2024, they reached 1,295,275 unique voters in key states who were not contacted directly by any other program in the comparison group**, even though the majority of these voters resided in highly contested swing states that were saturated with outreach by national campaigns and other Get Out The Vote operations.

1 Puya Gerami (2023). "Independent Political Organizations: A Strategy in the Making," *Convergence*, November 28, 2023.

2 The independent sector refers to 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations that operate independently of political parties and candidate campaigns, in contrast to partisan political committees and Super PACs. See: Theda Skocpol and Alex Hertel-Fernandez (2018), *Research on the Shifting U.S. Political Terrain*, Harvard University.

3 Virtually every one of the 26 IPOs have multi-entity structures, including 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations that run aligned but segregated programs. Some also have state-level and/or federal political action committees. Data was collected from each of these c3, c4, and PAC programs separately and combined by the research team for the sake of analyzing the collective impact of these multi-entity IPOs.

Overall these programs in ten states:

- Organized 86,237 members and volunteers into action during 2024.
- Collected 215,704 voter registration forms. Of these, 55,945 were new voters, and 22,776 were roll changing registrations.
- Had 5,035,135 live, person-to-person conversations with 3,625,744 individuals—approximately one out of every eight conversations documented by Democratic and progressive campaigns.
- Helped turn out 2,540,804 voters.
- Achieved wins aligned with their base constituents' strategic plans.

How and why were these organizations able to directly reach 1.3 million voters that no other program could—despite the billions of dollars spent in these states by other campaigns? We found that **for many state IPOs, voter mobilization is not an end in itself, but a program that strong civic associations wield to influence their local, state, and federal power arenas to hold government accountable to their constituents' interests.** They are engaging in electoral work to broaden their bases—to reach people not reached by others—and to build civic power.

To understand the civic associations behind the voter mobilization programs, the research team conducted four standardized quantitative analyses of the scale, depth, structure, and strategy of their organizing programs. Organizing is the long-term development of interdependent voluntary civic leadership networks and sustained political and social capital in critical communities and political geographies. It is aimed at equipping constituents to wield power to influence governing at the local, regional, and state levels.

Observationally, we found that **organizations that moved successful statewide or cross-local issue campaigns in the first nine months of 2025 had ended 2024 with between 200 and 700 highly committed organizing leaders** (people who had participated in at least five organizational activities in

the span of 12 months). These same organizations also built broader mobilizing bases at least three times that size. These broader bases consisted of cadres of volunteers who participated in organizational activity between one and four times in the same period. This outcome was consistent across red, blue, and purple states. The groups that achieved *local* wins in 2025 ended 2024 with between 80 and 100 highly committed leaders and a broader mobilizing base at least twice that size. Most of the organizations that did not meet the threshold of at least 50 highly committed members have not yet been able to translate their electoral engagement into sufficient power to deliver either defensive or offensive policy wins for their bases in 2025.

Taken together, the findings show that effective **state IPOs are uniquely positioned to address today's power crisis. These organizations reached voters overlooked by traditional campaign vehicles, built durable organizing structures (networked teams of committed leaders), and converted civic participation into tangible influence in local, state, and federal governing arenas in 2025.** Their distinct contribution lies in their ability to build deep in-person networks of civic leaders who can mobilize voters at scale *and* hold government accountable to the interests of their constituents after an election. Because they work to sustain this civic power beyond a single cycle, they are critical vehicles for building a stronger 21st century democracy and shaping governing outcomes in the years ahead.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

We have a power crisis. Increased electoral participation has failed to translate into greater governmental responsiveness and accountability to the American public.⁴ The infrastructure of civic associations that build and enable organized constituencies to influence local, state, and federal governance—in other words, to self-govern—has faltered over the last two decades.

In the course of American history, civic associations have played a critical role in engaging voters across the political spectrum to participate in electoral and legislative arenas in ways that advance their collective interests and agendas.⁵ Joining with others to achieve shared influence and power in the arena of representative government is the fundamental practice of democracy. The health of democracy depends not only on high voter turnout, but also on government responsiveness to that participation—what some call a virtuous cycle.⁶ Government responsiveness is secured not through individual voice, which is known to be unequally distributed, but through the long-term power of collective, organized interests.⁷

Consider that the 2024 election had higher rates of voter participation than any election since 1960, except for the record-breaking turnout of 2020. Similarly, participation in the streets has reached historic highs over the past decade, with more robust and widespread protests in the first half of 2025 than during a similar period in Donald Trump's first term in 2017.⁸ The June 2025 No

Kings protests in 2,100 cities and towns was the largest recorded civil action in American history.⁹

Yet, despite robust participation, the millions who came out to protest have struggled to hold to account federal and state officials who impose policies counter to their interests, including sending the National Guard and military into American cities, shrinking Medicaid, decimating public agencies and staffing, delegitimizing decades of health and environmental science, rolling back worker and consumer protections, ratcheting up immigrant deportations, waging unprecedented interference in the private sector, and advancing highly partisan gerrymandering.

Americans across the political spectrum are desperate to have a voice in collective self-governance and to see their issues and concerns addressed by their government. They are taking to the streets, social media, and to the polls to show it. However, in the history of our democracy, it has never been the case that individual voices decide outcomes alone, or even in simple aggregate. **Wielding sufficient power to govern in the US has always required the building and wielding of organized power blocs over time.**¹⁰

We have a power crisis.

As traditional 20th century constituent-rooted power blocs like parties, unions, and other mass membership organizations have declined, so too has the power of regular working people across race to have their interests seen, heard, or satisfied.¹¹ **The result is a power crisis: a declining ability to turn record-setting levels of individual participation into the power to achieve actual material wins through governing.**

4 Gilens, M., & Page, B.I. (2014). "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(03): 564-81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001595>.

5 Ziad Munson, Marshall Ganz, and Theda Skocpol (2000). "A Nation of Organizers: The Institutional Origins of Civic Voluntarism in the United States," *American Political Science Review*. 94(3): 527-46.

6 Robert Dahl (1972). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Martin Gilens (2005). "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness" *Perspectives on Politics*. 69(5): 778-96.

7 Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady (2012). *The Uneven Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

8 Erica Chenoweth, Soha Hammam, Jeremy Pressman, and Christopher Wiley Shay (2025). "American Spring? How Nonviolent Protest in the US is Accelerating," *Waging Nonviolence*, June 12.

9 Erica Chenoweth, Soha Hammam, Jeremy Pressman, and Christopher Wiley Shay (2025). "New data shows No Kings was one of the largest days of protest in US history," *Waging Nonviolence*, August 12.

10 Alexander Hertel-Fernandez (2019). *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States — and the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press. Jacob M. Grumbach (2022). *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

11 Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld (2024). *Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Party Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

While mass-based political and civic organizations have long been on the decline, this erosion has been uneven across the political spectrum. The conservative movement has spent decades building and networking civic infrastructure while progressive forces have predominantly engaged in reactive, episodic mobilization through the loosely coordinated activist efforts collectively termed the Resistance.¹² Various historical, structural, and strategic factors have shaped these contrasting approaches. Factors endogenous to the civic infrastructure itself include a decline in broad-based member recruitment and long-term organizing (as opposed to episodic, social media-enabled mobilizing), the search for digital silver bullets, a decade of reactive “resistance” mentality, and a tactical approach to voter turnout that has hollowed out many organizations. Exogenous factors include active, hostile efforts to dismantle organized labor and civic associations led by Black and Latino people, and the disorganization and alienation caused by the COVID pandemic. All of these trends have been exacerbated by a shift in the political industry to invest in revolving nationalized, tactical voter mobilization programs like birthday mail programs and party-at-the polls events that, while narrowly effective at boosting voter turnout in the short term, seem to have diminishing marginal effects and do little to rebuild the muscular civic associations in the long-term.

This power crisis is starting to have knock-on effects on participation in some communities. In 2024, millions fewer people across race and ethnic backgrounds voted in the election than in 2020. Pew estimated that 37% of eligible Black voters, 41% of eligible Latino voters, and 33% of eligible Asian Americans have not voted in any of the last three elections, compared with 20% of white voters.¹³ This may be in part because 25 million eligible Black and Latino people are missing from or mislisted in US voter files, twice the rate of white voters, which makes them harder to

contact.¹⁴ It is also likely due to millions of eligible voters not being contacted by party or independent organizations even during the months before major elections.¹⁵

There is also evidence that one reason participation is declining among certain groups is that they have a diminishing sense of their own power. Research from the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund in 2024 showed a decreasing sense of power among Black and Latino voters in several states. Among both constituencies, just weeks before the election, approximately 40% felt disconnected and disengaged, saying that their votes were not powerful at the individual or collective level.¹⁶ When most people choose not to vote, the research suggests that it is not because they are apathetic. Instead, this investigation showed that they were making a calculated choice that reflected their experience of limited or nonexistent government responsiveness to their interests.

In the face of these trends, a set of state-based independent political organizations are engaging strategically and collectively in elections to advance their constituencies’ interests. IPOs are not voter contact program vendors in the political industry. They are civic associations of regular people aligned to participate collectively in local, state, and federal arenas to demand a responsive government on issues that matter to them, like better jobs, decent health care, affordable child care and elder care, freedom from over policing, civil rights, and so on. They engage in elections as an opportunity

12 Dana Fisher (2021). *American Resistance: From the Women's March to the Blue Wave*. New York: Columbia University Press; Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez (2016). “The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism” in *Perspectives on Politics*. 14(3): 681-99.

13 Hannah Hartig, Scott Keeter, Andrew Daniller, and Ted Van Green (2025), “Behind Trump’s 2024 Victory, A More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition,” Pew Research, June 26, p.19.

14 Miriam McKinney Gray (2024), “Surfacing Missing Voters: Addressing Data Systems, Tools and Engagement Models that Invisibilize Black and Brown Communities,” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, February 12, 2024.

15 A 2025 CIRCLE report from Tufts showed that one in three young people—and one in two of those without college experience—were not contacted by an organization or campaign about the 2024 election. Of young people in their study who did not vote, 59% were not contacted by anyone. Alberto Medina, Kelly Siegel-Stechler, and Sara Suzuki (2025). “Young People and the 2024 Election: Struggling, Disconnected and Dissatisfied,” Tufts.edu. January 15, 2025. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/2024-poll-barriers-issues-economy>.

16 Astead Herndon, Rebecca Suner, James Surdam, Noah Throop, and David Seekamp (2024). “Who are the Black Swing Voters?,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2024. Alejandra Gomez, Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Katrina Gamble (2024). “Latinos Rising: Redefining Power, Inside Arizona’s Most Comprehensive Voter Study,” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Oct 18, 2024.

to mobilize a broader community of voters around a shared agenda. **These civic associations are working to address the power crisis by connecting individuals to each other and to viable pathways for actual change in local, state, and federal arenas, and their voter programs reflect that.**

This memo summarizes the topline from several quantitative and qualitative research projects undertaken in 2025 to evaluate the political and power implications of this emerging 21st century state-based civic infrastructure. The report is structured to look first at their voter mobilizing programs, then at the underlying organizing programs in 2024 in relationship to power influence and outcomes in 2025.

Table 1: Differences in Voter Mobilization Program Design

VOTER CONTACT PROGRAM TYPES

Type	<i>IPO Constituent-Based Organizing Programs</i>	<i>“Better Field”</i>	<i>Marketing-Based Field</i>	<i>Large-Scale Marketing</i>
Program Tactics	• Direct person-to-person contact conducted by community members to shape a political context and agenda for governing post election • Building and wielding the networked influence of grasstops leaders with high social capital in a place • Representing organized community and class-based interests	• Relational voter contact programs, often supported by tech tools • Deep canvassing; long form canvassing that invites substantive conversations • Other research-informed direct voter engagement methods	• Vended canvasses that seek to maximize voter contact <i>attempts</i> (door knocks, phone calls, and texts)	• Mail • TV/digital/radio ads and strategies • Paying online influencers
Logic	Privileges the building of a broader base, who are in direct organized relationship with each other, for post-election governance	Privileges more effective person-to-person voter contact tactics in the short-term context of an election	Privileges scaled phone, door and text outreach to targeted voters in the short-term context of an election	Privileges broad voter messaging in the short-term context of an election
Time Frame	Multi-year, multi-cycle	GOTV in one election	GOTV in one election	GOTV in one election
Power Arena	Typically focused on local and state governing arenas that can have federal ramifications	Local, state and federal campaigns, and ballot measures	Local, state and federal campaigns, and ballot measures	Typically federal and statewide races

THE 2024 ELECTION: WHAT HAPPENED?

Donald Trump won in 2024 with a larger and more racially diverse coalition than he had in 2020. Kamala Harris saw a drop-off in Democratic voter turnout and support compared to 2020, especially among infrequent and Democratic voters. Once again, infrequent voters played a decisive role in the outcome of the election.

The research team analyzed the outcome of the 2024 election shortly after it ended. Based on state- and county-level results available in the weeks after November 5th, the main contours of the election quickly became clear:

- It was a **high-turnout election**, second only to 2020 in the last century.
- At the top of the ticket, **Harris lost 6.3 million votes** relative to Biden's 2020 results, while **Trump gained 3.1 million votes** relative to his 2020 total.
- There was a **dramatic Democratic vote dropoff in key cities and counties**, including Philadelphia (PA), Maricopa County (AZ), and Wayne County (MI). But this dropoff was uneven across key states. There were notable exceptions: Fulton County (GA) had an increase in turnout, and statewide turnout in North Carolina nearly matched the state's record-breaking 2020 turnout just weeks after Hurricane Helene.¹⁷
- Overall, **Democratic dropoff was less extreme in swing states** than in the rest of the country. Active campaigning—including by the organizations in this study—may have contributed to limiting the extent of the nationwide red wave in these states.

These findings were corroborated and expanded upon by subsequent analyses in the *New York Times* and elsewhere.¹⁸

Once individual-level voter data became available in early 2025, organizations like Catalist (a Democratic-affiliated voter file and analytics vendor) and Pew Research were able to provide more

granular analyses of voting trends.¹⁹ These analyses agreed on most points. As summarized by Catalist, Harris retained much of the Biden 2020 coalition but at lower levels among key groups, “including young voters, men, voters of color, less frequent voters, [and] urban voters.” These shifts held, but were less pronounced, in battleground states relative to the rest of the country.

While voters of color still favored Harris overall, Trump won with a more racially diverse coalition than he had in 2020 or 2016. The disaggregated data reveals important trends. Pew estimated that Trump achieved near parity among Hispanic voters (51% for Harris vs 48% for Trump) after losing Hispanic voters to Joe Biden by 61% to 36% in 2020. Pew also estimated that Trump won approximately 15% of Black voters, nearly double his 8% support four years earlier. According to the Catalist data, approximately 70% of the shift among Black voters is attributable to men, particularly those aged 18 to 29. In absolute numbers, 90% of Black women supported Harris compared to 79% of Black men. Among Asian American voters, Pew found that 57% backed Harris and 40% supported Trump, a significant erosion of the Democratic margin in 2020, when 70% voted for Biden and 30% favored Trump.

According to Catalist, less frequent or “irregular” voters—those who had missed at least one of the last four general elections—tilted notably toward Trump in 2024, unlike prior elections when infrequent voters leaned Democratic. **Extensive reporting noted that conservative grassroots organizations made turning out low-propensity Republican voters their top priority.**²⁰ Their strategy seemed to pay off: Catalist estimated that 51.5% of 2024 voters who did not vote in 2020 (“new voters”) voted for Trump, as opposed to 2020 when 55.2% of new voters (those who did not vote in 2016) voted for Biden. Harris also lost some support among repeat voters, but by a much smaller margin.

¹⁷ Data collected from Secretaries of States websites.

¹⁸ Matthew Bloch et al. (2024). “Election Results Show a Red Shift Across the U.S. in 2024,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2024 (Updated December 17, 2024).

¹⁹ Catalist (2025). “What Happened in 2024: An Analysis of the 2024 Presidential Election.” May 20, 2025. <https://catalist.us/whathappened2024/>. And Hannah Hartig et al. (2025) “Behind Trump’s 2024 Victory: A More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition.” Pew Research Center, June 26, 2025. ²⁰ Antonia Hitchens (2024). “Inside the Trump Campaign’s Plan to Win Arizona.” *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2024.

Turnout and Democratic losses among voters of color and less frequent voters represent the biggest opportunities for the 501(c)(4) organizations and PACs whose data is included in this study and others like them.

As more Democratic-leaning voters in these groups stayed home relative to 2020, the voters who did turn out to the polls were more likely to vote for Donald Trump than they had been in the past. In future elections, turning out and persuading more of these voters will be key to advancing these organizations' power and agendas.

EXPANDING THE ELECTORATE: VOTER MOBILIZATION FINDINGS

The IPOs in this study reached 1.3 million voters that no other program in the Democratic Data Exchange contacted with live outreach, including the Harris-Walz campaign and well-resourced Senate and House campaigns. In comparison to other programs, these state-based groups targeted voter universes that were more racially diverse, younger, and more geographically diverse, and that included a larger share of low-propensity and infrequent voters. The IPOs achieved significantly higher contact rates in their programs overall, likely in part because they prioritized direct, personal forms of voter contact (phones, doors) more than other programs.

The distinct targeting and outreach approaches that drove the IPOs’ successes are the product of their broader and longer-term focus on building multiracial independent power bases to influence governing, rather than simply maximizing short-term voter turnout.

Despite their success at reaching via live contact voters that other programs missed, the IPO partners in the study had fewer repeat conversations with those voters, which made further increases in their turnout difficult. This signals an opportunity for future learning and impact.

To understand the electoral impact of independent civic associations in our study, we partnered with DDx to look at IPO voter contact programs and subsequent voter turnout in comparison to other programs in DDx. These other programs included the well-resourced Biden/Harris Presidential campaign, US Senate and House campaigns, state party programs, and other

large-scale national programs implemented by organized labor and national progressive groups.

The IPOs in this study contributed significantly to overall voter outreach and turnout efforts, making close to one out of every eight direct voter contacts recorded at DDx during the cycle.

Furthermore, DDx found that of the people contacted by the state IPOs in this study, a third—1.3 million—were individuals *uniquely* contacted by organizations in this study and *not* reached through live contact by other programs in the Exchange. In other words, **1.3 million eligible voters with high modeled support scores in key states last year *only* received direct live contact from state-based IPOs.** Of these, our analysis showed that 820,000, or 65%, voted in the November General Election.

Partner IPOs’ aggregate contact rate of 9.3% was markedly higher than the contact rate for other programs (5.4%). The difference was statistically significant and impressive given the fact that this cohort was targeting a greater share of lower propensity voters who are more difficult to reach.

Analyses of IPOs’ actions and choices during the 2024 cycle show that their heterodox targeting choices and voter outreach designs help account for this high number of people reached ***only by them***—even in highly contested swing states that were saturated with outreach by national campaigns and other Get Out The Vote operations.

Table 2: Comparing Topline Results from State IPO Programs and Other Program Data in DDx

	Attempts	Live Contacts	Contact Rate	Turnout Rate
State IPO Programs	54,062,379	5,035,135	9.3%	67%
Other DDx Partners	723,224,592	38,772,953	5.4%	75.7%

Source: DDx, “PDC 2024 GE Final Voter Contact Analysis.” Turnout analysis with TargetSmart voter file.

Targeting

In comparison to other programs, the **state-based groups in this study targeted voter universes that were more racially diverse, younger, more geographically diverse, and included a larger share of low-propensity voters.** These voters also had high modeled progressivity support scores.

Figure 1 shows that the overwhelming majority of IPO attempts and contacts were Black, Latino, Asian American, and Native voters, compared with less than half of the targets in external programs. State IPOs were also disproportionately effective at contacting Black voters in particular.

Figure 1. Proportion of Attempts and Direct Voter Contacts By Race in 10 Key States, 2024

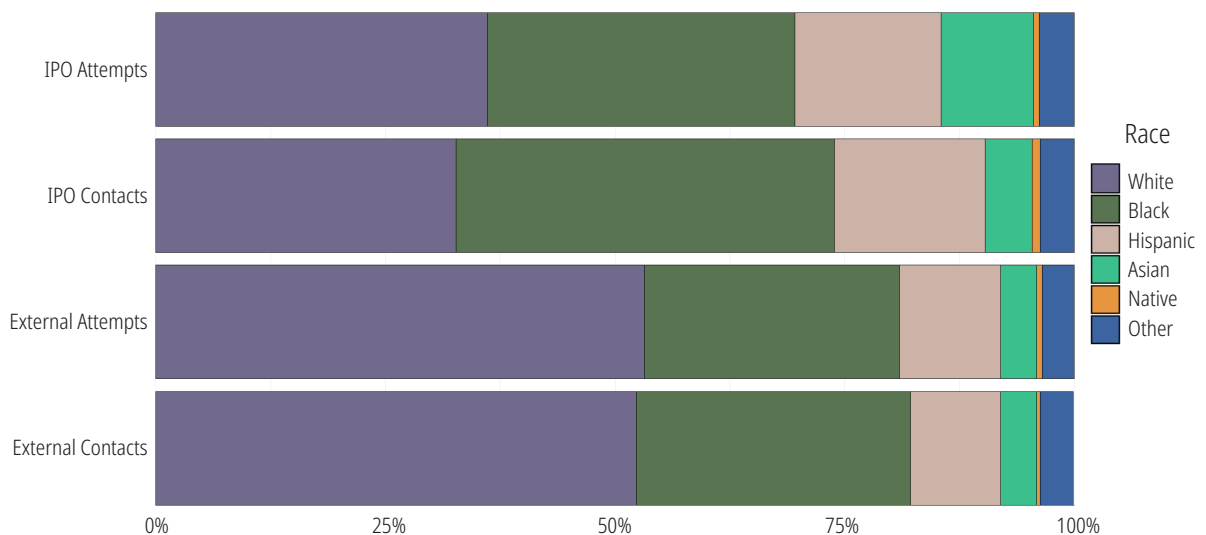


Figure 2 shows that IPOs also focused more on younger voters. Over half of their attempts were to reach voters under age 44.

Figure 2. Proportion of Attempts and Direct Voter Contacts by Age in 10 Key States, 2024

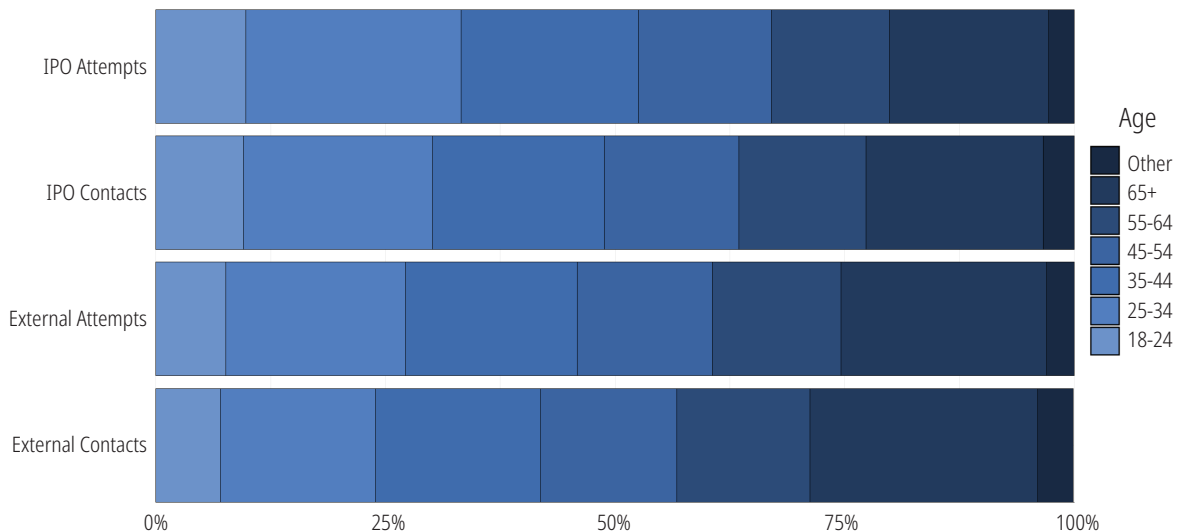
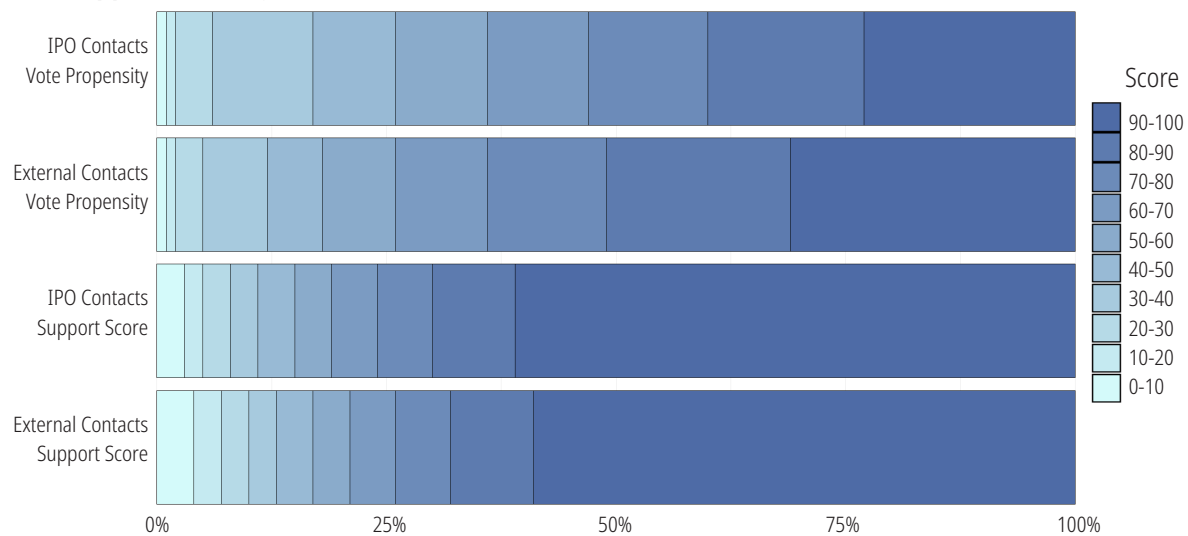


Figure 3 shows that the attempts and contacts of the IPO programs focused more on voters with lower vote propensity scores. Sixty-one percent of their attempts targeted voters with propensity scores lower than 80, compared with 50% of external programs. IPO program targets also had modeled support scores more likely to support Democrats than did other programs.

Figure 3: Proportion of IPO and External Program Contacts by Vote Propensity and Democratic Support in 10 Key States, 2024

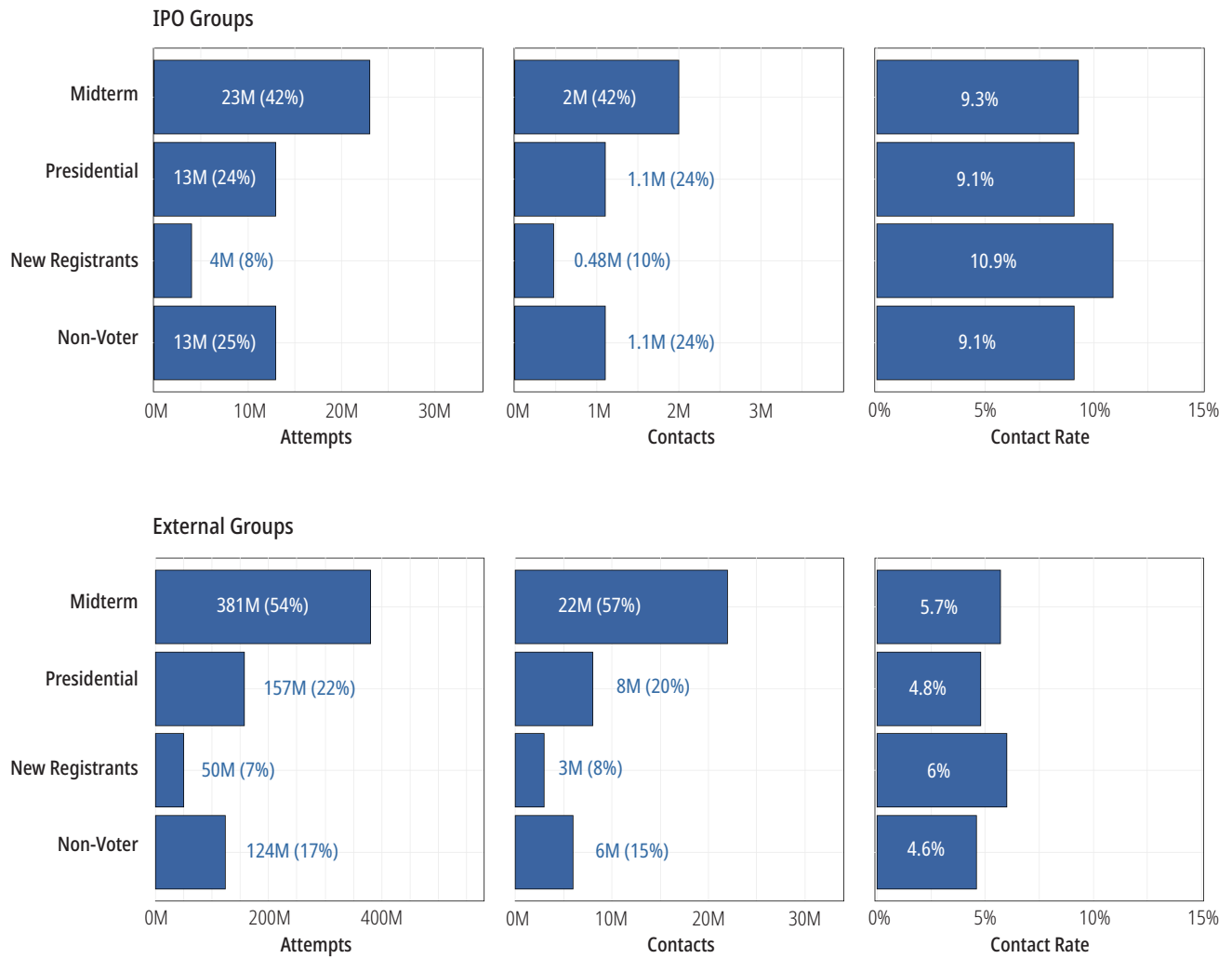


IPO partners were more likely to target voters who were less likely to turn out to vote based on past vote history, including newly registered voters and those who had never before voted or had only voted in Presidential elections. Fifty-eight percent of their contacts fell into these categories, compared to 43% of the contacts in other programs. While state IPOs had better contact rates with voters across the board than other programs in DDx, they had particularly stronger contact rates with these new or infrequent voters. (See Figure 4.)

Interestingly, this was similar to the approach taken by Donald Trump’s campaign, which targeted and drove up margins among voters who were new or had not voted in 2020.²¹

21 Pew Research Center, 2025.

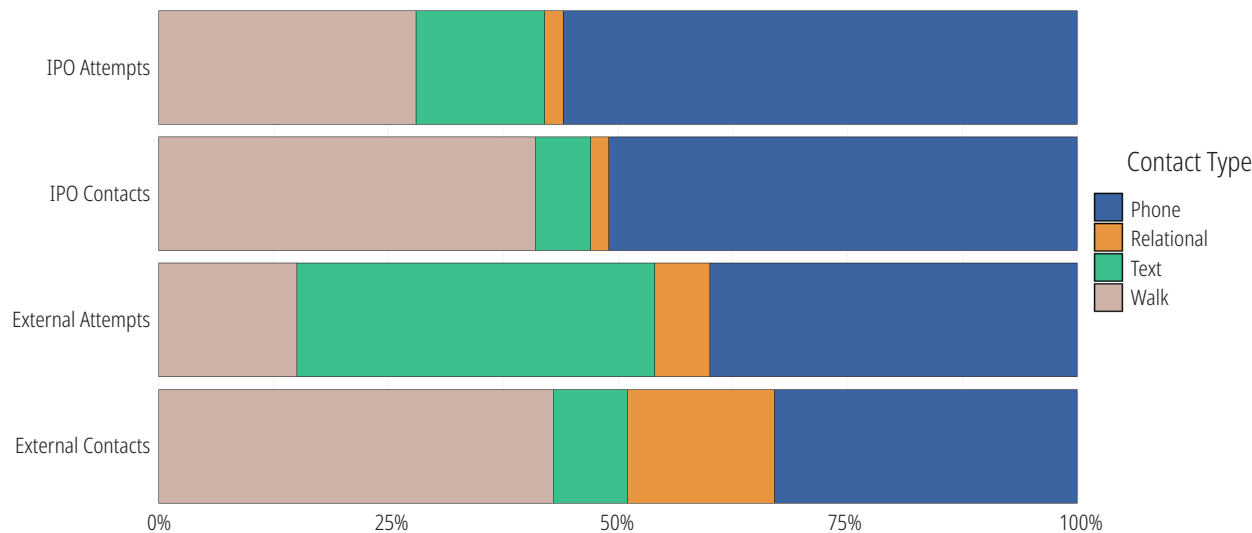
Figure 4: Summary of 2024 Cycle Attempts and Contacts by Vote History



Outreach Tactics

State IPOs prioritized live person-to-person contact by phone and at the doors instead of cold text outreach, which was the dominant approach of other programs in the Exchange. (See Figure 5.) In their report, **DDx concluded that it was likely the relentlessness of the person-to-person contact efforts that helped IPOs break through with voters that the rest of the industry failed to reach with live contact.**

Figure 5: Proportion of Attempts and Direct Voter Contacts by Contact Mode, Comparing IPOs and Other Programs, 2024



While IPOs had higher contact rates overall—likely in part due to their focus on phones and doors as opposed to texting—they had fewer conversations per contacted voter than the other programs in the analysis. This may be because they were the only groups reaching these voters, compared with the layering of contacts for higher propensity voters accomplished by other campaigns and programs in the Exchange. Previous research has shown that what matters more than individual contacts alone is the cumulative effect of multiple contacts.²² Hundreds of randomized controlled

trials in the last twenty years continue to signal that mobilization efforts through repeated direct person-to-person contact—and especially that achieved through known social contacts and relational networks—is the most effective way to increase voter turnout. So, **if state IPOs are the only organizations on the left speaking person-to-person to 1.3 million likely politically aligned but less frequent voters in key states, then these voters are unlikely to be getting the volume of attention necessary to increase their turnout.**

²² In a review of work around the effects of campaign efforts, Green & Schwam-Baird found that campaign mobilization efforts generally work: states that shift from being non-battleground to becoming battleground states see a marked increase in turnout. This was particularly true of direct voter contact. Counties in non-battleground states that were in battleground media markets did not see the same increase in turnout from media alone without direct voter contact. Donald P Green & Michael Schwam-Baird (2015). "Mobilization, Participation and American Democracy: A Retrospective and Postscript," *Party Politics* 22(2): 158-64.

Voter Registration

The IPOs in this study had a significant impact in expanding the electorate through voter registration initiatives. However, the organizations' voter registration programs were not well-integrated with their GOTV programs.

In total, partners in this program processed 215,704 voter registrations, or one in every six registrations recorded by DDx in these states. Of these registrations, 55,945 were for new voters and 22,776 were roll-changing registrations. Registration programs focused heavily on voters of color, especially Black voters. Of those who matched to the voter file, 65% were modeled to be Black, 9% Hispanic, 1% AAPI and 23% White. Forty-four percent were under the age of 44. The highest volume of registrations collected were North Carolina (86,476), Ohio (75,532), Pennsylvania (33,499), and Arizona (14,447).

One area for improvement in future programs is follow-on contact to new registrants by the organizations who helped them register. Only 28% of the individuals in the voter registration program records were successfully contacted during GOTV by the organization that collected their registration forms. Only 62% were directly contacted by any program in the state, according to DDx records.

Voter Turnout

The overall turnout rate of voters contacted by the IPOs that participated in the study, whose programs focused on less frequent voters, was 67.2%, compared to a turnout rate of 75.7% for all other programs in the Democratic Data Exchange. **Notably, the turnout rate of the 1.3 million voters contacted only by the IPO partners and not by others was 64.6%.** As noted previously, making multiple contacts with voters is a crucial factor in the success of turnout efforts. The fact that these 1.3 million voters—again, a group that was disproportionately composed of people of color, young voters, and lower propensity voters—were not directly contacted by Democratic and progressive GOTV programs likely contributed to their lower turnout rate.

Turning out infrequent voters can make the difference in a tight election—a fact that has not been lost on Republican voter contact operations. For example, in Arizona in 2024, Turning Point USA invested tens of millions of dollars in a program aimed at mobilizing right-leaning infrequent voters. Republicans saw a turnout advantage in the state among voters who had not voted since 2018, those who had skipped the 2022 midterms, and new voters.²³

These findings highlight the importance of better understanding more diverse, less frequent voters—who they are, what they value, and the conditions under which they engage. Our research shows that state-based IPOs are effective at reaching these voters, but that the progressive infrastructure as a whole is likely failing to contact them at a volume needed to optimize turnout.

Future research is needed to examine how their participation can be supported not only in elections but also in broader forms of civic power building.

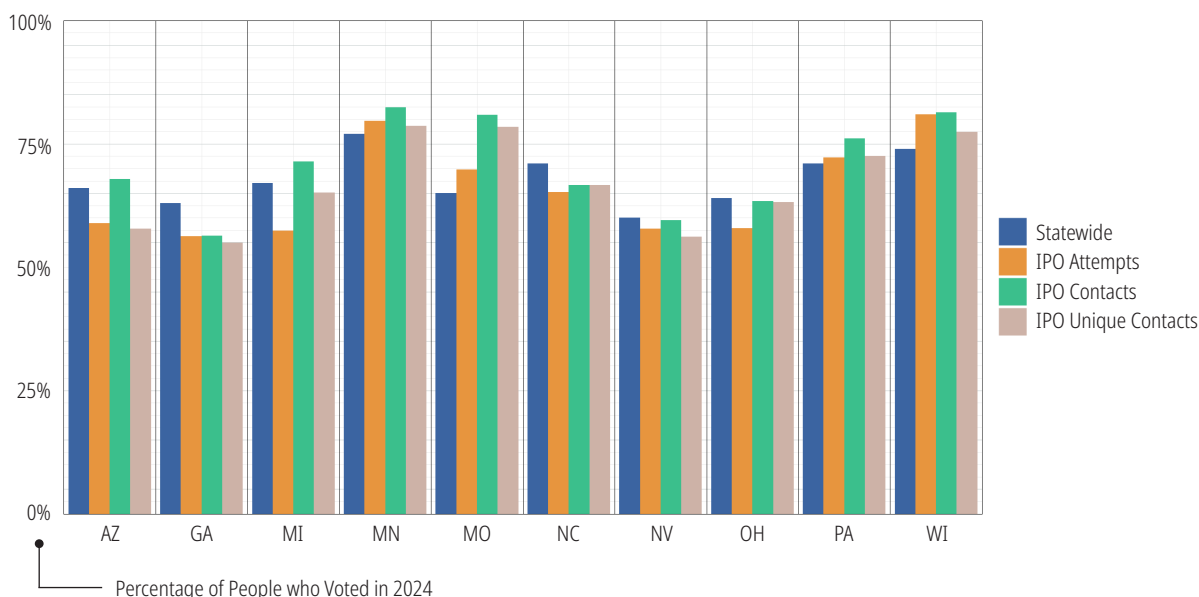
In addition to assessing overall turnout rates for the IPOs in our study, the research team also assessed how turnout rates varied across states and among specific demographic subgroups. (See Figure 6.) Across the ten states we analyzed, overall general voter turnout varied substantially, with a 17-point gap in general turnout between the lowest-turnout state (Nevada) and the highest (Minnesota). Such differences in statewide turnout can be traced to multiple structural and contextual factors, including variations in election law, the intensity of presidential campaign activity, and underlying demographic and economic conditions.²⁴

Within the organizational programs in this study, some state IPOs' contacts voted at rates higher than their state's average, and some voted at lower rates.

23 Nick Corasaniti (2024). "Pro-Trump Group's Risky Bet on Infrequent Voters Seems to Have Paid Off," *The New York Times*, December 23, 2024.

24 Michael Barber and John Holbein (2022). "400 Million Voting Records Show Profound Racial and Geographic Disparities in Voter Turnout in the United States." *PLoS ONE* 17(6).

Figure 6: 2024 General Statewide Turnout Compared to IPO Program Attempts, Contacts, and Unique Contacts



In order to dig deeper into variable turnout rates, the research team looked at the turnout of IPO partners' contacts across multiple variables: race, gender, vote propensity, state and program size. (See Figure 7.) Figure 7 is organized into four panels, each corresponding to a different range of vote propensity scores. Within each panel, the y-axis represents the amount a particular race/gender demographic (for example Latina women in Arizona within the relevant vote propensity score range) *differed from the overall turnout average for that same race/gender group statewide*. While the turnout rate for IPO contacts is calculated only among those in the relevant vote propensity bin, the statewide average used for comparison reflects all voters in that demographic group, regardless of their vote propensity scores. The size of the bubble reflects the volume of individuals contacted by state-based IPO programs in that constituency.

This results in some expected patterns. Voters with lower vote propensity scores turned out at rates below the statewide average for their race/gender group, while voters with higher vote propensity scores turned out at rates above the statewide average. Beyond that, the patterns are subtle and more specific to particular states.

Overall these charts reflect a wide variety of demographic and geographic differences in turnout patterns by state. It is important to note that these are *descriptions* of turnout data, which allows us to see trends but not to determine causality. For example, Black men with vote propensity scores over 75 who were contacted by state IPOs turned out at much higher rates than the state average for Black men in every state in this study. Turnout differences were more nuanced for Black men with propensity scores between 50 and 75. Those who were contacted by IPOs performed better than the statewide average for Black men in Arizona, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, and Wisconsin, but below the average in Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Our point here is to show that looking at demographic and vote history nationally, independent of state contexts, is misleading and makes uniform what are in reality radically complex state contexts. Since the overall trends are blurry across states, the research team worked with each IPO to assess their organization's voter turnout outcomes and conduct a comparative analysis of their target universes, contacts, unique contacts (those not reached by others) and overall state turnout, as well as turnout across demographic and geographic differences. The IPOs are

applying the data and findings to refine the design of their 2025 and 2026 voter contact programs.

To generate further insight into the relative efficacy of IPO voter mobilization programs, future research should incorporate methods that enable comparison of IPO turnout outcomes with a baseline turnout rate that reflects the varied demographic

composition of IPO target universes. Randomized controlled trials could be helpful in advancing this analysis, but their feasibility and statistical power may be limited by the heterogeneity of IPO targeting and tactics, which vary considerably across states according to the political and regulatory context. We need to continue developing analyses that can account for these differences.

Figure 7: Voter Turnout of IPO Program Contacts by Race and Gender, Compared to the Statewide Turnout Average for Each Constituency

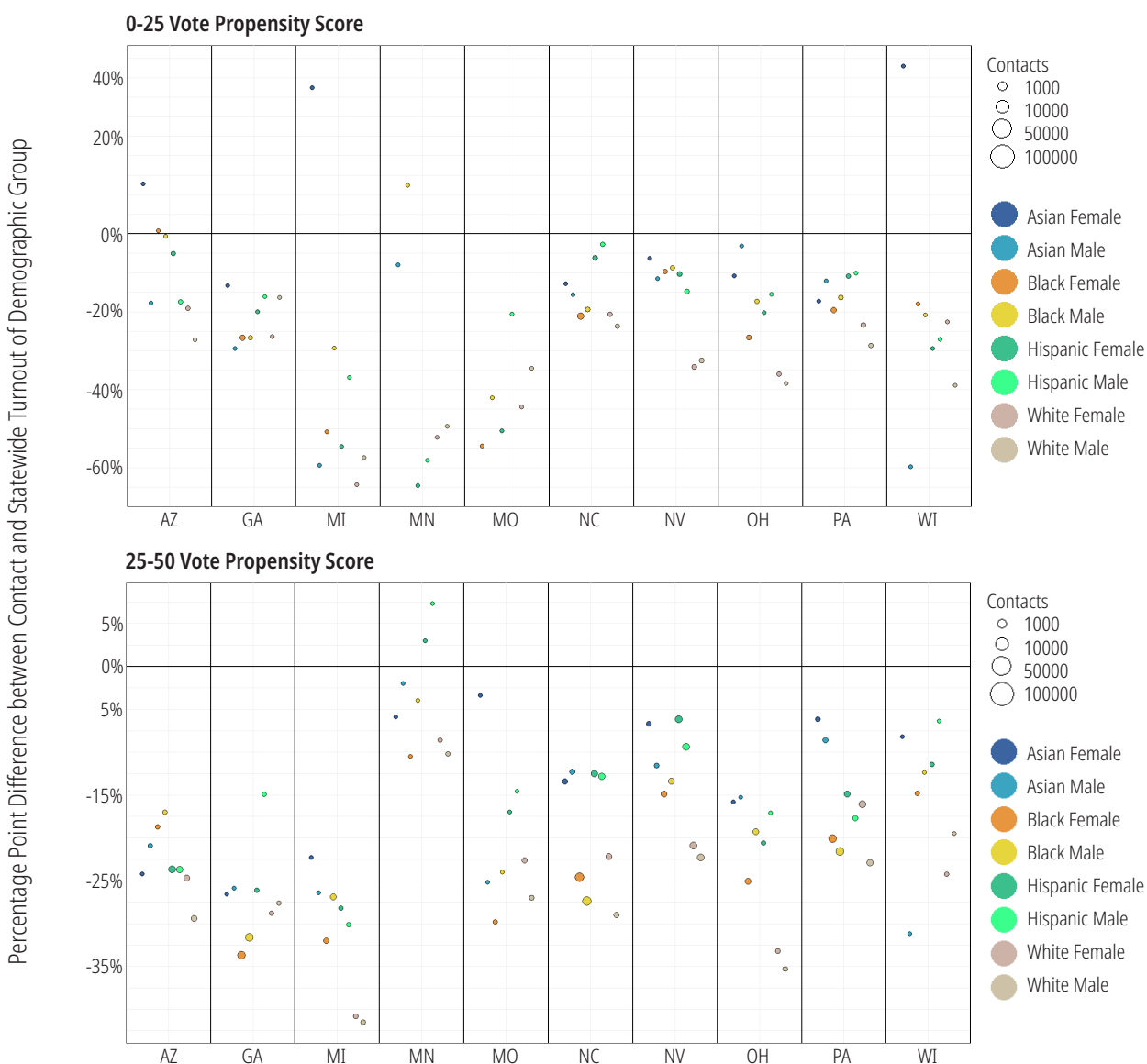
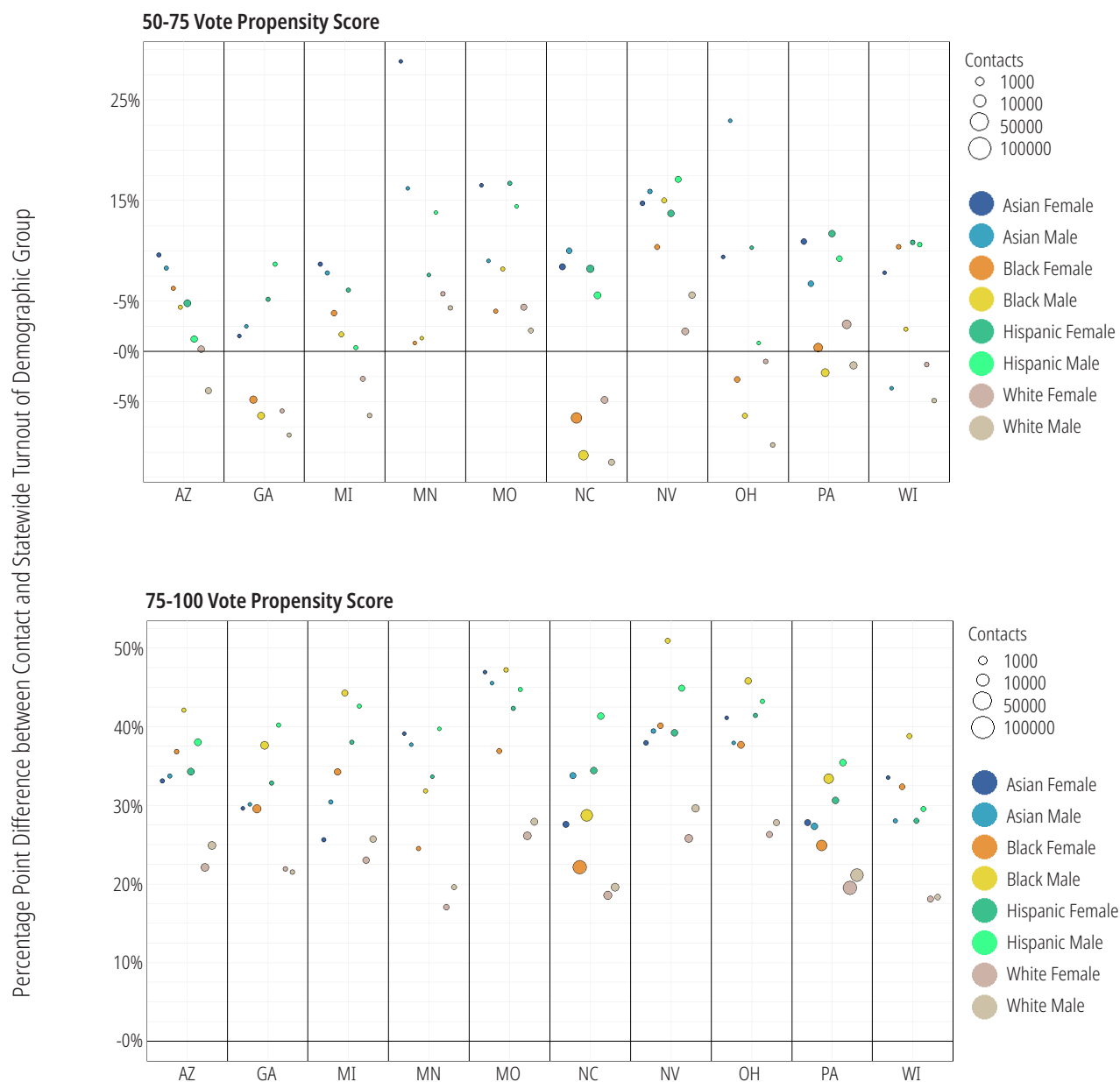


Figure 7 continued



Underneath the Results: Program Design Motivations

By standard measures, the state IPOs in this analysis led effective voter contact programs that reached millions of voters in swing states with direct person-to-person conversations. Through expanded targeting to more diverse and less frequent voters, and through relentless door and phone outreach, they contacted 1.3 million voters not reached by the rest of the progressive industry with live voter outreach. In our assessment, this is in large part because of the targeting and tactical choices these organizations made.

But *why* did they make those choices?

Through the interviews we conducted with state IPO executive directors in fall 2024, it was clear that their targeting and tactical choices were not primarily about efficiency for voter turnout. **In a sense, they did what Trump-aligned organizations on the right did: while other programs prioritized short-term efficiency and outcomes, they made the decision to focus on voters who had been less engaged in past elections as well as those who were harder to reach. They also chose harder tactics like door knocking over easier tactics like texting. Why?**

Our interviews and qualitative investigation of these organizations reveal that they prioritized harder-to-reach constituencies and more time-intensive tactics because those choices aligned with their values and longer-term power-building strategies. Many of the organizations behind the programs described above are leading year-round civic power programs with and for their constituents. **They are interested in the people they targeted not only as voters, but as citizens, potential organizational members, and constituents of districts in which they have legislative agendas. Voter turnout is just one component feeding into a larger, constituent-based power plan.**

John R Taylor III, founding co-chair of Black Male Initiative Fund, described his group's voter turnout efforts as the beginning of a long-term relationship. Taylor explained, "Getting you to

vote is just getting you into the amusement park. It doesn't get you on any of the rides. From there, we talk about the legislation, the policy...

all [the] work that we do to inform and enhance and change the laws to benefit our community."

At Black Male Initiative Fund, organizers are focused on empowering Black men through five pillars: education, civic engagement, criminal and restorative justice,

economic empowerment, and Black mental health and wellness.

Taylor said, "No matter where you get on the train, you're going to go all the way around to all five."²⁵

Similarly, Maria Ibarra-Frayre and Megan Hess, co-executive directors of We the People Action Fund, explained the group's central commitment was to their base's issue agenda. Hess highlighted the key questions that drive this agenda: "What are our communities saying? What do they care about? What are the visions and hopes that they have? And then what are the barriers that are getting in the way, according to the people who run into [those barriers] every day?" Moving their agenda forward means weaving together electoral work, community organizing, and legislative advocacy. Without this clear-eyed focus on making the voter turnout work serve the larger organizing work, Ibarra-Frayre and Hess feared their base would be used as "bodies and numbers for somebody else's political agenda."²⁶

We found that IPO leaders distinguished themselves in the 2024 electoral cycle through a consistent focus on using electoral mobilization to serve their organizations' larger goals. This meant targeting people whom they not only hoped to turn out to the polls, but whom they could also incorporate into the deeper organizing work they do year-round. **Voter turnout was an entry point, not an end point.**

"Getting you to vote is just getting you into the amusement park. It doesn't get you on any of the rides. From there, we talk about the legislation, the policy... all [the] work that we do to inform and enhance and change the laws to benefit our community."

—John R. Taylor III, founding co-chair of Black Male Initiative Fund

²⁵ Interview with John R. Taylor III, October 4, 2024.

²⁶ Interview with Maria Ibarra-Frayre and Megan Hess, October 9, 2024.

SOURCES OF POWER: ORGANIZING FINDINGS

Independent power organizations are not simply vehicles for voter mobilization: they seek to develop the power of organized constituencies to influence governance and secure material benefits for working-class communities of all races. Achieving that end requires IPOs to recruit, develop, sustain, and grow the engagement of constituent leaders committed to organizing others in their communities. This study finds that over time, organizations with greater organizing depth in an election year are more capable of securing more responsive governance after the election.

The existing data infrastructure to track and measure voter mobilization is mature and capacious. This research project sought to systematize organizing data collection and visualization tools for IPOs, which are less well developed, enabling them to assess their progress in developing committed leaders and in implementing the organizational structures and processes that are foundational to effective base building.

In our cross-organizational analysis of the organizing programs of 13 state IPOs, we found that the scale of civic leadership required to achieve meaningful influence in state and local governance was relatively modest. If IPOs across the country, with the support of their stakeholders, apply the same level of focus and incentives to their organizing programs as they do to their electoral programs, there is potential for them to significantly increase their influence in a relatively short timeframe.

The civic power crisis described at the top of this memo is not being resolved simply through mobilizing voting or protest at scale. Since 2020, it has become clearer that those are important but insufficient conditions for multiracial, working-class communities to gain meaningful influence in governance. As veteran organizing leader Doran Schrantz told us, “A virtuous cycle of participation demands a government responsible for and responsive to its constituents. A voter mobilizing campaign, especially one that shuts down right after Election Day, cannot in itself ensure that the government is responsive to constituents’ interests. It is the depth and structure of organized bases that

determine whether a scaled voter mobilization can be translated into long-term power to impact actual governing outcomes.”²⁷

Organizing has been foundational to making government responsive to the interests of ordinary Americans throughout our history and across the political spectrum, from organizations of abolitionists and suffragists in the 19th century, to unions and civil rights associations in the 20th century, to the networks of evangelical congregations, local rifle chapters, and conservative student associations of the last few decades.²⁸ Long-term movements to make democracy more representative of and responsive to all citizens in this country have advanced through the structuring of state and national webs of active local civic associations.

Based on historical precedent, **the current power crisis is going to require muscular institutional vehicles that can organize broad-based, multiracial constituents and wield that power collectively to influence governing arenas over time.**

“A voter mobilizing campaign, especially one that shuts down right after Election Day, cannot in itself ensure that the government is responsive to constituents’ interests. It is the depth and structure of organized bases that determine whether a scaled voter mobilization can be translated into long-term power to impact actual governing outcomes.”

-Doran Schrantz, Chair of Faith in Minnesota Action PAC, and Project Director of the Organizing Lab

In this study, we set out to understand the nature, strength and growth of the IPOs behind the voter mobilization programs from 2024 into 2025. Thirteen partner organizations generated robust datasets on how regular people participated in their programs during a major election season. The underlying data included participation data from small and large events that had been captured in organizational CRMs like EveryAction, or in program platforms like Zoom, Mobilize, and Action Network. When a member or volunteer went to a training, joined a celebration, led a phone bank, or lobbied a legislator, the organization captured their name and contact information. Our qualitative data come from post-election observations of organizations’ public campaigns in the first half of 2025.

²⁷ Interview with Doran Schrantz on September 14, 2025.

²⁸ Munson et al, 2000.

We equipped IPOs to analyze four critical components of effective leadership development and base-building structures and programs:

- The networked structure of leaders who are recruiting, activating, and developing the leadership of others (“organizing leaders”).
- Growth in a base of highly committed leaders over time.
- Activities that sustain the engagement of volunteers and grassroots leaders and cultivate their agency.
- A balance between organizing and mobilizing activities that facilitates both depth and scale of leadership development and public impact.

Our organizing data tools and methods drew on the prior research and scholarship of Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, Michelle Oyakawa, and partners of the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund.²⁹

Organizing Leaders

At the very core of a civic organization’s power are highly committed member leaders who act as volunteer organizers. They are non-paid people who actively organize and align with others for strategic, collective action in their communities. These leaders are the source of an organization’s authority to represent a larger community. They are the agents who ensure the organization is accountable to and advances the values and interests of that community in public.

Our research team developed network charts for each organization to capture the relationships among staff and members and to visualize which leaders in an organization are serving as organizing leaders by cultivating a base of others rather than simply acting alone. Organizing leaders appear on the network charts as the center of hub-and-spoke clusters of relationships.

29 Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa (2021). *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, and Joy Cushman and Elizabeth McKenna (2023). “Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund.

Figure 8 is a network chart from Down Home North Carolina, a multi-racial power organization focused on rural communities. Each node is a highly committed leader, operationalized as someone who participated in at least five events during 2024—an imperfect but useful indicator of sustained organizational involvement. One of the nodes in this dense web of relationships is Jason Dunkin, a volunteer organizer for Down Home. Jason and his network organized residents of the town of Oxford in Granville County to push county officials to restore a local playground and basketball court, led a team of volunteers and members to help elect the first-ever Black Sheriff in Granville County in 2022, and spearheaded a successful voter mobilization effort that helped flip a North Carolina House seat by a mere 228 votes, breaking the Republican supermajority in the North Carolina state legislature in 2024.³⁰

The network chart helps to make visible to an IPO who their most committed organizing leaders are and how they relate to each other. Jason’s story shows us what kind of power an organizing leader can bring to an organization. Effective grassroots leaders not only bring other community members into the constituent base of the organization. Working in a team, they build strategic capacity that can translate into electoral and issue wins that matter to their members.³¹ Organizing leaders like Jason are the foundation of an organization’s political influence: they are the constituents who can, when organized, hold public officials accountable. **Strong IPOs focus on identifying, developing, and structuring into local teams these highly committed local leaders.**

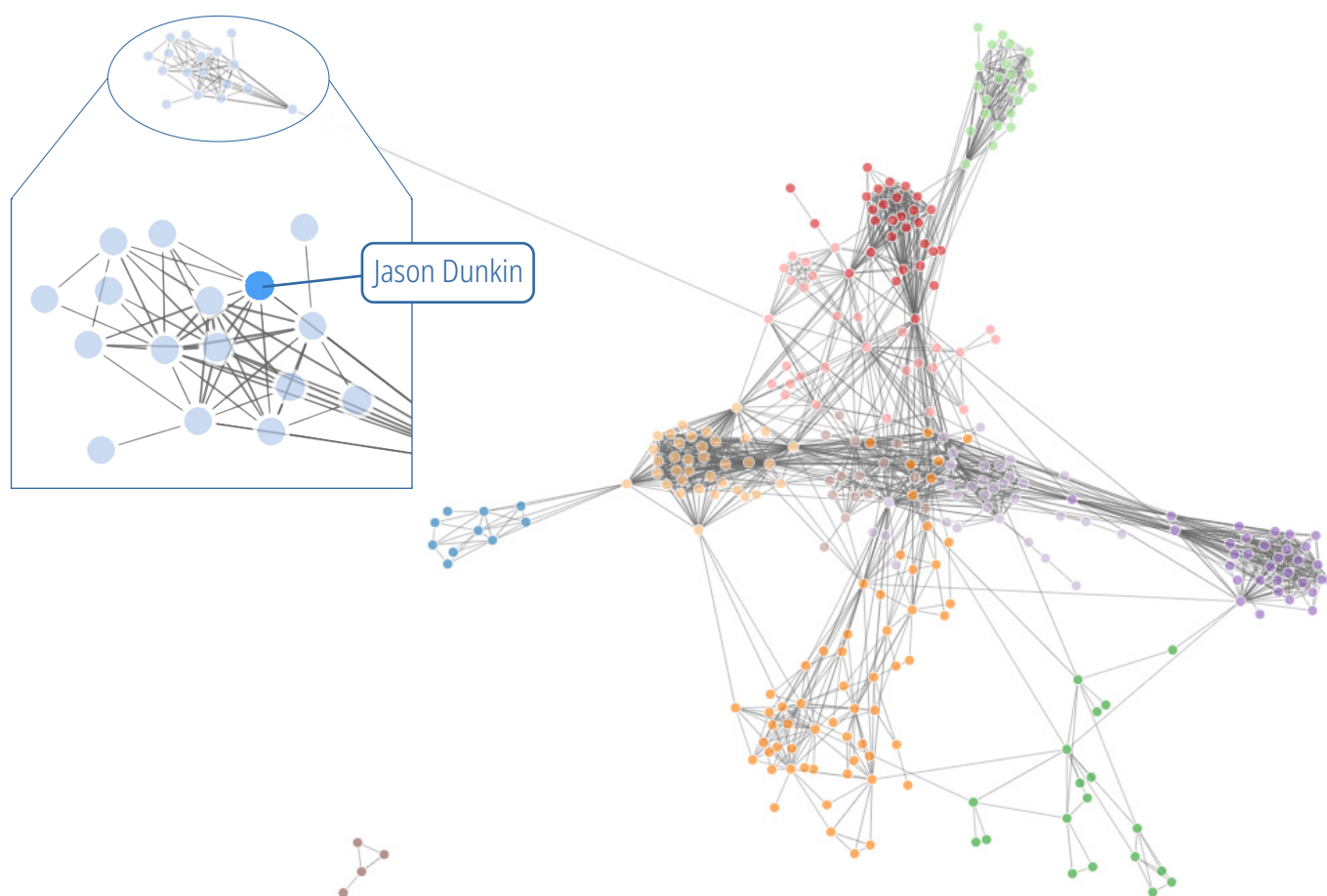
Growth in Committed Leadership

To achieve significant scale and power, IPOs must be effective at expanding their base of committed leaders over time. Shaping governance requires of IPOs an unyielding effort to contest in their power arenas to uphold the interests of their communities, respond to setbacks, defend against harmful

30 Dreama Caldwell and JaNaé Bates (2025). “Building Power from the Ground Up: Organizing Lessons from North Carolina and Minnesota,” Wechoose.us. Aug 19, 2025.

31 Marshall Ganz (2009). *Why David Sometimes Wins*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Figure 8: Network Map of Down Home North Carolina's High Commitment Leaders, 2024



policies and power grabs, and advance proactive strategies to strengthen the influence of their constituencies. **This power cannot be reduced to the number of voters contacted or turned out: its source is in organized local constituent teams of deeply committed and highly strategic leaders.**³²

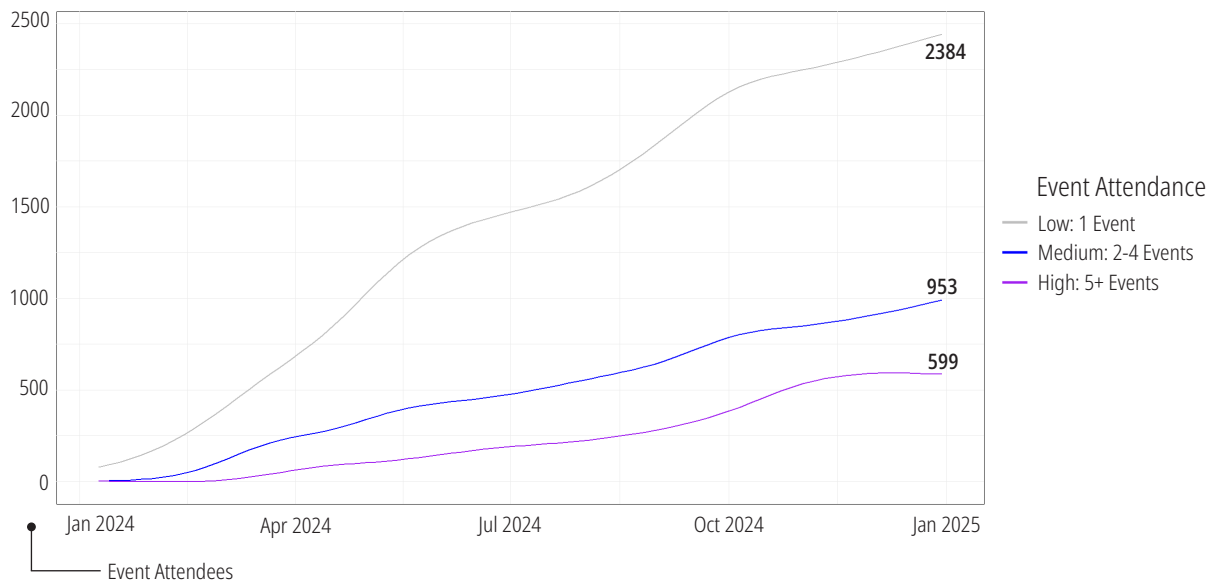
A second dimension of our analysis involved tracking the growth of committed leadership within an organization over the course of 2024 using event attendance data to track and sort “high-participation” and “low-participation” members. Participation

alone does not equal leadership, but commitment through action is a critical precursor to civic leadership.

Figures 9 and 10 are examples of the analysis we use to track growth in IPO member commitment. The grey line is the cumulative number of people who participated in only one event during 2024. The blue line is the number of people who participated in two to four events during the year. The purple line reflects the most committed members: the number of people who participated in five or more events during the year. These “purple line” members serve as a rough proxy for an organization’s progress in developing organizing leaders. Figures 9 and 10 show these patterns in two organizations.

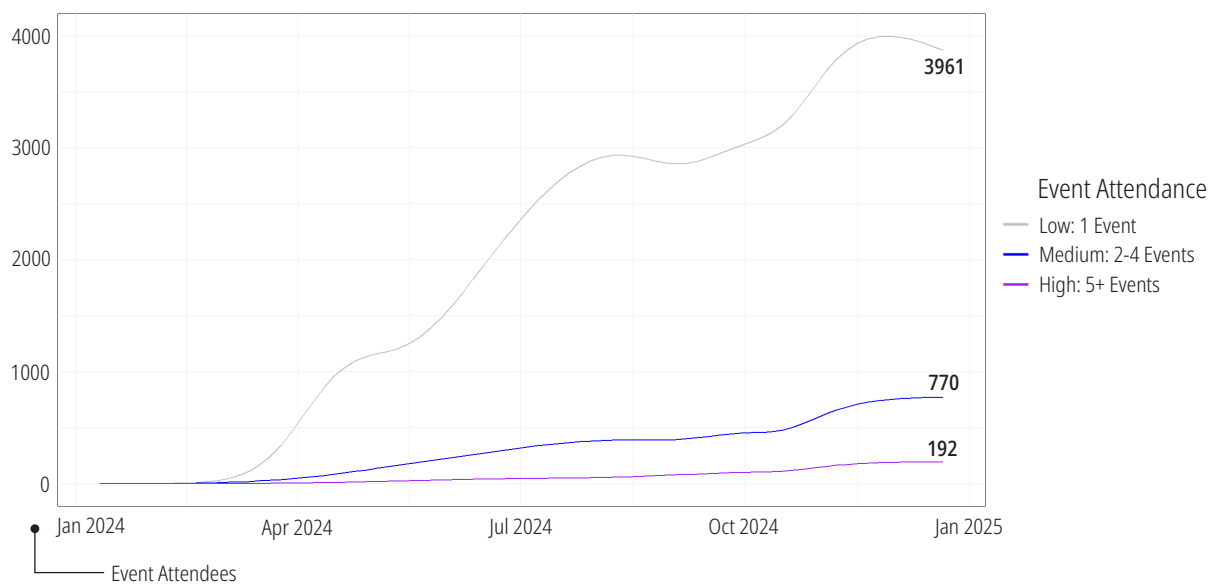
³² Michelle Oyakawa, Liz McKenna, and Hahrie Han (2021). “Constituency as an Independent Source of Power,” *Items*, April 6, 2021.

Figure 9: Organization A Event Attendees by Commitment Levels in 2024



In this example, Organization A had healthy growth in their purple line, reflecting the emergence and absorption of committed leaders over the course of the year. They also did mobilizing work, engaging 2,384 people who only participated once. In 2025 we observed this organization pivot quickly to influence local, state and federal legislative decisions.

Figure 10: Organization B Event Attendees by Commitment Levels in 2024



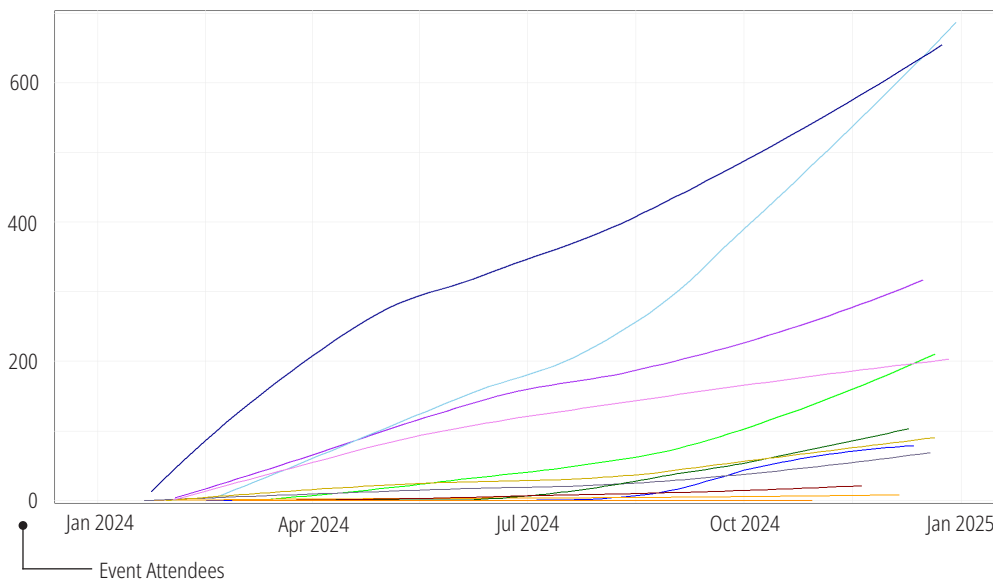
Organization B had rapid and robust growth in their grey line, reflecting thousands of unique people engaged in action. However, without a strong purple line until nearly October, they struggled to sustain the infrastructure needed to absorb more of the one-time participants. In late 2024 and early 2025 we observed them mobilizing again to defend a critical 2024 electoral win successfully, so they were able to turn many of the election-year participants into post-election campaigners. However, as they pivoted to the governing season in 2025 they have been wrestling with how to open up their organizing structure to absorb more committed people and wield more power in their county and state legislative arenas.

Based on the data we have analyzed to date, **we hypothesize that organizations that can grow a highly committed base of “purple line” leaders through organizing are better positioned to convert that base into action that generates influence during governing seasons than those that either do not build such a base or that lose it after election seasons.**

We analyzed leadership growth data from 13 IPOs in 2024 and coupled them with program observations in 2025 to factor in the success of each IPO in securing meaningful state and local issue wins post-election. Based on this analysis, we find that **the threshold among these organizations to achieve local influence was 80 to 100 committed, high-participation leaders, while IPOs that achieved state-level policy wins had between 200 and 700 committed leaders by the end of 2024 (see Figure 11).**

Figure 11 shows the “purple line” scale and slope for all thirteen organizations who submitted data. It reflects the wide range of organized bases even within this study. The organizations reflected in the top five lines have all contested for governing power and achieved wins in both local and statewide arenas in 2025, like protecting abortion rights, securing more child care funding through the state budget, and stopping cuts to public schools, libraries, and emergency services. Notably, they are based in blue, red, and purple states, so partisan and demographic lean alone cannot account for the variance we observe in their ability to engage and develop committed members.

Figure 11: Volume of Unique Individuals Attending 5+ Events Held by 13 IPOs in 2024



The next four organizations in the chart have all achieved important local wins in the first half of 2025, including stopping the building of sports stadiums in working class neighborhoods, passing public school bonds, and passing local resolutions to invoke the Fourth Amendment to protect people in public buildings from unlawful search and seizure. Those with fewer than 50 highly committed leaders in 2024 have struggled to convert their civic engagement efforts into successful legislative campaigns this year.

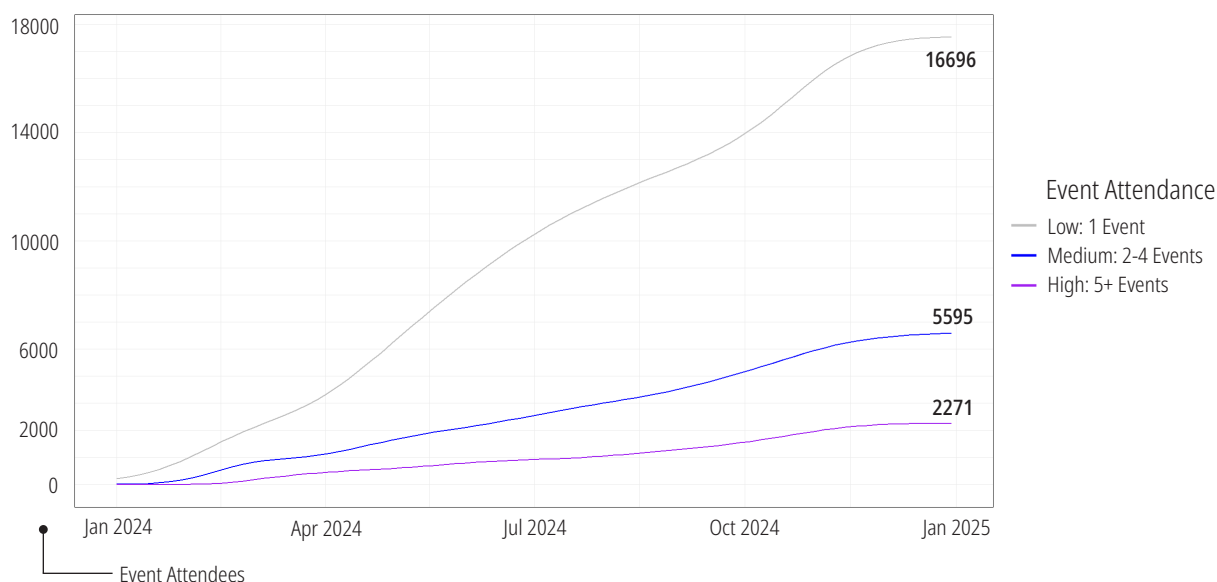
These figures are not what many would think of as massive scale. **Our analysis indicates that strengthening civic infrastructure for responsive governance at the local and state levels is not only possible but eminently within reach if IPOs focus on growing a deep base of committed and active members—and have the support of key stakeholders to do it.** This theory complements and builds on Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's finding that 3.5% of a population in nonviolent action can secure transformational change in maximalist campaigns.³³ Here we extend this insight to the current context and offer one explanation for the declining

efficacy of mass nonviolent resistance campaigns.³⁴ Our research suggests that it is not scaled participation alone, but local, structured teams that are needed to generate and absorb the kind of scaled participation that leads to the tangible legislative power needed to secure material wins.

The data we analyzed shows that IPOs are only tapping into a fraction of the potential leaders they are reaching through their organizing and mobilizing activities. Figure 12, reflecting the purple, blue and grey line member leaders in aggregate across 13 organizations, is revealing. All told, the 13 groups who submitted comprehensive organizing data moved 24,563 unique people into voluntary civic action beyond voting in 2024. And yet, 67% of them only participated once.

These findings raise important questions about the unrealized potential for collective power. **What level of influence and power might be possible if even a portion of these first-time participants were re-engaged and sustained in civic action through the election year and into subsequent governing periods?**

Figure 12: Event Attendees by Commitment Level for 13 IPOs Combined in 2024



33 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan (2011). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press.

34 Erica Chenoweth (2020). "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 31(3): 69-84.

Activities that Move People to Committed Public Leadership

A third component of our analysis focused on examining the nature and patterns of event participation among IPOs. **To grow a strong base of committed leaders, IPOs must be intentional about shaping activities and processes that cultivate people’s agency, knowledge, skills, and identity as public actors.** Organizations accomplish this work through engaging their members in leadership training, strategy meetings, and one-on-one developmental conversations, and through public actions that volunteers design and lead. Tactical mobilization events like phone banks or canvasses are typically inadequate to this task on their own.

We used Sankey charts to track the developmental pathways of people who attended two or more events in 2024. Each small lateral line wave reflects one person’s journey. The first column is that person’s first event type in 2024, the second column is that person’s second event type, and so on, up to five events. The shrinking flows over time indicate declining participation. When a line ends in column three or four, it means that the participant did not return to the organization for another event during the same calendar year.

This data visualization tool enables organizations to discern the “stickiness” of their events and activities and their effectiveness at sustaining the involvement of members over time.

Below are examples of two organizations’ Sankey charts. In Figure 13, Organization C was more effective at retaining member and leadership participation over the course of the year. In this organization, there was a mix of organizing (blue) and mobilizing (orange) events and relatively thick waves of people moving between those event types. Local leader meetings formed a consistent backbone for the organization, providing structural stability through 2024 and into the 2025 legislative season.

In contrast, Organization D’s Sankey chart reveals a strong initial influx of participants but a steep decline thereafter. With fewer and more sparsely attended organizing (blue) events, the organization lacked sufficient opportunities to absorb and retain new members (which was also reflected in a relatively flat “purple line” of highly committed leaders in the organization’s leadership growth chart). When the thick orange phone bank line disappeared after the election they had weaker participation and infrastructure to try to convert members over for the governing season.

Figure 13: Organization C Flow and Retention of Participants by Event Type, 2024

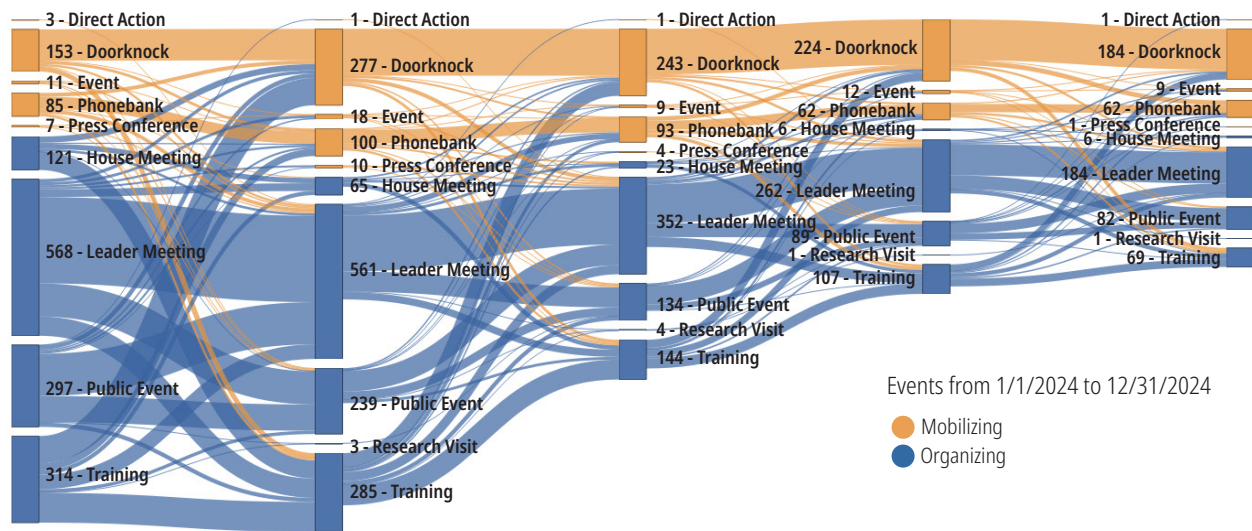
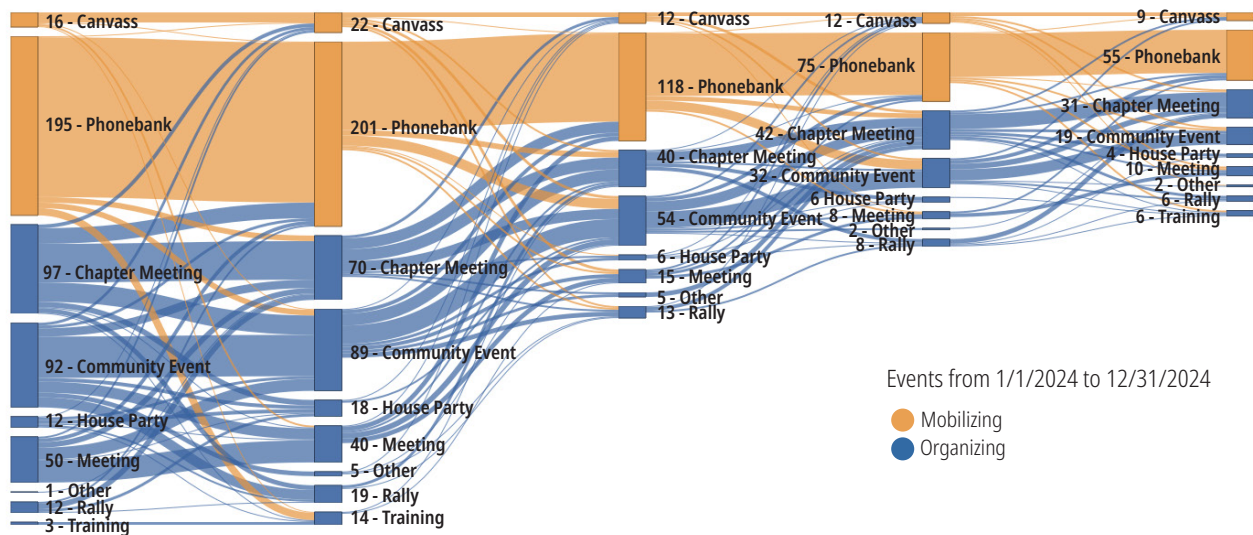


Figure 14: Organization D Flow and Retention of Participants by Event Type, 2024



Balancing Organizing and Mobilizing

The final component of our analysis examined the balance of organizing and mobilizing at each organization. **Effective IPOs create a balanced structure for organizing and mobilizing activities that enable them to achieve depth and scale of leadership and constituent bases and public influence and impact.** Mobilizing activities enable them to cast a wide net for new potential members and to flex their power in the electoral and issue arenas. Organizing events are developmental opportunities for participants to grow in their solidarity, power analysis, and public leadership with others; they are crucial to nurturing the agency, commitment, and skills of the organization's public leaders. As demonstrated above, IPOs that overindex to mobilization activities and neglect organizing events struggle to absorb new volunteers and to grow their leadership.

Figure 15 shows a strong statewide organization with robust local chapters that maintained a balance of organizing and mobilizing throughout the year. This organization exceeded their voter contact goals, grew their base of highly committed leaders, and

pivoted successfully in 2025 to leverage their base in the public arena for local, state and federal fights. In every month of 2024 except for September and October, the number of organizing events (in blue) they held exceeded mobilizing events (in orange) by considerable margins.

Figure 15 reflects the trajectory of one issue-based organization in the study that was working on a statewide ballot measure they had initiated. In the beginning of 2024, they began by focusing on mobilizing events (in orange); in January 2024 they did not record holding any organizing events. By June, however, they quickly built a training and local team meeting structure to absorb and hold repeat participants. Their base-building stalled as they switched back to mobilizing in the fall, but in November they made an interesting choice. They channeled all their new volunteers into regional get-out-the-vote canvasses while they worked with their more committed leaders to set up local organizing meetings to absorb new members immediately after the election. This program, which started as an electoral mobilizing program, ended 2024 with stable chapters of new member leaders across the state.

Figure 15: Organization E Proportion of Available Events by Month and Event Type, 2024

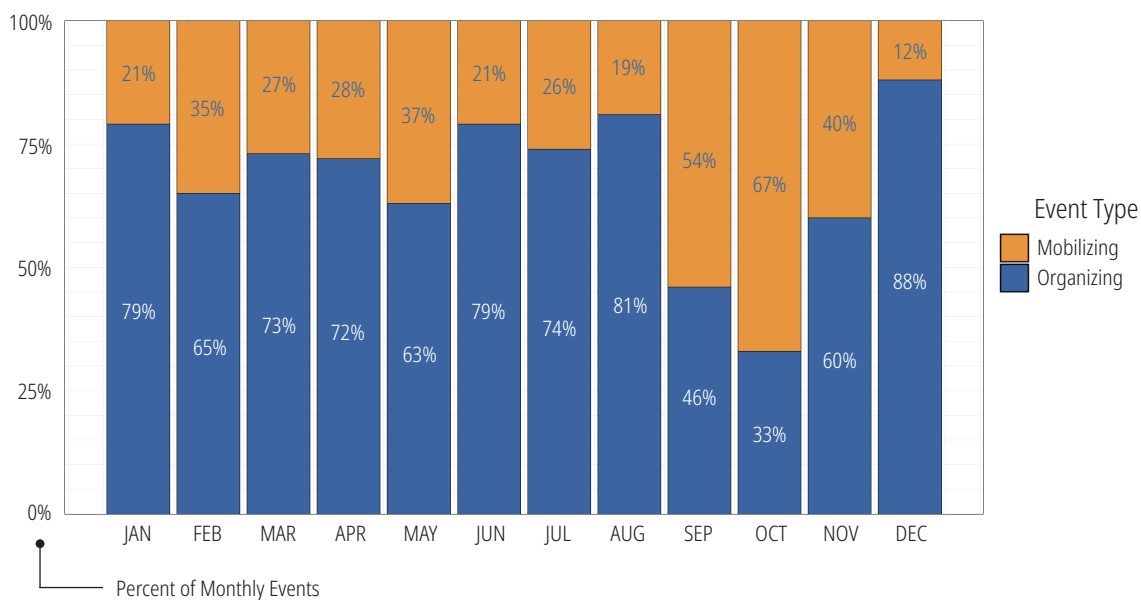


Figure 16: Organization F Proportion of Available Events by Month and Event Type, 2024

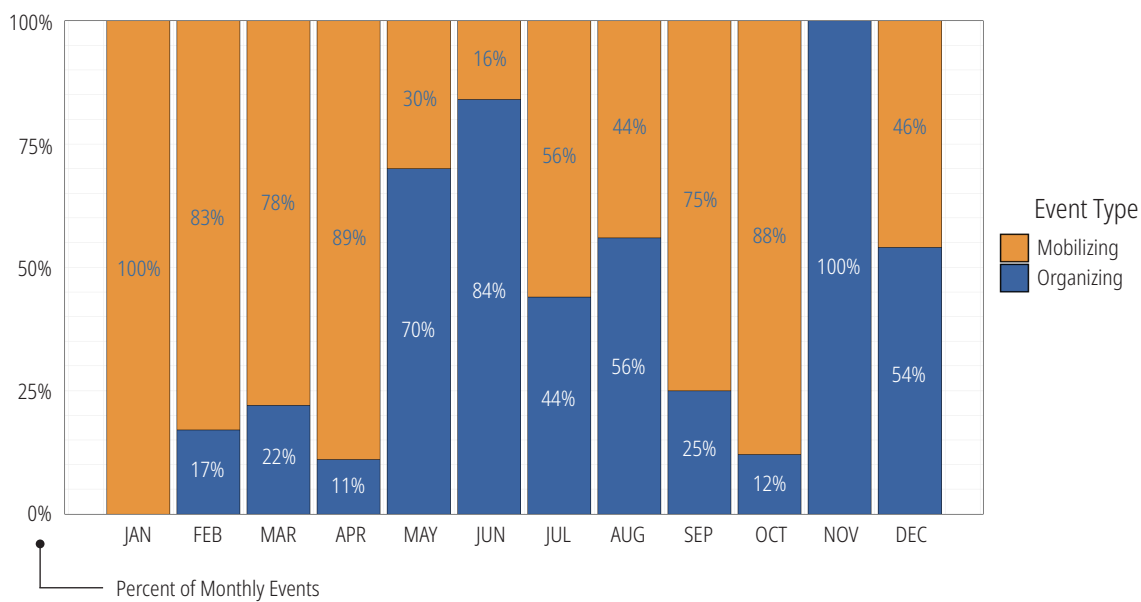


Figure 16 reveals that an organization that is initially indexed toward mobilizing can, through intentional effort and thoughtful design, reorient itself to absorb people into organizing pathways in a relatively short timeframe.

This finding suggests there may be significant, untapped potential to translate the mobilization capacity built during election years—capacities that are often viewed as “sandcastles” that wash away after election money dries up—into base building structures and activities that advance an organization’s influence on governance.

Importantly, both of the organizations profiled above were successful in achieving their public impact goals during the election. The first organization in Figure 15 used their 501(c)(4) electoral program to help elect a progressive statewide education leader who has become a top champion for the organization’s public education agenda in 2025. Advancing that agenda with the public official has required the members (organized in county chapters) to continue pushing from the ground up in their school districts for full school funding from county, state, and federal officials in 2025. The second organization profiled in Figure 16 led a coalition to achieve a state constitutional amendment to protect abortion rights. They needed the ongoing chapter structure they populated during the election to defend their win in 2025 and moving forward into 2026.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practitioners have a choice to make in upcoming electoral seasons about whether to continue the march toward nationalized, tactical voter mobilization programs that achieve scaled outreach but struggle to do the harder but critical work of expanding the electorate, contesting for new voters, or building organized, civic power that can secure responsive governance. Working communities of all races need more than simple participation in the streets or voting booths—they need increased access to, and agency inside, organizations that transform individual participation into collective power to get what they want.

Achieving this end requires a reorientation of the priorities of progressive political and civic institutions, donors, and other stakeholders, and the adoption of metrics and data tools that make visible and incentivize longer-term base building in addition to short-term electoral mobilization. We have three broad sets of recommendations:

1 Design and support IPO voter programs that expand the electorate, contest for new voters, and translate electoral participation into actual material wins.

Our research affirms that organizations rooted in broad bases are distinctly capable of reaching and contesting for millions of voters, including voters of color and young voters, whose engagement is crucial to build durable, progressive governing power in the US. Yet IPOs often find themselves swimming against the tide in their efforts to target these constituencies.

IPOs need flexibility and support to double down on contesting for these voters, including resources that enable them to target voters at lower propensity scores across geographies, support for person-to-person outreach methods that allow for deeper engagement, and investment in approaches that do not rely solely on identifying registered voters in the voter file, such as mobilization through relational networks and making use of same-day-registration opportunities. We must refine and improve the data infrastructure that supports electoral programs so that it more accurately captures and reflects lower propensity voters and voters of color.

2 Commit to the building of 21st century civic associations that can hold government accountable to the interests of regular people.

Meeting the power crisis will require the growth of base-building organizations that develop sustained leadership and power for regular people to influence governance. The growth of this sector requires the same attention given to electoral mobilization work over the last decades. Local and state organizations will each need to break open their structures to absorb and develop hundreds of highly committed local and state leaders.

Our research shows that organizations can develop significant influence at the local and state levels in a relatively short timeframe and with a modest-scale base of leaders. Given the current orientation towards short-term electoral mobilization, many organizations have substantial, untapped pools of volunteers they have yet to absorb into their leadership—but could, with a reorientation of their focus, priorities, and incentives.

3 Standardize and expand data infrastructure to measure and advance power building.

Over the last 20 years, progressive organizations have developed an expansive and mature infrastructure to track, measure, and analyze the impact of voter mobilization programs. We need comparable data infrastructure that measures, supports, and incentivizes the base-building and leadership development work that is critical for increasing the governing influence of civic associations. We recommend consolidating around the core set of metrics used in this analysis, equipping more organizations with organizing data visualization tools, and supporting them in collecting and storing their organizing data in ways that facilitate future cross-state and cross-organization analysis and learning.

Lastly, we recommend building on this baseline study with an expanded set of state groups in 2026 and 2027. Future analysis could study multi-cycle base organizing growth, shifts in voter mobilizing targeting and tactics, and the synthesis of deep organizing and broad mobilizing required to make government accountable to working people.

CONCLUSION

The source of working peoples' power to influence local, state, and federal governing arenas is organized constituencies: regular people organized into long-term voluntary structures through which they make meaning, build community, and enter the public arena collectively to advance their shared interests. The measure of this power cannot be reduced to the number of voters contacted or turned out, although that is important. Equally important is the presence of muscular civic organizations capable of contesting in the public arena year-round and winning laws, policies, and public investments that benefit their members and communities, creating a virtuous cycle of democracy.

It is possible to build a robust civic infrastructure for the 21st century that helps individuals turn their own agency, relationships, and resources into organized power to win the things that matter to them. That will require approaching the building of organized constituencies with as much curiosity and discipline as we approach electoral programs. This may be the only way to restore the faith of everyday Americans in the practice of collective self governance that we call democracy.

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We are gratified to offer this report as certifiable hope that there is a powerful path forward to advance the democratic experiment in the United States in our generation, and to make our government more accountable and accessible to all.

APPENDIX: RESEARCHER BIOS

Joy Cushman completed her PhD in Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow in Scotland in 2004. She is a practice-based researcher focused on the study of the role of civic associations in US democracy. She has built and directed the research program at the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund since 2019. Prior to that she was an organizer in local, state, and federal electoral and governing campaigns in the US.

Elizabeth McKenna is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and faculty director of the Civic Power Lab. She received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley and held a postdoc at Johns Hopkins with the P3 Lab and SNF Agora Institute. Her research and teaching focuses on social movements and civic engagement across the political spectrum in the United States and Brazil. She is the co-author of two books on democratic organizing, including *Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (with Hahrie Han and Michelle Oyakawa, University of Chicago Press, 2021). Prior to academia, she worked as an organizer in Ohio and Rio de Janeiro.

Miya Woolfalk earned her PhD in Government and Social Policy from Harvard University. She is a political scientist and researcher with over 15 years of experience focused on US political behavior, civic engagement and organizing, and racial and ethnic politics. She has served as an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wellesley College and held senior leadership roles at the Analyst Institute, including Director of Research and Managing Director of Research, Programs, and Partnerships. She is also the founder of MW Strategies, where she leads research and evaluation projects that bridge academic and applied work.

Michael Schwam Baird is an Associate Professor of Practice and the Deputy Director of the Political Analytics program at Columbia University. Before teaching at Columbia, Michael worked at the Analyst Institute and as the founding Director of Data Science at Grow Progress, a political technology firm. Michael received his PhD in political science from Columbia University. His work focuses on elections, political persuasion, public opinion, and experiments.

Miriam McKinney Gray is a Senior Data Analyst with the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund where she has worked to support community organizing groups in collecting and analyzing their program data since 2020. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Loyola University Maryland and a Master of Arts in Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences from Columbia University. Before joining Democracy and Power Innovation Fund, Miriam worked as a research data analyst at the Johns Hopkins University for four years, leading technical assistance engagements with cities, delivering online courses, and supporting the Coronavirus Resource Center project from 2020-2021.

Tianyi Hu is a Senior Data Analyst with the State Power Fund, where she has worked since 2020 to lead collaborative learning cohorts on data use and analysis and help groups strengthen their ability to measure impact and apply data-driven strategies. She holds a Master's degree in Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences from Columbia University.

Matt Duell is a Data Strategist with State Power Fund. He earned his PhD in Political Science from Stony Brook University. He has worked at the intersection of progressive politics and data analytics for five years, including positions with Digidems and Empower. He also co-founded a local activist organization in Brooklyn.

