

DEMOCRACY & POWER
INNOVATION FUND

LEARNING TO BUILD POWER

**THE DEMOCRACY & POWER
INNOVATION FUND'S WORK
TO SUPPORT MULTIRACIAL
DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE**

Loren McArthur

March 2026

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
DPI Origin Story.....	4
A New Strategy for Advancing Multiracial Democratic Practice.....	5
PEOPLE: Understanding Values and Identities.....	8
Understanding Black Identities and Values.....	9
CASE STUDY: <i>Transformative Conversations:</i> Understanding People to Build Power in Missouri.....	13
The Challenge of Disconnection and Disillusionment and the Potential of Hope.....	15
ORGANIZATIONS: The Role of Civic Homes.....	18
How Civic Homes Anchor Collective Action.....	19
Building Belonging and Agency: Deep Canvassing and Soul Food Dinners.....	20
POWER: Understanding and Measuring Power Building.....	24
The Formation and Early Work of the Data Cohort.....	25
CASE STUDY: Measuring Constituent Power: Renewing the Ohio Organizing Collaborative.....	27
Developing Standardized Tools and a Framework for Understanding and Measuring Power.....	30
INSET: A Primer on Power: Defining and Measuring Power Building.....	31
Expanding the Data Cohort and Implementing a Groundbreaking Election-year Research Initiative.....	32
Lessons and Recommendations.....	34
A New Paradigm.....	36
Acknowledgements.....	37
About the Author.....	37
Works Cited.....	38



INTRODUCTION

As the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund (DPI) enters its seventh year, we see our fundamental American principles coming under attack: the separation of powers, the right to due process, freedom of speech and association, free and fair elections. The rule of law hangs by a thread.

This growing threat of autocracy is a symptom of a deeper break. Our founding ideal of self-government is not a reality for millions of Americans. At a time when we need our democracy to work, the system is broken.

Since 2017, a record number of Americans have taken to the streets to demand racial and gender justice, oppose gun violence, and mobilize against authoritarianism.¹ Yet, this record high political participation and activism has not translated into sustained power to achieve durable, lasting progress in the public arena and in government. Authoritarianism continues to rise.

Millions of Americans are deeply disillusioned. While government institutions and programs are crucial to our well-being, many people do not feel they have any voice in politics or government. Inequality has spiraled² and the wealthy openly dominate public decision-making.³ Some people are opting out; others are embracing a political strongman.

¹ Chenoweth, Erica. "New Data Shows No Kings Was One of the Largest Days of Protest in US History." *Waging Nonviolence*, 12 August 2025, wagingnonviolence.org/2025/08/new-data-shows-no-kings-was-one-of-the-largest-days-of-protest-in-us-history.

² "Trends in the Distribution of Household Income From 1979 to 2021." Congressional Budget Office, September 2024, www.cbo.gov/system/files/2024-09/60342-Trends-Income.pdf.

³ Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics*, 18 September 2014, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/testing-theories-of-american-politics-elites-interest-groups-and-average-citizens/62327F513959D0A304D4893B382B992B>.

As this report details, the path forward lies in rejecting what our politics have become and embracing a transformational approach rooted in everyday people and their capacity to collectively drive meaningful change. Since 2019, DPI has nurtured a community of organizers, researchers, and funders committed to building 21st century multiracial democratic practices that enable regular people to exercise real power and to make government responsive to their needs. Through practitioner-driven research and programmatic innovation and a deep commitment to a culture of learning, DPI strengthens three foundational pillars for inclusive, multiracial democratic practices: understanding **people** and their complex values and identities, building effective civic **organizations**, and advancing these organizations' capacity to build and wield **power** to achieve material benefits for their members and communities.

Democracy is won through organized people and movements. American democracy is not about a singular founding moment; it is about the ongoing struggle to expand the promise of self-government, even in the face of fierce and often violent oppression and backlash. From the Sons of Liberty who helped ignite the American Revolution, to the abolitionist societies and women's suffrage associations of the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the Black churches and student organizing groups that drove the Civil Rights Movement, and many more examples in between and beyond, Americans have built and expanded our democracy through grassroots organizing and civic association. Every advance we have made toward greater justice, dignity, equality, and shared prosperity started with everyday people coming together to fight for something that mattered to them. We can do the same today.



DPI ORIGIN STORY

In December 2018, a group of 50 organizers, researchers, and funders met in Washington, DC in the wake of the mid-term elections. The gathering was not a typical election post mortem: this group focused on diagnosing the deeper failures of American politics and democratic practice, and explored solutions to those challenges.

The participants understood that people are the most important source of power in a democracy. They were all deeply committed to building the agency, power, and voice of everyday people: Black, Latino, and Asian American people, as well as White people. The organizers in that room had helped to build and lead some of the most powerful civic organizations in the country. They had spent years developing grassroots leaders, building teams, and helping communities seek solutions to their most pressing problems in city halls, state capitals, and the halls of Congress.

Yet, while they could point to discrete victories in various places, organizers recognized that what they were doing up to that point was not enough.

A healthy democracy depends on a virtuous cycle of political participation and responsive government: People make their interests known in the public arena; government delivers on those interests; and people's sense of political agency, participation, and power grows, enabling them to claim a yet greater voice in governance. But this virtuous cycle is broken for many Americans, who face a political process that fails to address their needs and generates increasing public disillusionment.

There are many reasons for this rupture, but the group at the 2018 gathering focused on

the domain where they have responsibility and agency: the realm of political practice and civic engagement. The way we approach politics, our dominant political practices, are failing people and undermining the promise of democracy. What could they do to correct it?

Leaders of grassroots power organizations were struggling with the forceful cross-currents of the political industry—the ecosystem of donors and advisors, campaign leads, consultants, and data experts who collectively determine how billions of dollars are spent on voter turnout programs. The industry had unleashed a massive influx of money for community organizations like theirs to run discrete tactical electoral programs. At the same time, their organizations were awash in new tech tools developed for tactical voter mobilization and mass communication. Yet the industry's tactics, tech tools, metrics, and funding practices are not designed to help communities build power and agency; they were intended only to extract votes from communities to elect the industry's favored candidates. The industry treats people—especially Black, Latino, and Asian American people—as bodies and numbers to be moved for someone else's power. The industry people calling the shots are not curious about the complexity and political agency of Black, Latino, or Asian American people and they see no value in civic associations. Politics was about mass marketing to individual consumers, not building structures through which people can act collectively to advance their interests in government.

The group recognized that these forces were exerting a powerful and distorting influence on organizations committed to building community power, often steering organizers away from their



foundational work of developing leaders and building a powerful base of people. The political industry was displacing collective, people-focused democratic practice with an atomized and appified version of mass politics. And many organizers had been too passive as their organizations fell under the sway of the industry's vision and money. The leaders in this group recognized that it is essential to rebuild and reimagine a democratic politics in which the people they were organizing have real agency and power – a politics rooted in strong civic organizations and a commitment to innovating more inclusive, effective organizing and political practices for the 21st century.

A New Strategy for Advancing Multiracial Democratic Practice

Participants of the December 2018 gathering dedicated themselves to shifting the dominant industry practices. The convening sparked the formation of a cross-sector learning community for organizers, social science researchers, and aligned funders committed to using research and program innovation to improve the craft of organizing and build more powerful civic organizations. This new community aspired to shift progressive politics toward a multiracial democratic practice that centers the interests and agency of everyday people and communities. The Democracy & Power Innovation Fund formally launched in June 2019 to support the community's research and learning agenda and its larger efforts to transform the field of progressive politics.

DPI created space for organizations building constituencies in diverse communities and geographies to innovate practices and to learn from each other. The Fund invited 12 organizations to form a *collaborative learning cohort* and provided each with a three-year grant of \$75,000 per year to build learning capacity.

Over the past seven years, the cross-sector community's research and practice have focused on understanding the complexity and motivations of the people who are the source of power in a democracy; the role of civic organizations in bringing people together to form a political community and engage in collective action; and making visible and measurable the *power* people and their organizations must build and wield to make democracy work for them.



PEOPLE

Understanding values and identities.

What motivates people to participate – or not participate – in political and civic life? What values and identities animate people, including Black, Latino, and Asian American people whose power and agency are so often disregarded in politics? What causes the disaffection of millions of people within and across racial and social groups?



ORGANIZATIONS

The role of civic homes.

What are the characteristics and practices of civic organizations that successfully identify, engage, and inspire people to take action together, including those who were previously disconnected from politics?



POWER

Understanding and measuring power-building.

How do civic organizations build power to win transformative changes that improve people's lives? How do we define and measure power in all of its dimensions?

Julie Fernandes of the Rockefeller Family Fund, a key architect of the DPI Fund and its managing director, recalled:

*We founded DPI as a community of people with a shared diagnosis about the need to re-center the interests of people and communities from all demographic and social groups into our political and civic engagement system. If we choose to recognize people as a critical source of power, we need to understand who these people are, how to find them and bring them into community, how to turn them into a collective, and how that collective can exercise external power.*⁴

From the outset, members of the new, cross-sector learning community understood that advancing a people-centered democratic practice requires pursuing different research questions and taking a fundamentally different approach to research and learning. The political industry's research agenda is driven from the top, mostly by party and candidate-focused interests. It is primarily focused on identifying and testing transactional voter mobilization tactics and devalues on-the-ground practitioners and their localized expertise and practice-based knowledge. In contrast, DPI brings researchers into close collaboration with on-the-ground practitioners to co-design research agendas that meet the needs and interests of civic associations.

As Fernandes explained:

This was super new. Most organizations did not have dedicated research or data staff with a mandate around their core work. And no one was supporting groups in work to actually understand the values and identity diversity within Black, Latino, and Asian American communities... Organizations saw "research" as an accountability tool for funders: "We'll measure whatever you want and report it so

*that we can continue to get funding." They knew that there were questions they wanted to ask that mattered more to their program, but they did not have the money or staff time to figure out answers.*⁵

Joy Cushman, one of the founding leaders of the learning community and a senior advisor to DPI, saw that the orientation toward funder accountability had stunted the development and exercise of learning. Part of DPI's critical role has been to encourage people to lean into curiosity, which means making space and devoting resources to learning:

*We have been learning how to learn – about people who've been ignored by the polling industry, about civic associations that the political industry ignores or engages with transactionally. We are helping organizers and leaders to see themselves not only as strategists, but as learners. If people don't feel that government is responsive to their interests, we as organizers have to try new things and learn new ways to make government more responsive. And we need people to see and experience responsive government to grow their sense of agency and power and increase their commitment to collective action and public life.*⁶

⁴ Fernandes, Julie. Personal interview. 29 October 2025.

⁵ Fernandes, Jullie. Written statement to the author. 7 August 2025.

⁶ Cushman, Joy. Personal interview. 29 October 2025.





PEOPLE

Understanding Values & Identities

To bring people into community and collective action, we first need to see and understand them: who they are, what their values are, and what motivates or impedes their participation in civic and political life. In 2019, the DPI Fund began to partner with power-building organizations who wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the communities they were working to organize. Focusing first on the Black community and then on Latino and Asian American communities, DPI and its learning partners have undertaken groundbreaking research to uncover key drivers of these communities' political and civic participation and explore similarities and differences in values within and across groups.

Fundamentally, the research has revealed a deep sense of disillusionment and disconnection that cuts across Black, Latino, Asian American, and White communities. The people are not politically apathetic or indifferent; instead, their disillusionment stems from the failures of our political and economic institutions. The research has also identified sources of resilience, agency, and hope.

Members of the DPI learning community are applying the research findings to strengthen their organizing and electoral programs by drawing on deeper, more holistic understandings of their communities to find, engage, and activate people.

DPI's research and learning fills a critical gap. The progressive political industry has historically viewed Black, Latino, and Asian American communities as monolithic turnout blocs for candidates and campaigns. Pollsters focus their research on the narrow objective of short-term mobilization, grounding their conclusions in how people's stated issue priorities and preferences in artificially-constructed survey environments and randomized controlled trials influence their self-reported vote choice.⁷ The industry has exhibited little to no curiosity about the complexity and diversity within and across Black, Latino, and Asian American communities or the motivations behind their participation – or non-participation. Furthermore, there has been little research aimed at understanding the diverse values and identities within these communities for the purpose of building their civic agency and power.

According to DPI research partner Terrance Woodbury, DPI's curiosity about and focus on understanding these communities is unique:

Black and Latino and AAPI communities have not been investigated with the same level of curiosity... Why do Black people feel these things? Or why do Latinos feel less of these things? What are the barriers? What are the motivations? Allow for that level of curiosity. Allow for us to try things that may not have an immediate transactional benefit. But now we understand something better. That was the magic of DPI.⁸

DPI is not simply applying different methods to achieve the political industry's goal of winning elections. DPI is pursuing a radically different goal: to use research to understand how to increase the motivation and power of everyday people to influence governance and win things they want for themselves, their families, and their communities.

⁷ For a comprehensive critique of the dominant practices of progressive and center-left polling and messaging practices, see Anat Shenker-Orsorio's Substack article, "Bringing a Survey to a Gun Fight." Weekend Reading, 4 October 2025, www.weekendreading.net/p/bringing-a-survey-to-a-gun-fight.

⁸ Woodbury, Terrance. Personal interview. 7 October 2025.

Understanding Black Values and Identities

In 2020, DPI launched a series of research projects to gain a deeper understanding of Black communities across the country. The political industry caricatures Black America by dividing Black people into two camps: apathetic Black people who don't understand their own interests, and older Black voters inspired by the legacy of the Civil Rights movement and presumed to have an unyielding commitment to electoral participation. The organizers and researchers in the DPI learning community knew the reality is much more complex. They wanted to understand the specific Black communities in their states and regions – rural Black constituencies in Georgia, urban Black men in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee, and more – and learn how to better reach and engage them, with the goal of increasing these constituents' power to drive change.

Woodbury and his colleagues at HIT Strategies partnered with state-based power-building organizations in five states to conduct surveys and focus groups. The partner organizations took the lead in defining and shaping the research. New Florida Majority (now Florida Rising) was the first to design a Black values research project; other organizations drew on their template and approach.⁹

One of these, POWER Interfaith, designed a program aimed at understanding Black men in Philadelphia. It was 2020, an election year, and money and campaign consultants were raining down on the state. However, the political industry saw Black men only as turnout targets, not people who needed to be understood on a deeper level and whose engagement required persuasion. Political industry operatives had asked Bishop Dwayne Royster, then executive director of

⁹ Fernandes, Julie. Personal interview. 11 December 2025.



PHOTO: POWER Interfaith leaders

POWER, to insert his voice into a pre-written radio advertisement encouraging the Black community to vote.

Royster recognized that the industry's clunky and transactional approach would not be effective at engaging his community, nor was it oriented towards helping that community build power for themselves. In the surveys and focus groups that POWER and HIT Strategies conducted through DPI's larger initiative, Black men in Philadelphia talked about the importance of hearing from trusted messengers – people from their own community who shared their lived experience and who could effectively make the connection between voting and issues they cared about. POWER partnered with the DPI Action Fund (a 501c4 partner to DPI) to produce its own ad to communicate with Black voters. There were multiple police reform measures on the ballot in Philadelphia in 2020; POWER's ad focused on those issues, and they ran it on Black radio stations. The ad tested much higher with Black people than the ad the industry operatives had scripted and the police reform initiatives ultimately passed that year in Philadelphia.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Ranada Robinson, a senior researcher with the New Georgia Project (NGP), undertook research to explore why some Black people in

Georgia choose to sit out elections and what could bring them into political and civic life. She remembered:

The New Georgia Project was focused on “low-propensity” voters. Most people don’t invest in them because they think it’s a waste of time... When people were labeled “low-propensity,” canvassers wouldn’t knock on their doors. So I changed the label from “low-propensity” to “high-opportunity” voters. Words matter. If you change the frame from “they haven’t” to “they could,” it changes the posture of canvassers. They think, “If I knock on this door, I might be the person who gets this person to see that this matters.”¹¹

NGP was particularly interested in engaging rural Black communities and younger Black men under 40 to whom few (if any) campaigns or organizations were paying attention. NGP's research revealed that Black people from these communities participate in voting and civic life primarily if they feel they have power to drive change.¹²

¹¹ Robinson, Ranada. Personal interview. 6 November 2025.

¹² Woodbury, Terrance and Roshni Nedungadi. “Pain to Power: The Use of Power Messaging to Mobilize Black Voters in Georgia: Shifting Black Voters’ Perceptions of Power.” HIT Strategies, 18 June 2021, www.linkedin.com/pulse/pain-power-use-messaging-mobilize-black-voters-georgia/.

¹⁰ Fernandes, Julie. Personal interview. 11 December 2025.



According to Fernandes:

This finding was radical. The conventional wisdom is that you had to “scare” Black and Latino voters to “get them to vote.” This research found that what is most critical to people’s participation is whether they believe in their and their community’s own agency and power.¹³

Strikingly, this research reveals that, between the “NextGen Traditionalist” and “Rightfully Cynical” clusters, fully 40% of Black people are disconnected from or disillusioned with the political process.

NGP’s surveys and focus groups also surfaced important issues for these constituencies, who were still reeling from the COVID pandemic and hungry for concrete progress on racial justice issues in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd. Robinson and NGP drew on their research insights to refine their 2020 voter engagement program, messaging, and approach. The results were impressive: Black turnout in rural counties they targeted matched or exceeded White turnout in the 2020 general election and the 2021 Senate run-off election.¹⁴

In 2022, DPI deepened exploration of the Black community, partnering with HIT Strategies and Sojourn Strategies to conduct a large, national Black values survey that uncovered distinct, values-based clusters within the larger Black population.¹⁵ The analysis built on previous research that Katrina Gamble from Sojourn had undertaken with researcher Janay Cody, which

used data from Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel to explore the racial experiences and narratives of distinct groups of Black Americans.¹⁶ In 2024, DPI, HIT, and Sojourn conducted another Black values survey to refine and deepen their analysis.¹⁷

HIT and Sojourn identified five Black values clusters: an older cohort of highly engaged “Legacy Civil Rights” voters; a cluster of relatively more educated, politically progressive Black voters; a small cohort of politically conservative community members (“Race Neutral Conservatives”); a group of more religious Black voters with traditional views on gender roles and low rates of electoral participation (“NextGen Traditionalists”); and a sizable group of young, skeptical Black Americans dubbed “Rightfully Cynical.” These community members, who skew working-class and male, are leery of political engagement not because they are uninformed or misinformed, but because of their lived experience with the very real failures of government: struggling schools, abusive police, and the failure of institutions to deliver economic opportunity. Strikingly, this research reveals that, between the “NextGen Traditionalist” and “Rightfully Cynical” clusters, fully 40% of Black people are disconnected from or disillusioned with the political process.

For base-building groups working to mobilize and organize Black constituencies, the Black values research helped to clarify and create a language for something they already knew: Black communities are complex and diverse, and there are strong subcultures just as there are for other racial groups. DPI’s research helped bring this reality into national discourse: [the New York Times featured the Black values clusters](#)¹⁸ and DPI

¹³ Fernandes, Julie. Written statement to the author. 1 December 2025.

¹⁴ Fernandes, Julie. Written statement to the author. 29 October 2025.

¹⁵ Woodbury, Terrance, Martina Smith, Roshni Nedungadi, and Katrina Gamble. “Black Power Shift Clusters: Black Voters Beyond Demographics” HIT Strategies, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, and Sojourn Strategies, 4 October 2023, slide deck (unpublished).

¹⁶ Cody, Janay. “The Black Experience Model.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, May 2021.

¹⁷ Gamble, Katrina, Terrance Woodbury, and Roshni Nedungadi. “Black Values Survey 2024.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, HIT Strategies, and Sojourn Strategies, 4 September 2024.

¹⁸ “Who Are the Black Swing Voters?” The New York Times, 31 October 2024, www.nytimes.com/video/us/elections/10000009710303/who-are-the-black-swing-voters.html.

Figure 1: The five Black values clusters



Photo credit: Black Values Survey 2024

advisor Prentiss Haney appeared on the *Times* podcast “[The Run-Up](#)”¹⁹ to discuss the values clusters and their implications for the 2024 presidential election.

In the summer of 2024, DPI organized an event in Philadelphia for Black-led organizing groups to discuss the values clusters research and help incorporate the insights into the organizations’ electoral programs. The event, “Blackshop: Black Narrative & Agency Workshop,” convened groups from Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania and supported each group to design programs tailored to their distinct constituencies and communities. The Blackshop event provided valuable ideas for groups seeking effective ways of getting through to community members resistant to voting and political engagement, and it was just the start of applying the insights from DPI’s Black values clusters research.²⁰

Figure 2: New York Times coverage of DPI’s Black values cluster research in 2024



¹⁹ “The Democrats’ Plan to Get Skeptics on Their Side.” *The Run-Up*, 19 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/19/podcasts/the-democrats-plan-to-combat-cynicism.html?>

²⁰ Fernandes, Julie. Personal interview. 11 December 2025.



CASE STUDY

Transformative Conversations: **Understanding People to Build Power in Missouri**

The Missouri Organizing and Voter Engagement Collaborative’s (MOVE) deep canvassing program, *Transformative Conversations*, offers a path-breaking example of how commitment to curiosity and learning about people can be a foundation for powerful organizing practices.²¹ MOVE transformed the traditional canvass model – the quintessential tool of transactional mobilization – into a vehicle for better understanding people’s values and motivations and bridging across contentious issues and racial divides. Developing the program with DPI’s support helped MOVE build an organizational culture of experimentation and learning.

MOVE is the backbone organization for 20 base-building groups across Missouri. MOVE’s mission is to support strategic, integrated voter engagement programs and build multiracial, working-class power in the state. In Missouri, achieving this goal requires activating politically disconnected communities and building bridges between diverse Black, Latino, and White working-class constituencies. These constituencies share economic and many social interests, but politicians in the state have used race and dog whistle politics to divide them.

Drawing ideas and inspiration from the LGBTQ community’s pioneering deep canvassing work, MOVE piloted *Transformative Conversations* in 2019. Their goal was to train and deploy canvassers to engage in long-form conversations whose primary purpose is listening and understanding rather than mobilization. According to MOVE’s program director, Alice Chamberlain,

*We’re trying to understand these two key constituencies that we know we need to build real statewide power and influence in Missouri, and we don’t have... There are Black, brown, and poor voters who don’t feel agency and empowerment and are sitting out. How do we get them off the sidelines? And then there are conflicted White voters whose worldview we want to shift to bring them into solidarity with Black and Latino working-class people.*²²

Since 2019, the program has had multiple iterations, sometimes serving exclusively as a listening and research campaign, other times as a vehicle for base-building and membership enrollment, and often with a mix of goals. At its heart, *Transformative Conversations* is a dynamic tool to learn about people in Missouri and their values and generate insights that inform scaled organizing programs.

²¹ For more on MOVE’s *Transformative Conversations* program, see Noga Shlapobersky’s report, “Transformative Conversations: Using Deep Canvassing to Enroll Communities in a Path to Power.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Missouri Organizing and Voter Engagement Collaborative (MOVE), and Analyst Institute, June 2025.

²² Chamberlain, Alice. Personal interview. 14 October 2025.

The program has enabled MOVE and its partners to plumb the sometimes-conflicting values and beliefs underlying the attitudes and behaviors of poor and working-class Missourians and to discern pathways for building multiracial solidarity on contentious issues.

The program contributed to MOVE and its partners' successful work on ballot initiatives to expand Medicaid, increase the minimum wage and provide paid sick leave for Missouri workers, and restore abortion access.



PHOTO: Union members at a MOVE campaign rally and canvass launch in 2024

For example, Abortion Access implemented the *Transformative Conversations* model in 2024, seeking out people who were modeled in the voter file as politically conservative and potential abortion opponents. Through deep canvassing, they were able to identify potential supporters of the abortion rights ballot initiative within these unlikely constituencies and then scale up outreach to them through a more traditional mobilization program.

According to Chamberlain,

We got to experiment and learn who these people are, versus what VAN²³ tells us people are... In these electoral campaigns, we are always forced into these boxes: "Only talk to these people," and "These are the only gettable people." It's so narrow. Transformative Conversations allows us to experiment, because the 'stakes' aren't as high: ... We want to make sure everyone has the access to the reproductive healthcare they want. Do you agree? Why is that important to you? ... we're able to have these conversations with people we would have never done that with before.²⁴

Since the pilot phase in 2019, DPI has served as a critical research and learning partner, supporting the design and evaluation of *Transformative Conversations* and multiple rounds of connected research. DPI has also provided technical support to MOVE to develop dashboards to track the progress and impact of the program.

Most importantly, DPI's partnership and coaching have helped organizers look at failure with curiosity instead of fear: when things go awry, there is opportunity to learn and adjust the program design. Chamberlain credits DPI for helping MOVE and its partners embrace this culture and mindset:

Your program should be sharper at the end than it is at the beginning. This isn't about coming up with the perfect idea and just running it...if we had the right answer to how we're [going to] organize everyone, we wouldn't be here. We need to be testing

²³ VAN, the "Voter Activation Network," is a voter database widely-used by campaigns and electoral programs to model and target voters.

²⁴ Chamberlain, Alice. Personal interview. 14 October 2025.

*theories, testing assumptions, and getting smarter over time.*²⁵

For Molly Fleming, former executive director of MOVE and the original architect of *Transformative Conversations*, embracing learning means choosing to pursue power:

*[Transformative Conversations has] always, at heart, been a learning program. Which... is a power decision, not a values-based decision. It's not because it's nice to learn stuff, it's because... if we don't humble ourselves to what's working or what's not, we're going to waste time and resources, and we're not going to get to the impact [we want].*²⁶

MOVE is now helping other organizations in the DPI learning community draw on its model and lessons to shape and implement their own deep canvassing programs. Kaelyn Seymour, the data director at MOVE who played a lead role in developing methods for collecting and analyzing data in the *Transformative Conversations* program, recently provided guidance to Su Cho, the data director at North Carolina Asian Americans Together (NCAAT), in the design of NCAAT's first deep canvassing initiative.²⁷ Seymour and Cho's collaboration is an example of how DPI has helped foster knowledge-sharing across organizing groups and has elevated the leadership of research and data directors in their own organizations and also among their peers in the field of organizing, all in pursuit of more effective and impactful civic practice.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Fleming, Molly. Personal interview. 10 November 2025.

²⁷ Fernandes, Julie. Personal interview. 11 December 2025.

The Challenge of Disconnection and Disillusionment and the Potential of Hope

By labeling members of the Black community who have rejected political participation as “Rightfully Cynical,” DPI fundamentally reframed the challenge of Black political disconnection. Refusal to participate in politics is not a problem within Black people, rooted in apathy or ignorance of their own political interests. It is a rational reaction to broken systems that have continually failed the Black community. The system is the problem.

Robinson puts it this way:

*People are rational. If someone is cynical, they probably have a reason to be. It's not that they woke up and they can't fathom what you're talking about. It's because you are telling them something that is opposite of what they've experienced. If you're telling them, “Voting changes things that matter to you,” but they've been voting, and nothing has happened, then of course they're going to be like, “I don't know about that, and I don't know if it's worth me going to vote.”*²⁸

We have to stop looking at disillusionment as a character flaw... we have to acknowledge and honor what people are going through, and embed that in our work, and not fight against it.²⁹

According to Gamble, who leads DPI's values and identity research, DPI is challenging a

²⁸ Robinson, Ranada. Personal interview. 6 November 2025.

²⁹ Robinson, Ranada. “Understanding Disillusioned Voters.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund 2025 Annual Convening: “Meeting the Moment: Evidence-Based Strategies to Drive Impact.” 3 December 2025. Panel presentation, unpublished transcript of remarks.

long-standing political industry assumption about Black people:

There's this assumption that Black people don't have complex political agency, so that when they're making decisions to not show up... that's based off of a lack of information. When in reality... our research shows that people are making those choices with full information... "I actually understand what's happening here, I understand the political dynamics, and I'm choosing not to do something because I've decided what's in my best interest."³⁰

DPI fundamentally reframed the challenge of Black political disconnection. Refusal to participate in politics is not a problem within Black people, rooted in apathy or ignorance of their own political interests. It is a rational reaction to broken systems that have continually failed the Black community. The system is the problem.

This kind of disillusionment is not limited to Black people. **DPI applied similar methodologies to plumb the complexity of Latino and Asian**

American communities. While there are important differences within and between these communities, DPI's research also reveals a stark through-line of political disillusionment affecting broad swaths of all of them.

For example, in 2022, DPI partnered with Sojourn Strategies, Equis Labs, and several organizing groups to conduct a national Latino values survey.³¹ They found that perceptions of power – an individual's power and that of Latinos as a group – are a critical driver of political participation among Latino voters, just as they are for Black voters. Subsequently, in 2024, DPI supported a large survey of Latinos in Arizona undertaken by the Arizona Center for Empowerment (ACE) in partnership with Data for Social Good, and learned that more than 30% of Latinos in Arizona feel their vote has little power to change things.³² ACE and Data for Social Good's research also identified five distinct values clusters within the Latino community. Nearly a quarter of Latinos profile as "Alienated Centrists" or "Detached Undecideds" who aren't participating in elections and have a low sense of the power of their vote.

In 2024, DPI supported North Carolina Asian Americans Together in conducting a values survey to better understand their diverse Asian American constituencies, which span South Asian, Chinese, Pacific Islander, and Islamic Asian

Figure 3: Latino values clusters

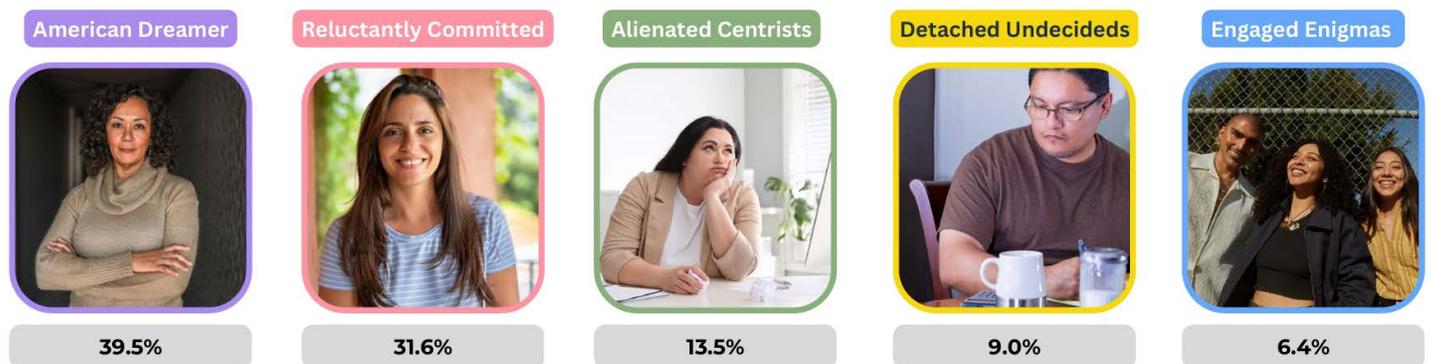


Photo credit: *Latinos Rising: Redefining Power, Inside Arizona's Most Comprehensive Voter Study*

³⁰ Gamble, Katrina. Personal interview. 19 November 2025.

³¹ "Latino Values Survey." Equis Labs, Sojourn Strategies, Florida Rising, Make the Road Nevada, Poder NC, LUCHA, Voces de la Frontera, PICO California, August 2022.

³² "Latinos Rising: Redefining Power, Inside Arizona's Most Comprehensive Voter Study." Arizona Center for Empowerment (ACE), Data for Social Good, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, and Sojourn Strategies, October 2024.



communities, among others. They discovered that 43% of community members feel disconnected from the broader Asian American community and 35% have low confidence in their community's ability to effect change. The research also revealed that people have a weak sense of Asian American identity compared to their particular national and ethnic and American identities – a challenge for an organization that seeks to build pan-Asian American power in the state.³³

Political disillusionment is pervasive in White communities as well. In 2025, with DPI's support, Gamble and Sojourn Strategies carried out a large-scale, multiracial survey of Black, White, Latino, and Asian Americans, including voters and non-voters, to probe into the drivers of political disconnection within and across these communities. The overriding sentiment underpinning disillusionment – across race – is frustration about politics. White people reported the highest levels of frustration of all the groups.

For organizers working in these communities every day, DPI's research has validated their experiences and the challenges they face engaging people who are disaffected with an extractive political industry and with broken institutions that are unresponsive to their needs and interests.

The research also offers glimpses of hope, and reveals toeholds for organizers seeking to enroll disillusioned constituents in collective action and power-building. Gamble's 2025 multiracial survey of disconnected constituencies found that, across race, more than 60% of people want to feel more connected to others in their community and 80% have a sense of linked fate with their racial or ethnic group: they believe that what happens to others in their community affects them. Even if many people are skeptical about engaging with the formal processes of political participation, solidarity and a desire to be in community are foundations upon which to build a shared civic endeavor. An

³³ "Poll Brief: Insights into Asian American Voters in North Carolina." Z to A Research, North Carolina Asian Americans Together, and Sojourn Strategies, October 2024.

overwhelming majority of respondents – 89% percent – believe they should work with others like them to make things better, a pattern that cuts across every racial and ethnic group in the survey.³⁴

Even in communities that have the most reasons for cynicism and despair, there are reservoirs of resiliency and hope that can be tapped to fuel collective action. DPI research partner Davin Phoenix, an associate professor at the University of California-Irvine, worked with Faith in Florida, Voice of the Experienced in Louisiana, and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth to understand the perspectives and experiences of the family members and loved ones of returning citizens. Through interviews and informal conversations with these constituencies from 2021 to 2023, Phoenix concluded that feelings of hope and love are more effective at motivating people to action than anger.³⁵

According to Phoenix:

... even if I'm rightfully cynical or rightfully realistic about the prospects of political victory or loss, I can't let that be my mindset. My mindset is, what won't I do for the people I love? If you can connect political action to what people are willing to do out of love, then you have a truly palpable mobilizing force that isn't contingent on a candidate or a policy platform.³⁶

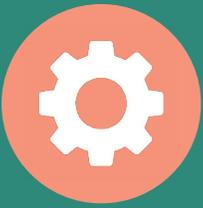
The endemic political disconnection that DPI's research makes visible poses a challenge to all those striving to make American democracy work for everyday people: how do we grow the political agency of people who feel that their voices don't matter? How do we tap into the forces of hope, love, and community that have the potential to mobilize the politically skeptical? DPI is investing in the learning capacity of civic organizations across the country to develop, test, and iterate on innovative approaches for meeting this challenge.

³⁴ Publication of these research findings is pending; these data are sourced from Gamble's unpublished briefings.

³⁵ Phoenix, Davin. "Creating Political Engagement: Discovering a 'Linked Fate of the Experienced' among People Connected to Returning Citizens." Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, October 2025.

³⁶ Excerpted from the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund newsletter, "DPI Digest: Hope, Love, and Building Power for the People We Love," 6 November 2025.





ORGANIZATIONS

The Role of Civic Homes

How do we find, engage, and inspire millions of Americans across demographic and social groups to find connection and hope and to build the power they need to make government work for their communities?

In the political industry's narrow view of democracy, this is a marketing challenge centered on elections: identify the right messages and channels for microtargeting and mobilizing individual voters. But the industry's individualized, transactional approach to civic engagement cannot address the cynicism and distrust at the root of many people's disconnection. In fact, the industry's extractive approach is one of the drivers of pervasive civic isolation, distrust, and disconnection.

Members of the DPI learning community understand that engaging and inspiring people to participate in civic life requires collective structures that build enough shared power to move an agenda. Creating change by and for everyday people requires people-led, grassroots *organizations*. These "civic homes" are vehicles for collective action that bring people together in community, create an environment of belonging that sustains their participation, and provide pathways for collective action that builds people's agency and power.

The DPI community is on a learning journey to understand and strengthen the practices of effective civic homes. How do organizing groups transform isolated individuals – including those who feel disconnected and who have a low sense of their political efficacy – into organized constituencies capable of acting collectively and achieving real power in the governing arena? What choices can organizations make to nurture belonging and agency among people disillusioned with the political process, in a way that incentivizes public action? To find answers to these questions, DPI is supporting organizer-driven research and programmatic innovation.

How Civic Homes Anchor Collective Action

In 2022, DPI set out to understand why people join civic associations and what compels them to stay. Over a two-year period, Gamble and her colleagues at Sojourn Strategies conducted qualitative research with organizations in six states to identify and define the key characteristics and practices of effective civic homes, which they defined as “inclusive spaces where individuals can connect over shared values, build collective power, and work toward common goals.”³⁷ Through listening sessions, one-on-one interviews, and participant observation, the researchers identified three crucial characteristics of effective civic homes:

Belonging. Effective civic homes create a relational culture of inclusion and belonging that attracts and sustains people’s participation. People feel they belong at an organization when their social or cultural identities are represented among the staff, leaders, and members; through organizational activities that affirm and celebrate their language, cultural traditions, and history; and when they are with others who share their values. Organizations also cultivate trust and belonging by organizing services and resources that meet peoples’ material needs, e.g.: food, emergency assistance after a natural disaster, and legal services. These “demonstrations of care” – which often come in the form of mutual aid, with members supporting each other – show people that the community sees them, values them, and cares about their needs, beyond their contributions to the organization’s campaigns and programs.³⁸

³⁷ Gamble, Katrina and Destiney Golden. “Building Civic Homes: Fostering Belonging, Agency, and Collective Impact in Community Organizations.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, April 2025.

³⁸ Gamble’s 2025 multiracial survey of disconnected people referenced earlier suggests that cultivating a sense of belonging is key to engaging the participation of people who feel disconnected. A regression analysis of the survey data, which controlled for race, age, income, and other factors, showed that people who have a higher sense of belonging are more inclined to civic participation – clear quantitative evidence that validates the qualitative findings of her study of civic homes.

Figure 4: The characteristics of effective civic homes

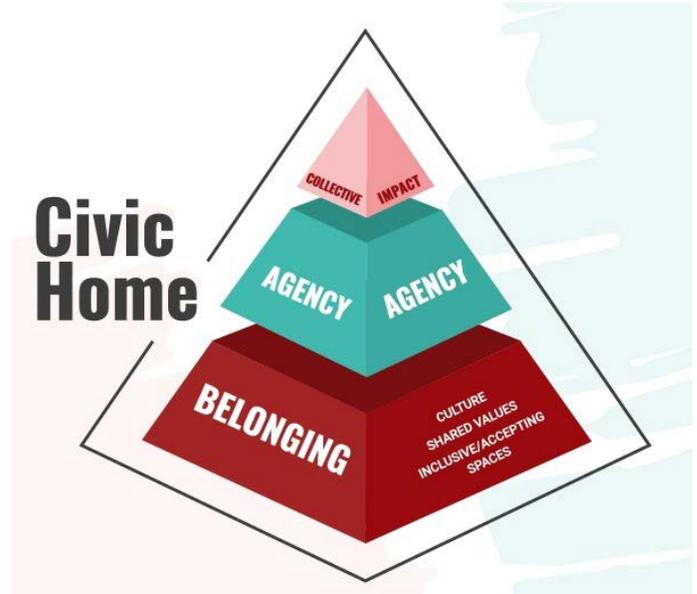


Photo credit: *Building Civic Homes* report

Agency. Civic homes grow the leadership and agency of their members. Gamble defines agency as belief in one’s own power, which includes the ability to act, make choices, and make a difference. Members of civic homes are fueled by the chance to develop, contribute, and grow as public leaders through formal training and political education programs and through opportunities to meet and negotiate with elected officials and other decision-makers as community representatives. The experience of public leadership strengthens members’ sense of agency.

Collective impact. Finally, effective civic homes sustain people’s engagement and commitment by achieving tangible outcomes for their communities: new public policies or public investments that benefit their communities or prevent harm, and the meaningful milestones and progress that make these wins possible, such as getting issues onto the legislative agenda or securing champions for new policies. Civic homes are not simply social clubs; they are collective structures through which people effect political and social change.

Gamble’s research also revealed that the entry point to civic homes is social networks: people first come to an organization through an invitation from a family member, friend, neighbor, member of their congregations, or some other personal relationship. Social networks bring people through the door and sustain a culture of belonging that keeps people involved. This finding suggests that the outreach tactics the political industry embraces – voter file targeting, mass electoral door knocking campaigns, large-scale text programs – are unlikely to keep people connected with a civic home. Those tactics may mobilize individuals, but they are not effective for building *communities* of people engaged in a shared project of collective action and power-building. Building civic homes is the province of *organizing*, which focuses on reaching people through relational networks, building one-on-one relationships, and developing community teams that can negotiate and strategize with each other to drive their public agendas.

PHOTO: Community members at NCAAT 2025 Common Roots Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month event



Building Belonging and Agency: Deep Canvassing and Soul Food Dinners

Acting on new research insights, including revelations about stark political disconnection within and across racial and social groups, DPI has recently begun supporting innovative organizing programs aimed at reaching disconnected constituencies and enrolling them in civic homes. Organizers are drawing on new understandings of the diverse values and identities within and across Black, Latino, Asian American, and other communities to engage people who are skeptical about and have previously steered clear of political participation.

For example, after its 2024 survey (described earlier) revealed that many Asian American people in North Carolina feel disconnected from the broader community, NCAAT has implemented new organizing strategies to reach disconnected people and bolster a sense of belonging and agency among its members. In 2025, NCAAT launched a deep canvassing program to reach out to 50,000 people across its nine priority counties in North Carolina. The canvass targeted people NCAAT had not been able to reach through its 2024 electoral program and those who had not voted: in other words, disconnected members of the diverse Asian American communities in the state. Canvassers also reached out to the core constituencies whom they engage consistently in their organizing efforts. They spoke to people in their native languages and focused on listening and building trust rather than mobilization.

In tandem with the deep canvass, NCAAT also revamped its membership program, hiring a membership manager who is focused on developing clear leadership pipelines to sustain and deepen members’ engagement based on their skills and interests. NCAAT also hosted a three-day Youth Leadership Institute, with youth-organized workshops on local government,



advocacy campaigns, and other topics and continues to coordinate a Community Partner Network that delivers resources and services to meet their communities' diverse needs and concerns.

Cho explained:

We want NCAAT to be a civic home for our community, so it was important for us to prioritize... fostering that sense of safety, having our community feel seen and heard, being in community with others, while also helping folks see their agency and their power. And this duality and this balance of action and belonging... is the core of what NCAAT strives to do, and what we needed to spend 2025 actively prioritizing our tactics around.³⁹

In Philadelphia, DPI is supporting POWER Interfaith's efforts to foster more effective strategies for reaching and creating a sense of belonging among younger, politically disconnected members of the Black community. Drawing on insights from DPI's Black values cluster research, in 2024 POWER piloted its *Soul Food Dinner* program to foster intergenerational conversations between older Black community members and younger people to discuss the importance of voting. Leaders and organizers held more than 80 dinners, mostly in church settings, and reached 2,600 people. While those who participated reported an increased sense of belonging and power, the dinners included very few of the younger "Rightfully Cynical" community members and almost entirely failed to reach "NextGen Traditionalist" folks.

³⁹ Cho, Su. "Values Research in Action: New Approaches for Organizing Disillusioned Voters." Democracy & Power Innovation Fund 2025 Annual Convening: "Meeting the Moment: Evidence-Based Strategies to Drive Impact," 4 December 2025. Panel presentation, unpublished transcript of remarks.

PHOTO: POWER Soul Food Dinner program



In 2025, POWER worked with DPI researchers to analyze why the *Soul Food Dinners* program did not engage the people they were trying to reach. They concluded that, to reach more younger people, they needed to move more of the dinners out of the church and to enlist a different set of messengers to whom younger people can better relate. Also, since “Rightfully Cynical” and other younger people are not convinced political participation is valuable, the conversations should not be framed for transactional voter mobilization.

With DPI’s support, POWER changed the program design and implementation to connect with “Next Gen Traditionalist” and “Rightfully Cynical” young Black people and make them feel welcome and motivated. POWER’s redesigned *Soul Food Dinners* are held in barber shops, nonprofits, and other settings where young people feel comfortable. They have recruited two younger, progressive clergy who are more immersed in and better equipped to speak to younger generations of the Black community. And the dinners are oriented towards listening and deep conversation rather than persuasion or mobilization around an election.

Perhaps most critically, POWER is changing the way they speak to young people. According to POWER’s research director, Reverend Dr. Sharon Sobukwe:

The traditional approach of Legacy Civil Rights voters is to essentially shame those who don’t vote. We say, “Our ancestors died for you to do this.” Right? We say, “This is your legacy. This is what the Civil Rights Movement was about...” However, DPI research partner HIT Strategies helped us to... come up with scripts... to begin to talk across these clusters... Shame is not a motivator... and it’s not wrong to have your own experience and derive concrete, real perspectives from it. We were dismissing the experience of younger people when we, Civil Rights Legacy folks, only shamed them. We were dismissing the legitimacy of their

experience and the logic and rationality of their conclusions, which is ultimately not respectful at all.⁴⁰

Both NCAAT and POWER are constructing the elements of effective civic homes that Gamble identified as foundational to building a community of belonging and agency. NCAAT is building trust through cultural representation, hiring canvassers who come from and speak the language of distinct Asian American communities. They are offering demonstrations of care through the Community Partner Network and nurturing people’s sense of agency through formal leadership training programs. And POWER, by changing the venues for its *Soul Food Dinners* and bringing in younger clergy and leaders, is helping to create an environment where “Rightfully Cynical” and “NextGen Traditionalist” community members can see themselves represented, gather with people who share their values, and feel a sense of belonging.

Sobukwe and Cho are drawing on the DPI learning community’s research to make bold choices about organizing strategies and program designs. They have committed to learning and to refining, iterating, and continuously improving their practices. Their work is an example of the practitioner-driven research and practice-based learning that DPI enables among its learning partners.

Nurturing belonging and agency is not something that we can achieve when we treat people as data points and apply marketing strategies aimed at extracting votes or discrete tactical actions from atomized individuals. It requires bringing people into relationships with each other – into *community*. Organizations provide the structure and scaffolding for the work of building community.

⁴⁰ Sobukwe, Sharon, The Reverend Dr. “Values Research in Action: New Approaches for Organizing Disillusioned Voters.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund 2025 Annual Convening: “Meeting the Moment: Evidence-Based Strategies to Drive Impact.” 4 December 2025. Panel presentation, unpublished transcript of remarks.



ACE Executive Director Alex Gomez offers this perspective:

Organizing is not a niche project... Organizing is essential for reaching our communities. Our communities have this saying: Nada más quieren algo de nosotros. They just want something from us. Within Latino communities, consistency and [persistence] is essential for building belonging and a relationship. If you go into a community to transact or extract, our communities are going to see right through it. We know that resilience actually rests in us, and so we anchor in each other instead of in that transaction or that extraction...⁴¹

Of course, according to DPI's research, collective impact is another key element that enables civic homes to engage and activate the politically disillusioned and disconnected. It is not enough merely to make people feel welcome, or even to develop their sense of agency. People need to see the material benefits of collective action. They need to *win*.

And winning, of course, requires power.

⁴¹ Gomez, Alex. "Values Research in Action: New Approaches for Organizing Disillusioned Voters." Democracy & Power Innovation Fund 2025 Annual Convening: "Meeting the Moment: Evidence-Based Strategies to Drive Impact," 4 December 2025. Panel presentation, unpublished transcript of remarks.



POWER

Understanding and Measuring Power Building

In a flourishing multiracial democracy, ordinary people connect with each other to build and exercise collective power and make government work for them. Organizations that serve as civic homes are the vehicle for them to do so. But how do these organizations build the power they need to drive outcomes? What makes organizations powerful and how can we make the process of power-building visible to strengthen organizing practices?

Building power involves more than simply mobilizing people. It requires creating structures through which grassroots leaders can act collectively and strategically in dynamic decision-making arenas and that engage and are accountable to a larger, committed constituency base.

“[Collective action] is more than the additive sum of individual actions,” Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa tell us in *Prisms of the People*, a groundbreaking analysis of power-building and organizing. “Leaders and organizations...[are] able to exert power in large part because they [are] grounded in constituencies... committed to standing together, to becoming something new together that they could not be alone.”⁴²

For nearly two decades, the data capacities of grassroots power organizations have been heavily focused on tracking the voter turnout metrics demanded by funders. DPI instead helps organizations track and make visible the work critical to building durable, collective power that has heretofore remained largely invisible: efforts to build a mass constituency base, develop leaders, nurture capacity for coordinated and strategic action, and build influential relationships with government decision-makers.

For six years, DPI has supported a growing cohort of data managers in re-engineering data functions to strengthen organizing practices and in developing a standardized set of analytical tools to make visible, learn from, and improve power-building efforts. Throughout and in tandem with this work, DPI researchers and academics elaborated a framework for measuring civic organizations’ efforts to build democratic power, detailed in Joy Cushman and Elizabeth McKenna’s 2023 report, “Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy.”⁴³

⁴² Han, Hahrie, et al. *Prisms of the People*. 2020, page 3. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226744063.001.0001>.

⁴³ Cushman, Joy and Elizabeth McKenna. “Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 2023.

The Formation and Early Work of the DPI Data Cohort

In the spring of 2020, the DPI learning community launched a practitioner cohort of data managers from 11 leading, state-based power-building organizations and one national group interested in using data to understand and enhance their organizing programs and efforts to build power and influence. DPI gave each organization a three-year grant of \$75,000 annually to support their data and research functions. For many of the organizations, this was the first time they were able to hire a dedicated organizing data manager. DPI also hired experienced data analysts Tianyi Hu and Miriam McKinney Gray to support the cohort and help members build new data tools to improve constituent organizing and base-building efforts.

DPI's senior research partners and data experts did not arrive with a set of prescribed metrics for tracking and assessing organizing and power-building activities. The DPI team wanted to learn about data organizations were already gathering, the tools they were using to gather that data, and how they were using it. The goal was for each organization to identify the metrics that mattered most to their power-building efforts and to develop new and refined methods for collecting, analyzing, and visualizing data relevant to those metrics. Metrics and methods would not be imposed on the data cohort; instead, organizations joined a collaborative effort between researchers and organizers.

At the start of this process, most organizations' data systems were oriented toward the voter participation metrics favored by elections-focused donors and table leaders. Collection, tracking, and visualization of other aspects of the organizations' membership activity and leadership development efforts was inconsistent or confined to basic tools such as Google spreadsheets. Groups that were gathering organizing data – such as data on event participation, for example – were not systematically analyzing the data to gain consistent insight and learning.

To shift the data culture within organizations and spark the development of new tools and practices, DPI challenged members of the data cohort to explore the simple question, “Who are your people and what are they doing?” That question catalyzed the first two years of learning.⁴⁴

Through monthly cohort meetings, annual convenings, tailored workshops and trainings, and one-on-one support, DPI helped data managers develop and implement tools that make visible aspects of their organizations' work and structures critical to building powerful constituency bases, e.g.: patterns of event participation, methods and effectiveness of leadership recruitment, drivers of membership growth, and dynamics of network expansion. DPI's senior data team provided individualized coaching and support to each organization to discern which kinds of visualizations would best support their organizational approach and strategy – such as membership maps, leadership development bar charts, and event participation charts – and help them build tailored tools.

For example, when We the People Michigan's data director, Sargeant Donovan-Smith, joined the cohort, she was inspired by the sophisticated visualizations other data directors were creating and wanted to move her organization beyond its limited work with Google spreadsheets. By participating in the data cohort's coding workshops, Donovan-Smith built fluency in the programming languages Python and R; meanwhile, We the People hired two new data analysts to expand the organization's data management capacities. With these expanded skills and capacities, the data team at We the People created a number of dashboards and visualizations that enable them to track and assess their base-building and power-building efforts, including a mapping tool that tracks the distribution of their members by precinct and congressional district in Michigan. This tool enables We the People to

⁴⁴ Cushman, Joy. Personal interview. 15 May 2025.

analyze the power of its base across legislative districts and assess where it has influence and where it needs to build a stronger base.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the heart of the DPI data cohort's work is leadership development. The cohort serves as an invaluable space for peer-to-peer learning and professional growth for data managers and directors. DPI's resources and support have helped elevate data directors within their organizations as strategic leaders responsible for enabling learning.

According to McKinney Gray:

*[DPI] has done a lot of great work investing in data managers. They are more confident about approaching executive leadership, stepping up in meetings, trying new things, playing around with coding. Their leadership is generating a lot of great learning for organizations. A lot of data managers and directors in the DPI data cohort space are women and people of color: [DPI] pours into them and their confidence and that is super important.*⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hu, Tianyi. Personal interview. 4 June 2025.

⁴⁶ McKinney Gray, Miriam. Personal interview. 4 June 2025.

CASE STUDY

Measuring Constituent Power: Renewing the Ohio Organizing Collaborative

In 2018, the Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC), a statewide power-building organization, had just suffered a disheartening defeat. Ohio voters had voted down State Issue 1, a ballot initiative that would have reformed sentencing guidelines in Ohio, reduced incarceration rates, and redirected savings to alternative public safety and prevention programs. OOC had been the lead champion of the measure; they had registered 143,000 voters and recruited and trained 7,000 volunteer canvassers to mobilize for its passage.

Shortly after the defeat, Molly Shack, who had been the lead organizer for OOC's ballot campaign, assumed the role of co-director of OOC along with Prentiss Haney. The ballot measure campaign had been powerful, but Shack realized that OOC had become so singularly structured around the campaign that its focus on long-term leadership development and base-building had lapsed and the organization was unable to fully

leverage the power of the volunteers it had activated. She noted, "We were shaped around the traditional practices of the political industry, and we didn't have the structures to absorb the 7,000 people who had volunteered on the ballot campaign."

The mobilization metrics so valued by donors and the political industry in fact masked the ways in which OOC's leadership base had been hollowed out, and its organizing culture and structures stunted by the demands of the ballot campaign. Shack and Haney recognized that the OOC needed a strategic reset, one that put base-building and leadership development – not campaigns – at the center of the organization's work. They had to shift the currency and culture of the organization away from the more transactional forms of grassroots engagement entailed by ballot work and rededicate themselves to the patient, relational work of listening and organizing. And the right kind of data and metrics could help them build this culture.

Figure 5: OOC data tools and dashboards helped the organization track organizers' one-on-one meetings

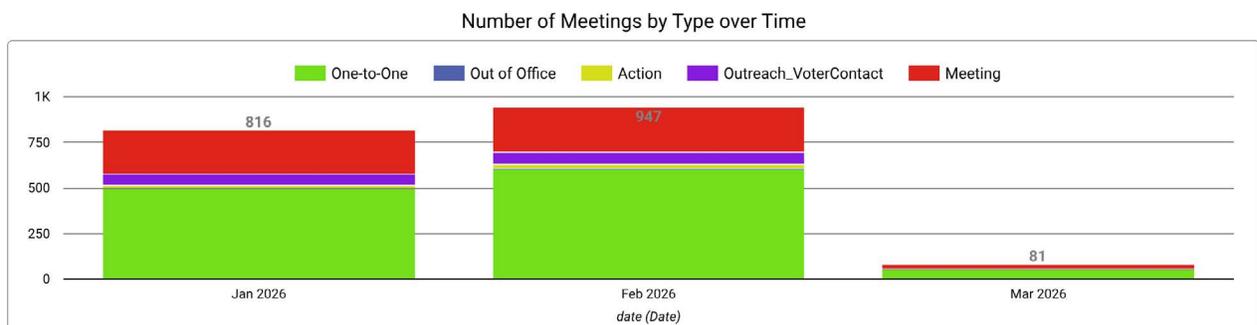


PHOTO: OOC leaders at “A Day Without Childcare” in 2025



With a grant from the DPI Fund, OOC hired a full-time data director, Derrick Smith, who built a new tool to track OOC organizers’ one-on-one meetings with leaders and members by rigging an application called Time Tackle to the organizers’ Google calendars. Then, with support from Hu at DPI, Smith created a weekly dashboard visualization that showed the team how many one-on-ones each organizer was conducting and with whom, including the share of meetings with existing leaders and members or with prospective new leaders.

The tool was simple, but elegant. Importantly, it was grafted onto an existing calendar management process and did not impose new administrative burdens on organizers with extremely demanding schedules.

DPI also partnered with Smith to create the first network charts showing the relationships OOC organizers were building with leaders. The one-on-one tracking tool and network charts were powerful tools that helped Shack and Haney mentor and coach organizers

towards the work of developing durable, committed leadership teams –and not just evanescent mobilization activities. The tools made visible the exceptional organizing work of organizers like Tami Lunan, the lead for OOC’s care economy organizing efforts.

Starting in 2021, Lunan has grown a powerful base of leaders among childcare workers, educators, and parents. This base has exercised real influence in Ohio’s state power environment. The group organizes a major action at the Ohio state capital every year, “A Day Without Childcare,” which has bloomed from a handful of participants to hundreds of people. In a politically conservative state, Lunan’s organizing has enabled OOC to win millions of dollars in new funding for childcare; the appointment of OOC members to licensing boards and administrative entities that oversee and regulate the industry in Ohio; and commitments from business leaders, state legislators, and Republican Governor Mike DeWine for measures to expand eligibility and funding for state-subsidized childcare.

Shack explained the impact the data visualization tools had on her efforts to rebuild the organizing culture at OOC:

Tammy's 1st Day Without Childcare had three people at it. And then it became 30, and then it became 350, and then it becomes 600....that happens when you take the time to care about three leaders and who they are and what their interests are....

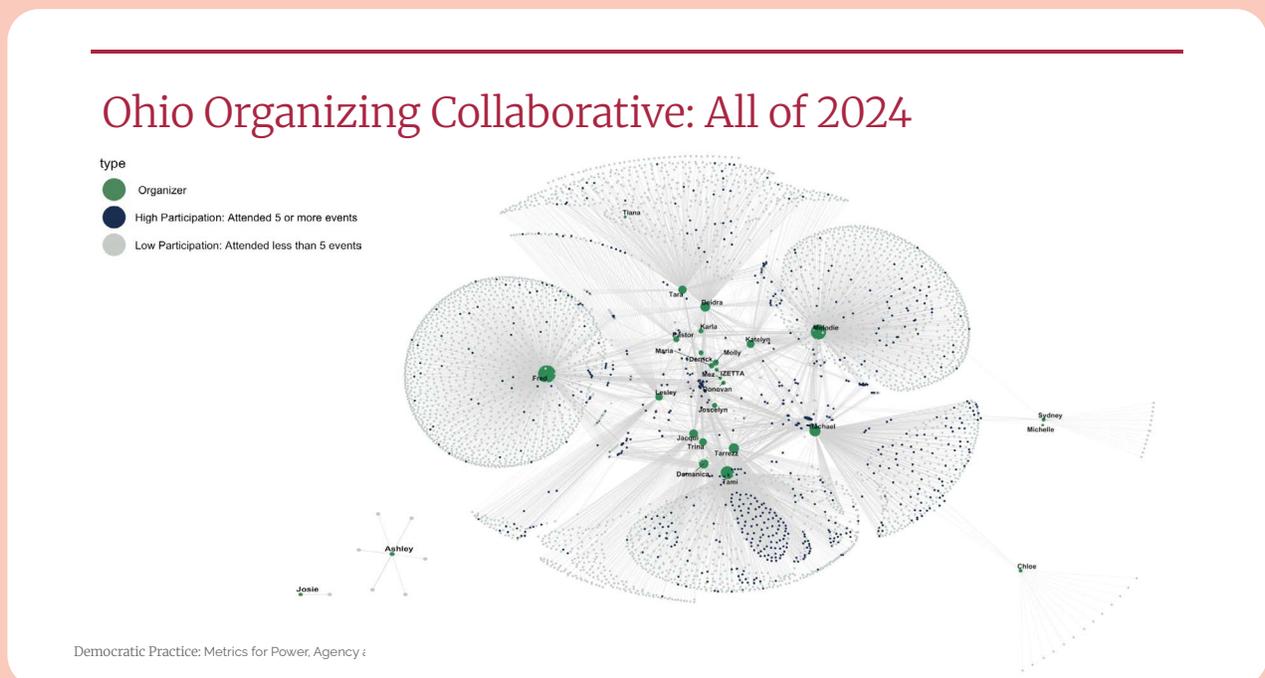
So many of the tools that are built for our sector are intended for extracting votes. They are voter activation tools that we have to jerry-rig for organizing purposes. And if you don't measure what matters in your organization, it's hard to create a culture that incentivizes it. Part of our

organizational reset was creating a culture that validates, celebrates, and reinforces one-to-ones, which are the foundation of base-building work. Creating a data practice to track, measure, visualize, and celebrate one-to-ones was important for reinforcing this new culture.

The network charts and other data visualization tools that Smith and DPI pioneered are now mainstays for the organizations in the DPI data cohort, enabling a growing cadre of organizing groups to better understand, support, and incentivize strong and deep leadership development work. These tools bring the kind of rigor to organizing programs that the political industry has long demanded groups apply to their voter contact programs.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Shack, Molly. Personal interview. 9 June 2025.

Figure 6: Ohio Organizing Collaborative network chart



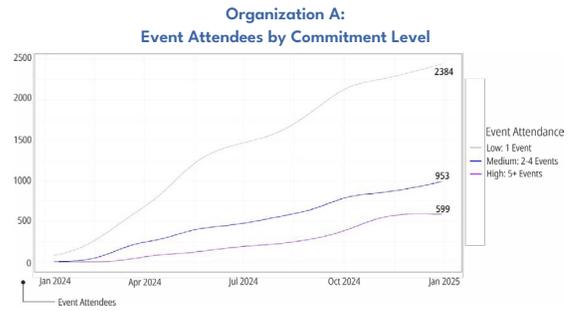
Developing Standardized Tools and a Framework for Understanding and Measuring Power

As the DPI data cohort created tools tailored to organizations' individual needs, the cohort's senior data analysts workshopped a set of four standardized analyses of organizations' base-building and leadership development work that they found to be especially valuable in generating actionable learning and insights. A set of standardized data tools would enable groups to better learn from other organizations and lay a foundation for cross-organizational comparative research.

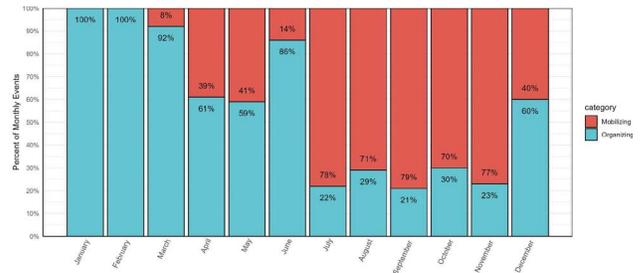
Meanwhile, Cushman and Elizabeth McKenna, a DPI-affiliated sociologist and assistant professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, synthesized the work and learning of the data cohort into a clear and detailed framework for conceptualizing and measuring power. In 2023, they published "Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy,"⁴⁸ a seminal DPI report laying out a multi-dimensional set of metrics to understand and visualize power. The framework is rooted in the theoretical work of scholars such as Hahrie Han and Steven Lukes and the practice-based insights and learning of the DPI data cohort. It outlines the three core dimensions of power necessary for an organization to drive the outcomes wanted by their constituencies: (1) a base of people and active leaders; (2) the capacity to operate as a collective, with shared goals and strategy; and (3) the ability to impact the power arena and drive change. [See inset below, "A Primer on Power".] The report provides practical examples (many drawn from the DPI data cohort) of how organizations can measure their work to build power across these three dimensions.

⁴⁸ Cushman, Joy and Elizabeth McKenna. "Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy." Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 2023.

Figure 7: The DPI data cohort's four core organizing data tools

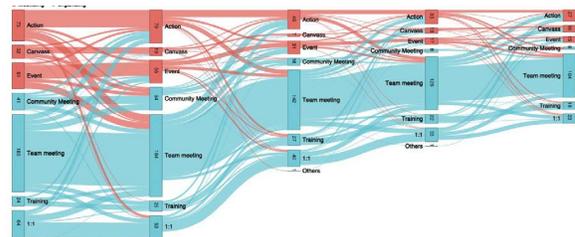


"Purple line" graphs chart an organization's progress in recruiting highly committed leaders who participate in multiple organizational activities.



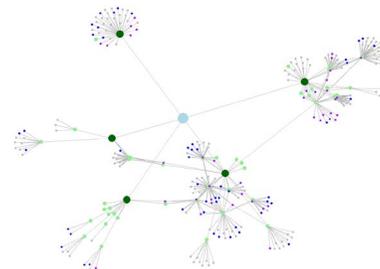
inocratic Practice: Metrics for Power, Agency and Democracy

Event charts document the proportion of organizing and mobilizing events at an organization.



inocratic Practice: Metrics for Power, Agency and Democracy

Sanky charts show the pathway of volunteers across different organizational events over time, illuminating which events best sustain organizational engagement.



Network charts show the web of relationships among staff and leaders and which people have built the strongest base.



A PRIMER ON POWER

Defining and Measuring Power Building

WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC POWER?

Democratic power is the ability for everyday people to win changes that improve their lives.

Power cannot be reduced to participation. Historic levels of voter participation and massive numbers of people in the streets do not translate into meaningful influence in governance if other capacities and structures aren't in place. Nor can power be reduced to static measures such as the number of members an organization claims or the amount of resources it has. As political scientist Han has argued, power is relational: an organization's power varies according to the context and the specific actors it seeks to influence, and whether the organization has, and can effectively leverage, resources that act on those stakeholders' interests.⁴⁹

A fulsome definition and framework for democratic power must, therefore, account for how people build the structures, commitment, and collective capacities to translate popular participation into outcomes in dynamic legislative, electoral, and other arenas.

HOW CAN WE MEASURE POWER?

Cushman and McKenna developed a framework for measuring democratic power-building among grassroots organizations focused on three core dimensions of power.

Base. The foundation of an organization's power is in the strength and size of its constituent base, which can be measured by observing the scale and depth of an organization's membership and leadership development efforts. To what extent is the organization recruiting new members and sustaining their involvement over time? Is it deepening these individuals' commitment to the organization and developing their political skills, analysis, and engagement as public leaders?

Collective capacities. An organization needs collective capacities to translate individual-level participation and commitment into coordinated, collective, strategic action that can move decision-makers and drive change in the policy arena. Collective capacities fall into three categories:

1. *Solidarity* is the commitment of members of the organization to each other and the strength of bonds among them.

⁴⁹ Han, Hahrie, et al. "An Approach to Understanding and Measuring People Power." The P3 Lab, Johns Hopkins University, May 2021, page 6.

2. *Strategic capacity* is the ability of an organization to make sound strategic decisions and respond effectively in a dynamic power environment. Does the organization have internal, group decision-making processes that allow it to effectively leverage the range of its collective resources, knowledge, and expertise? Does it demonstrate a capacity to adapt, maintaining and pursuing a clear, constituent-driven agenda and not just reacting to the opposition?
3. *Structuring capacity* is a function of the internal, team structures through which individuals come together to build relationships among one another, make and influence organizational decisions and strategies, and maintain cohesion and alignment in applying constituent-rooted pressure on elected officials and other stakeholders in the external power arena.

Influence and impact. The final dimension of power is an organization’s ability to influence the external political, narrative, and policy environment. Beyond concrete policy “wins”, organizations can also have a role in shaping the broader policy agenda in a power environment and in shifting the narrative and public discourse to expand the scope of politically-possible outcomes.

Expanding the Data Cohort and Implementing a Groundbreaking Election-year Research Initiative

In 2024, DPI launched a major research initiative in partnership with the Pro-Democracy Campaign and the Organizing Lab at the State Power Fund. Nearly 20 new organizations received training, coaching, and technical assistance to collect and analyze their organizing data using DPI’s standard tools. The goal of the research initiative was to assess the electoral reach and impact of organizing groups in an election year and to evaluate their efforts to build governing influence.

Drawing on what the lead researchers believe is the largest set of organizing and electoral data ever collected, the analysis found that the 26 paired 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations that participated in the study achieved significant scale in their electoral programs and reached communities that political campaigns and other voter contact operations neglected or failed to contact.

The organizations had direct, person-to-person conversations with more than 3.6 million unique voters in the 10 states in which they were operating, and their aggregate contact rate of 9.3% was significantly higher than traditional industry-driven programs (5.4%) according to a comparative analysis. **Most notably, these organizations had live conversations with 1.3 million voters no one else contacted – a universe that included a disproportionate share of young voters, Black, Latino, and Asian American voters, and infrequent voters. In other words: organizing groups are reaching many of the disconnected and disillusioned communities that the political industry has overlooked and alienated.**⁵⁰

An observational analysis of the groups’ organizing data – which made use of one of DPI’s core data visualization tools, the “purple line” chart – also generated new insights into

⁵⁰ Cushman, Joy, and Elizabeth McKenna, with Miya Woolfalk et al. “Civic Power 2025: The Role and Impact of Independent Political Organizations in Expanding the Electorate and Building Governing Influence.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Pro-Democracy Campaign, and the State Power Action Fund, September 2025, pages 3-4, 10

the threshold measures of base power required to achieve local and state governing influence. Organizations with at least 200 highly committed leaders – people who participated in at least five organizational activities during a 12-month period – succeeded in winning significant state or cross-local policy victories.

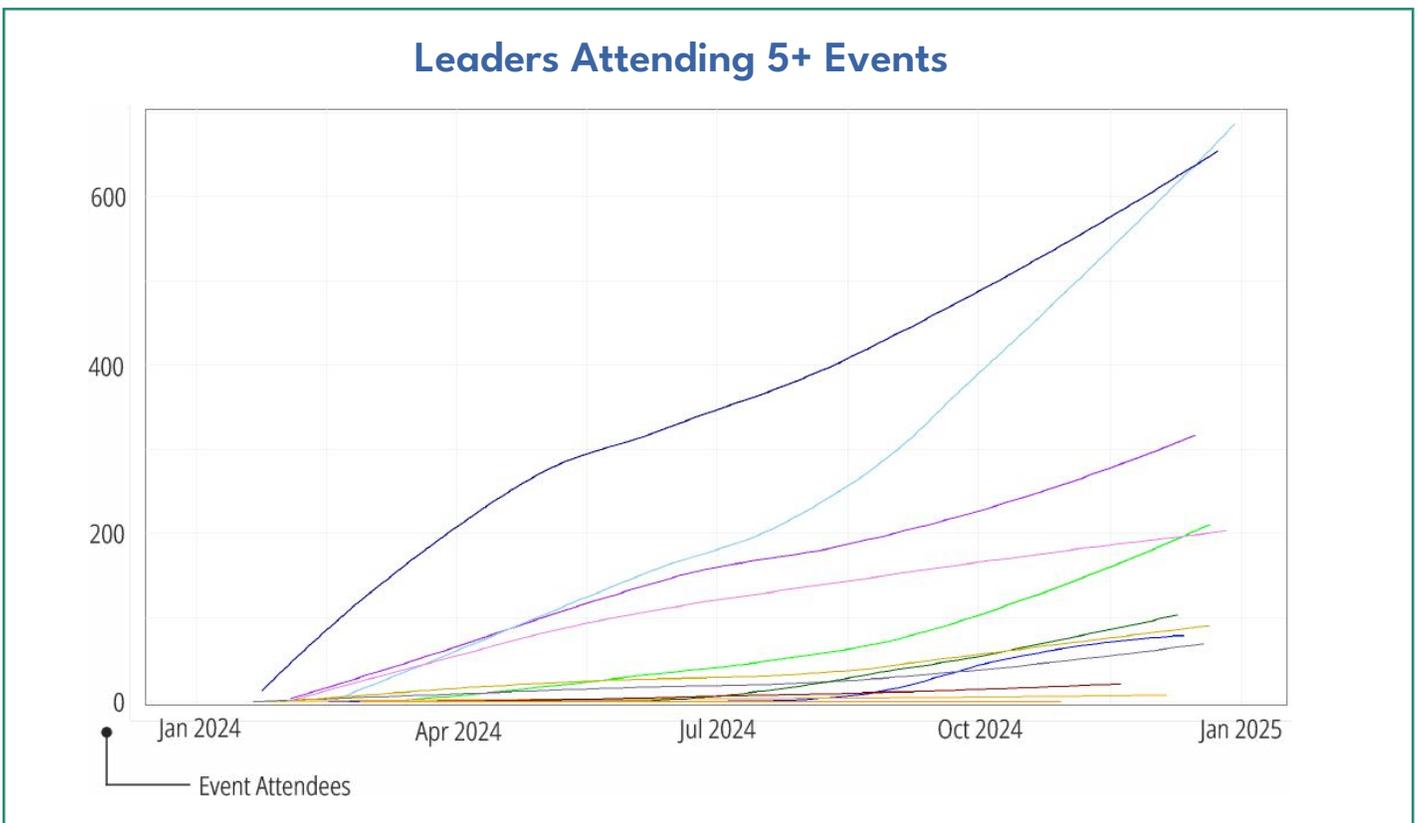
Those with 80 or more highly committed leaders were able to wield significant power and win meaningful victories at the local level.⁵¹

These relatively modest leadership thresholds suggest that the goal of organizing – to help everyday people build power to make government work for their families and communities – is well

within reach, if we focus energy and resources on leadership development and base-building.

As a longstanding axiom of business management reminds us, “What gets measured gets done.” While the progressive political industry is constructed around net votes – a measurable output that has exerted a black-hole-level gravitational pull on funding, field practices, and infrastructure design – the DPI learning community has laid the groundwork for a paradigm shift away from that approach. DPI is developing tools for measuring the work that actually needs to get done to build power and drive democratic practice.

Figure 8: Analysis of organizing groups’ “purple line” charts in 2024 generated insights into the threshold measures of base power required for governing influence



⁵¹ Ibid, page 4



LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of six years, DPI has published 28 research reports and supported dozens of program innovation projects by groups intent on strengthening organizing practices to drive change. DPI's work has helped organizing groups better understand the values and identities within and across communities, gain insight into how to nurture their organizations as civic homes, and understand and measure power.

How can organizers, funders, researchers, and others interested in building a multiracial democracy implement some of the core lessons DPI has learned?



PEOPLE

The foundation of any powerful organization is people. To drive change in a democracy, we need people to act collectively, and that starts with understanding them. But people are complex. To understand their motivations and values, we must begin with curiosity, free from any preconceived ideas or stereotypes, and with a commitment to being open and to listening. We must be willing to learn and try new things, drawing on existing research and developing new research based on the specific population we are trying to engage.

A genuine multiracial democracy also requires an expansive approach to engaging people – in contrast to the narrow, microtargeted approach of the political industry. In voter engagement programs, that means targeting a much broader universe of people, including and especially those who are disconnected and disillusioned. To reach such people, we must implement outreach methods such as relational organizing approaches that leverage people’s personal networks.⁵² And we must bring a learning mindset to voter engagement programs, using conversations with people not only as opportunities to mobilize, but to learn about their values, beliefs, and motivations.



ORGANIZATIONS

People can only drive change that addresses their concerns if they are organized. Collective structures and associations are critical to advancing the interests of everyday people and growing their agency and power. We must move beyond nationalized, tactics-driven, marketing-oriented mobilization initiatives to instead build and nurture locally-rooted and -led organizations that create spaces of belonging, agency, and collective power. These organizations must ensure that people and their development are at the center of all work and resist pressures to orient staff, resources, and capacity exclusively around large-scale mobilization.



POWER

Democratic power is the ability of everyday people to get government to respond to their needs and interests and deliver material benefits that improve their lives. For us to understand and improve how civic organizations build and wield democratic power, we must measure what matters to that outcome: the process of building and growing a constituency base; creating and strengthening collective capacities of accountability, decision-making, and strategic action; and building influence in power arenas. We must support organization’s efforts to track, visualize, and analyze these processes in ways that enable them to improve their strategic choices and organizing practices.

⁵² Organizations exclude large swathes of communities when they rely exclusively on voter databases such as Catalist for their targeting and outreach. DPI research partner McKinney Gray estimates that 40% of eligible Black and Latino voters are missing from or mislisted in voter databases. See McKinney Gray, Miriam. “Surfacing Missing Voters: Addressing Data Systems, Tools and Engagement Models that Invisibilize Black and Brown Communities.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, January 2024.



A NEW PARADIGM

The DPI story is more than a collection of discrete research projects and programmatic innovations. It is about a community of learners who are imagining — and practicing — true multiracial democracy and driving a paradigm shift that is taking root in every state across the country.

We see this shift in the way a rising organizer meets a rightfully disillusioned neighbor at the door, armed not with a one-off ask to vote but with the tools and curiosity to have a real conversation.

We see it in how civic organizations are breathing new life into their programs and structures, putting relationship-building and leadership development at the center of their work and bringing discipline, focus, and rigor to building and wielding power.

We see it in how organizers and movement researchers are pushing the political industry to think about Black, Latino, and

Asian American communities as people with individual and collective agency. We see it in the increasing number of funders who are shifting resources and investments to support organizing and reorienting their learning and evaluation frameworks to center real people and enduring power. And the list goes on.

In the 250th year of our nation, our democratic experiment is in peril. There is no technocratic fix to this crisis. We will not find salvation in poll-tested messages, or digital ads, or a micro-targeting strategy. The path to a better future lies in people: in listening to and understanding them, developing their collective leadership, and helping them build organizations that unleash their power and agency to drive change.

This is the transformational work of organizing and it is vital to realizing an America where democracy thrives and all people can flourish.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to the writing of this report, including Julie Fernandes, Joy Cushman, Scarlett Jimenez, and Margot Friedman. Anna Glass copyedited the text and Ruby Western created the design.

I am grateful to those in the DPI learning community who took time to be interviewed and contribute their insights, including Alice Chamberlain, Molly Fleming, Katrina Gamble, Miriam McKinney Gray, Juan Miranda, Tianyi Hu, Tami Lunan, Ranada Robinson, Molly Shack, Doran Schrantz, Sam Wohms, and Terrance Woodbury. Finally, deepest gratitude to the organizers and leaders who are working diligently and courageously to build civic organizations that can make democracy work for all of us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Loren McArthur consults for philanthropies, funding intermediaries, donor collaboratives, and nonprofits on initiatives to strengthen US democracy and civil society. Previously, he served as head of thought leadership and senior advocacy lead at Arabella Advisors and led the civic engagement department at UnidosUS, the largest national civil rights and advocacy organization in the US. He started his career as community organizer in the cities of Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts. Loren's writing and thought leadership on philanthropy and the social sector have appeared in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *Inside Philanthropy*, and the *Center for Effective Philanthropy*.



WORKS CITED

- Chenoweth, Erica. “New Data Shows No Kings Was One of the Largest Days of Protest in US History.” Waging Nonviolence, 12 August 2025, wagingnonviolence.org/2025/08/new-data-shows-no-kings-was-one-of-the-largest-days-of-protest-in-us-history.
- Cody, Janay. “The Black Experience Model.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, May 2021.
- Cushman, Joy, and Elizabeth McKenna, with Miya Woolfalk et al. “Civic Power 2025: The Role and Impact of Independent Political Organizations in Expanding the Electorate and Building Governing Influence.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Pro-Democracy Campaign, and the State Power Action Fund, September 2025.
- Cushman, Joy and Elizabeth McKenna. “Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 2023.
- Gamble, Katrina, and Destiney Golden. “Building Civic Homes: Fostering Belonging, Agency, and Collective Impact in Community Organizations.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, April 2025.
- Gamble, Katrina, Terrance Woodbury, and Roshni Nedungadi. “Black Values Survey 2024.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, HIT Strategies, and Sojourn Strategies, 4 September 2024.
- Gilens, Martin and Benjamin I. Page. “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens.” Perspectives on Politics, 18 September 2014, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/testing-theories-of-american-politics-elites-interest-groups-and-average-citizens/62327F513959D0A304D4893B382B992B>.
- Han, Hahrie, et al. “An Approach to Understanding and Measuring People Power.” The P3 Lab, Johns Hopkins University, May 2021.
- Han, Hahrie, et al. Prisms of the People. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226744063.001.0001>.
- “Latinos Rising: Redefining Power, Inside Arizona’s Most Comprehensive Voter Study.” Arizona Center for Empowerment (ACE), Data for Social Good, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, and Sojourn Strategies, October 2024.
- “Latino Values Survey.” Equis Labs, Sojourn Strategies, Florida Rising, Make the Road Nevada, Poder NC, LUCHA, Voces de la Frontera, PICO California, August 2022.
- McKinney Gray, Miriam. “Surfacing Missing Voters: Addressing Data Systems, Tools and Engagement Models that Invisibilize Black and Brown Communities.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, January 2024.



Phoenix, Davin. “Creating Political Engagement: Discovering a ‘Linked Fate of the Experienced’ among People Connected to Returning Citizens.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, October 2025.

“Poll Brief: Insights into Asian American Voters in North Carolina.” Z to A Research, North Carolina Asian Americans Together, and Sojourn Strategies, October 2024.

Shenker-Osorio, Anat. “Bringing a Survey to a Gun Fight.” Weekend Reading, 4 October 2025, www.weekendreading.net/p/bringing-a-survey-to-a-gun-fight.

Shlapobersky, Noga. “Transformative Conversations: Using Deep Canvassing to Enroll Communities in a Path to Power.” Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Missouri Organizing and Voter Engagement Collaborative (MOVE), and Analyst Institute, June 2025.

“The Democrats’ Plan to Get Skeptics on Their Side.” The Run-Up, 19 September 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/19/podcasts/the-democrats-plan-to-combat-cynicism.html?>

“Trends in the Distribution of Household Income From 1979 to 2021.” Congressional Budget Office, September 2024, www.cbo.gov/system/files/2024-09/60342-Trends-Income.pdf.

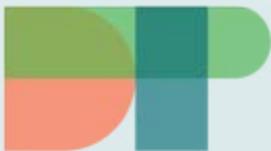
“Who Are the Black Swing Voters?” The New York Times, 31 October 2024, www.nytimes.com/video/us/elections/100000009710303/who-are-the-black-swing-voters.html.

Woodbury, Terrance and Roshni Nedungadi. “Pain to Power: The Use of Power Messaging to Mobilize Black Voters in Georgia: Shifting Black Voters’ Perceptions of Power.” HIT Strategies, 18 June 2021, www.linkedin.com/pulse/pain-power-use-messaging-mobilize-black-voters-georgia/.

Woodbury, Terrance, Martina Smith, Roshni Nedungadi, and Katrina Gamble. “Black Power Shift Clusters: Black Voters Beyond Demographics” HIT Strategies, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, and Sojourn Strategies, 4 October 2023, slide deck (unpublished).

To access the Democracy & Power Innovation Fund research publications cited in this report, you can sign up for an account on the DPI Fund website at <https://www.dpifund.org/>.





**DEMOCRACY & POWER
INNOVATION FUND**

dpifund.org