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## HOW BASE-BUILDING DRIVES ELECTION REFORM

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# INTRODUCTION: BASE-BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

In recent years, efforts to restrict voting access and undermine nonpartisan election administration have accelerated at the federal and state levels. This study examines the role that state-based organizing groups have played in shaping election reform policy and legislation. Specifically, we focus on two states where robust organizing infrastructure helped advance comprehensive election reforms: New Mexico and Minnesota. In both states, groups used multi-entity structures to build organized constituencies capable of influencing policy outcomes, advance reforms that strengthened democratic participation, and sustain engagement through implementation to ensure those reforms delivered on their promise. The successful democracy reform campaigns in New Mexico and Minnesota were distinguished by two key features. First, they were grounded in strategic coordination across a full ecology of participants: policy groups, grassroots organizers, legislators, and funders, with base-building organizations at the center. Prior to 2020, democracy reform ecosystems in both states were anchored largely by policy and legal organizations. As base-building groups grew their power, strategic capacity, and constituent membership, reform coalitions shifted to put organizing at the center. That shift, and the organized constituent bases it produced, enabled both states to drive durable legislative outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

This report is based on interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2023 with organizers, legislators, Secretaries of State, and policy advocates. Interviewees included the team at Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLÉ), a lead multi-issue civic organization in New Mexico; Faith in Minnesota, a multiracial, multi-issue organization; and individuals affiliated with We Choose Us, the coalition behind Minnesota's election reform campaign..

## MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Across both states, several common themes emerged:

- In both legislative campaigns, organized constituents led voting rights coalitions that had previously been dominated by policy and legal groups.
- Organized constituents developed a multi-issue democracy agenda centered on expanding ballot access and strengthening voting rights.
- They built strong relationships with legislative champions, helping elected officials understand the full range of their constituents' priorities.
- Pro-democracy coalitions continued to educate constituents and elected officials about their goals even when legislative success seemed unlikely. When the political context shifted, they were positioned to move quickly toward legislative action.





## CASE STUDY: NEW MEXICO

In 2023, New Mexico passed landmark voting rights and election reform legislation. The New Mexico Voting Rights Act (VRA) was a comprehensive omnibus bill incorporating reforms that advocates had been working toward for decades.

### The law:

- Restores voting rights immediately upon release from prison for individuals with felony convictions, immediately affecting more than 11,000 formerly incarcerated people. Previously, people had to complete probation and parole before regaining voting rights, a process that could take years.
- Expands voting access on Tribal lands through the Native American Voting Rights Act (NAVRA), which secures early voting on Tribal land, allows Tribes to designate polling places on the same timeline as other jurisdictions, permits Tribes to request ballot drop boxes, and designates additional registration address locations for Tribal members who lack traditional mailing addresses.
- Requires automatic voter registration on the “back end”: when an eligible resident interacts with a state agency — including the Department of Motor Vehicles or public benefit agencies — that person is automatically registered to vote and given the opportunity to opt out.
- Expands absentee and mail voting access by requiring at least two ballot drop boxes in every county.
- Mandates same-day registration at all polling locations, allowing eligible residents to register and vote on the same visit.
- Creates a permanent absentee voter list, eliminating the need to reapply for a mail ballot each election.
- Designates Election Day as a school holiday.



## BACKGROUND

Starting in 2014, New Mexico's voting rights movement included both policy advocacy groups and base-building organizations, though they rarely collaborated on legislative efforts. Campaigns were typically led by the Election Administration Coalition (EAC), convened by America Votes New Mexico and Common Cause New Mexico (CCNM) — two established policy groups — alongside organizations like OLE, a nonprofit grassroots membership organization. Beginning in 2017, EAC leadership began to shift toward organizing groups rooted in communities of color. This shift began when groups like OLE entered the legislative arena with a push for automated voter registration. Though that effort failed, it marked a significant turning point. Two years later, in 2019, the EAC succeeded in passing both automated voter registration and same-day registration.

In 2022, the coalition came close to passing a strong voting rights bill. The bill cleared the House but stalled in the Senate, hampered by procedural delays during the four-week legislative session: it received no committee hearing for the first three weeks, and extended debate in the Rules Committee blocked its advancement. A senator with key committee authority chose not to move the bill forward, and it never reached a floor vote.

In response, State Senator Katy Duhigg and other legislators hastily drafted and introduced a stripped-down version of the bill, removing provisions such as expanded ballot drop boxes and a lower voting age. That bill also passed the House but died in the Senate when Senator Bill Sharer filibustered it. As the 30-day session expired, “the bill died a spectacular death,” in the words of Andrea Serrano, Executive Director of OLE.

New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse-Oliver attributed the 2022 defeat partly to a failure of legislative champions to ground the bill in constituent interests. “Part of the reason why it failed was that this was a top-down initiative,” she said. Senator Duhigg agreed, noting that the 2022 bill and its strategy had been developed largely behind closed doors, without meaningful consultation with community organizations.

After the 2022 defeat, the organizations formed a new steering committee called the New Mexico Inclusive Democracy Project (IDP). This committee was led primarily by community-based organizations representing a broad set of constituencies — including communities of color, Indigenous and immigrant communities, and LGBTQ groups — all of which were directly affected by voter disenfranchisement.

Under this new structure, organizing groups led the 2023 reform campaign from the outset. The coalition's strategy shifted: instead of beginning with policy advocacy, it began with constituent education, organizing, and mobilization.

Recognizing the power of community voices, the NM IDP focused on enabling everyday people to advocate directly for change in the halls of the capitol. This is the heart of the New Mexico story: a coalition that educated and organized directly impacted constituents to speak for themselves with policymakers.



# LEARNINGS FROM NEW MEXICO

## Organized Constituents Built a Unified “Democracy” Agenda Across Multiple Interests

In 2023, NM IDP leadership shifted from treating “democracy” as a standalone issue to understanding that a constituency group’s ability to advance any issue depended on the existence of a free and fair electoral system. Over time, more constituency-based groups came to recognize this connection and joined the coalition.

As Secretary Toulouse-Oliver put it: “All of these groups that have these other issues as their primary concern have come to acknowledge and understand that access to the ballot box has to be a top priority for their organizations.”



PHOTO: Youth organizing, courtesy of Aline

Serrano described part of the coalition’s work as “moving folks from a belief that democracy reform and issue-based work are separate beings.” Under the leadership of OLÉ, the Center for Civic Policy, Equality New Mexico, Naeva/ NM Native Vote, and partner organizations, the coalition launched a renewed campaign built on a shared narrative encompassing the needs of all member communities. When the 2023 New Mexico VRA was introduced, the coalition read through the bill together and agreed on which provisions were essential for all member organizations’ goals to be met.

“If anyone was going to come to us with a deal, and if it meant stripping out parts of the bill in order to pass other parts, we decided it was all-or-nothing because it was that important for us that we stay together.”

**ANDREA SERRANO**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OLÉ

This commitment also shifted the campaign away from the quiet, careful lobbying that policy organizations had long favored. Organizers are in the business of “unapologetically telling their stories,” said Serrano. The coalition’s priority was to create pathways for people from all affected communities to tell their stories directly to lawmakers — not to craft carefully managed messaging for the comfort of a few legislators.

From the coalition’s perspective, this was democracy in practice: creating opportunities for everyday people to set strategy, testify publicly, and do the work to achieve meaningful reform.



## THE COALITION CREATED PATHWAYS FOR PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AND DIRECT ACCOUNTABILITY

Alongside the goal of building a coalition encompassing all affected communities, NM IDP focused on engaging new constituencies — young people of color, immigrants, formerly incarcerated individuals, and Native people — all of whom had a direct stake in the legislative campaign.

Young people of color contributed throughout the campaign and developed leadership skills in the process. Aline Castelan Gonzalez, Campaign and Projects Director at Dreams in Action New Mexico, brought her experience facilitating youth-led action to the coalition in 2023 as its Campaign Manager. She organized immigrant youth around voting rights, and while some young activists were too young to vote themselves, they understood the connection between an inclusive democracy and the immigration issues they cared about most. They became effective messengers to people in their communities who could potentially be impacted by voting rights policy issues.

Aline mobilized more than 500 young people to participate in the election reform campaign. By engaging them on issues they were personally connected to — immigration and pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds — she activated a base that proved instrumental to the passage of the entire Voting Rights Act.

The campaign to pass voting rights restoration for formerly incarcerated people was similarly led by those most directly affected. Justin Allen, a returning citizen and former organizer with OLÉ, described how the coalition succeeded by centering the experiences of people the legislation would impact. Legislators “were really impressed with the humanity of our speakers,” he said. Organizers shifted the narrative by bringing impacted people directly to the legislature to advocate for themselves.

"The first time I was invited to go advocate at the state legislature, it was really empowering because I felt heard, I felt listened to. These people took the time to listen to our stories. And so I'm trying to give that same experience to my members — not empowering them but giving them the tools to find their own power."

**JUSTIN ALLEN**  
**FORMER ORGANIZER, OLÉ**

The campaign for the Native American Voting Rights Act (NAVRA) component followed a similar approach. Naeva/NM Native Vote, led by Executive Director Ahtza Dawn Chavez, prioritized having Tribal leaders speak directly to legislators — not through lobbyists, but in person. Native organizers showed up consistently at every committee hearing, legislative vote, and press conference.

As Representative Chasey observed in 2023: “I have never seen such a diverse and engaged group of community organizers from every walk of life [...] What amazed me was the various groups were monitoring every single committee hearing and they were coming back to me and

quoting me [...] They were following everything, absolutely everything.”

This model — where organizers from impacted constituencies served as primary leaders and voices — gave the campaign a distinct humanity and a clear mandate from the people of New Mexico. Impacted communities directly shaped the narrative and engaged legislators on their own terms, creating a more representative and participatory democratic process.

## POLICY GROUPS RESET THEIR LEADERSHIP ROLE

For organized constituents to exercise leadership in the democracy reform campaign, the leading policy group, Common Cause New Mexico (CCNM), had to relinquish its position at the front and learn to share power with community-based leaders.

PHOTO: Youth organizing, courtesy of Aline



As organizing groups grew stronger, policy organizations began having difficult internal conversations about how their role in the voting rights movement needed to change. CCNM Executive Director Heather Ferguson was candid about this process. CCNM recognized that its role was to provide policy expertise and to educate lawmakers on the value of the legislation — not to lead the coalition’s public strategy. It also came to understand that policy work alone was insufficient; building a public mandate required constituent mobilization.

Ferguson acknowledged mistakes from earlier years. In 2019, she said, “Common Cause wasn’t operating as a good partner to a lot of our community partners at the time. We were leading too hard with the policy rather than making it a community engagement or organizational tool.” Following further reflection in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, CCNM concluded it needed to shift its internal culture: “We’d always been so policy heavy and policy leaders in the space that we hadn’t been operating in a way where we looked at policy through a racial equity lens and made sure that we had all of the voices at the table.”

CCNM came to understand that its job was not to pass reforms for communities, but to engage with and follow the leadership of those communities. Rebuilding trust with coalition partners required transparency and accountability for past missteps.

In January 2023, CCNM hired Mason Graham, a former organizer with the New Mexico Black Voters Collaborative, as a dedicated point person for coalition engagement. Graham’s organizing background strengthened CCNM’s standing within the coalition and enabled more genuine partnerships. “I leaned on my own advocacy and my own passion for democracy and elections to continue to cultivate those relationships,” he said. “I only do this work because it’s something I care about and I’m passionate about. And I think people resonate with that.”

Reflecting on lessons for other states, Serrano offered: “What we should have done — and what we didn’t do — was have an upfront conversation about sharing the space. But what we eventually figured out is, there’s room for everyone... You need all of us when we’re trying to really build out what this vision of democracy is. And having those upfront conversations, not about territory, but rooted in values — if we’re all working toward the same thing, what’s the lane for all of us in this work?”

## **POLICY ADVOCATES, ORGANIZED CONSTITUENTS, AND LEGISLATORS COLLABORATED BEFORE AND AFTER THE LEGISLATIVE FIGHT**

The 2023 New Mexico VRA succeeded because of close, early collaboration among legislators, policy groups, and organized constituents — in sharp contrast to the top-down approach that had characterized the failed 2022 effort. This early engagement reflects the long-term relational investment that legislative success requires.





PHOTO: Courtesy of OLE

Secretary Toulouse-Oliver described the difference: “The coalition came together after 2022. They took that bill, they made it the new, better version of itself, and they drove the bus in 2023. They found the sponsors, they drafted the legislation, they brought me and the governor and everyone else on board.”

State Senator Duhigg emphasized the importance of early, frequent, and ongoing engagement between coalitions and legislators. Knowing she had the full support of organized constituents and policy groups was critical to her effectiveness. The partnership also worked in the other direction: community members gave representatives scripts, talking points, and messaging that reflected constituents’ needs, led by Marshall Martinez of Equality New Mexico and lobbyist Dylan McArthur, with support from Planned Parenthood.

These partnerships reinforced a broader lesson: no single legislative champion and no single-issue constituency can carry a bill alone. Success required a united broad base, multiple legislative leaders working from within, and a large coalition of organized constituents maintaining pressure throughout.

Building this infrastructure – connecting legislators, organized constituents, and policy groups – was a long process that required adequate staffing and sustained funding for the organizations leading the effort.





## CASE STUDY: MINNESOTA

In 2023, Minnesota passed significant legislation protecting and expanding voting access. The Democracy for the People Act was a landmark omnibus bill addressing voting rights and election reform. Also passed that year, the Restore the Vote Act restored voting rights to citizens who had previously been convicted of a felony. Together, these victories demonstrate the power of a movement that had been building for decades.

Upon passage, Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon called it “a really, really big deal. Bills like this only come around about once every half century. The last time we had one this big was 1973, almost to the day, when Minnesota passed same-day voter registration.”

## MAIN PROVISIONS OF THE DEMOCRACY FOR THE PEOPLE ACT

- Allows 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote, with registration activated when they turn 18.
- Establishes automatic voter registration at the Department of Motor Vehicles and at public assistance agencies. When an eligible citizen interacts with one of these agencies, they are automatically registered using information the agency already has, and later given the option to opt out.
- Permits voters to opt into a permanent absentee voter list, enabling them to receive a ballot every election without reapplying.
- Greatly expands access for people with limited English proficiency by requiring sample ballots and voting instructions in multiple languages, and bilingual election workers in areas with significant non-English-speaking populations.
- Strengthens penalties for voter intimidation and deception.
- Includes provisions that significantly strengthen campaign finance laws.

The Restore the Vote Act restored voting rights to an estimated 55,000 Minnesotans with prior felony convictions. Previously, Minnesotans had to complete probation and/or parole before becoming eligible to vote again — a process that could span decades. Under the new law, voting rights are restored immediately upon release from incarceration.



# BACKGROUND

The omnibus and rights restoration bills have separate but intertwined histories. For more than two decades, legislators had worked alongside policy organizations to advance election reform, building strong networks, resources, and best practices — but seeing little actual legislative movement.

The path to the 2023 Democracy for the People Act began in 2020: the coalition launched a campaign to organize constituents around multiracial democracy, and the makeup of the legislature had shifted such that more legislators were receptive to these policy changes. With strong legislative partners, years of accumulated strategy and practice, and the resources to run a well-coordinated campaign, the coalition played a central role in the eventual passage of reform legislation.

The Restore the Vote coalition underwent a parallel transformation during this period. Organized constituents increasingly stepped into leadership roles, with Minister JaNaé Bates and Brian Fullman from Faith in Minnesota facilitating the shift away from policy-focused leadership toward base-building and constituent organizing.

# LEARNINGS FROM MINNESOTA

## Shifts in the Legislature Improved the Odds of Success

In 2020, Emma Greenman was elected to the state legislature on a strong pro-democracy platform. As a long-time voting rights lawyer and activist, she was prepared to move quickly on reform. She immediately began developing the Democracy for the People Act, constructing a legislative agenda that could address the democracy reform needs of all Minnesotans. The January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol added further momentum; legislative leadership wanted a democracy bill, and advocates seized the moment to launch their campaign.

In previous years, legislative champions had introduced and debated pro-democracy bills even when passage was unlikely, calling these efforts “dress rehearsals.” They were developing and refining their strategy so that when the policy environment became favorable, they would be ready. That preparatory work meant that when Representative Greenman was elected and the We Choose Us coalition formed in 2020, they could build on years of accumulated effort.

The Restore the Vote coalition had a similar experience. Policy and advocacy groups had been working on voting rights restoration for two decades. In 2003, then-State Representative Keith Ellison (now Attorney General) introduced the Voting Rights Restoration Bill. For years, it failed to gain traction. The coalition formed in 2013; JaNaé Bates of Faith in Minnesota joined in 2016. As JaNaé described it, one of the critical tasks during those years was redefining what “winning” meant.



PHOTO: Restore the Vote actions, courtesy of ISAIAH

"We would have these big hearings where we packed a hearing room — that was the win. It didn't matter that the bill didn't pass in that moment. But we talked about how amazing it was that so-and-so got to tell their amazing story about what it would mean for them to exercise democracy. You have to talk about wins that don't always feel like wins until you talk about them that way."

**JANAÉ BATES**  
**FAITH IN MINNESOTA**

Secretary of State Simon echoed this: "By the fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh time, legislators are really engaging and hopefully in a space where they can embrace it or at least vote for it. So much of this has to do with being willing to try and fail a few times. Understanding that momentum for these ideas takes a lot of time to build. What was once seen as unconventional can become mainstream with a lot of help."

JaNaé described the cumulative rigor of this work: "This was my seventh session working on voting rights restoration, and every single year felt very similar. It was never like, 'Now this is the year we really put the pedal to the metal.' We did it every single year. We created a rigor and a practice in our work — prepping testifiers, writing letters to the editor, talking to legislators, having lobby days. We did that every single year. And we built a practice around it, a rigor around it, so that once we actually had the political terrain to match the possibility, it was like going from dress rehearsal to real deal."

Representative Cedrick Frazier led the Restore the Vote initiative in the Minnesota House. Elected in 2020, he arrived with a labor law

background and a history of organizing. Upon election, he immediately consulted with Representative Ray Dehn, the bill's previous sponsor, and contacted the Speaker of the House about prioritizing the legislation.

Frazier sought to support the coalition, not the other way around. He gave organizers direct access to him, provided regular legislative updates, and coordinated outreach to other policymakers alongside the coalition. On the House floor when the bill passed, he recounted the personal stories of individuals who would be affected by the law. "I always told their stories," he said.

This ongoing work mattered for legislators as well, giving them repeated opportunities to witness the power of their leadership and feel accountable to their constituents.

## **BROADENING THE DEMOCRACY COALITION**

With new champions in the legislature, Representative Greenman and allied groups — including ISAIAH, SEIU, Inquilinx Unidxs por Justicia, and the 100% Campaign — committed to expanding the legislative advocacy coalition well beyond the policy groups that had previously dominated the democracy reform space. They concluded that winning required policy expertise, legislative strategy, and organized constituents demanding change.



To meet this need, ISAI AH and Faith in Minnesota contracted with a coordinating staffer in early 2021 to lead coalition expansion. The work included outreach to organized constituency groups to understand their policy priorities and build shared alignment.

**Policy and advocacy groups that had long championed election reform in Minnesota — including the League of Women Voters — were supportive of the shift.**

As Executive Director Michelle Witte put it: “We already had testimony from the past, a whole vetted website on this, and We Choose Us was able to pop in and take that body of work and help move it. It made perfect sense that power-building organizing groups should lead.”

The We Choose Us coalition organized into working groups focused on policy, communications and narrative, and organizing. The organizing cohort — the Organizing for Power group — became the ultimate decision-making body and included Jewish Community Action, the Barbershops and Black Congregation Cooperative (ISAI AH), the Muslim Coalition of ISAI AH, New Justice Project, Minnesota Voice, and Inquilinxs Unidxs por Justicia. Policy groups continued the work they were best suited for: educating legislators on bill specifics and leveraging relationships to build broader stakeholder support, including among county clerks across the state.

In 2022, the coalition undertook significant internal alignment work. The Organizing for Power cohort held a leadership retreat attended by 200 people from across the state to clarify

strategy and solidify shared commitments. The coalition’s leadership also conducted one-on-one conversations with all partner organizations, a process that produced a strong policy agenda with genuine consensus across the coalition. The result was the Expanding Democracy agenda — a shared framework that coalesced significant power behind the coalition.

Representative Greenman described the breadth of the coalition: “Many of their bases were not democracy bases. Inquilinxs Unidxs was building a base around immigration and DACA. ISAI AH and the Muslim Coalition were multi-issue. The church ladies from Faith in Minnesota were congregation-based with a whole range of issues. And we had the 100% Campaign — the environmental piece. Getting organizations that had a base to really embrace democracy reform as a piece of their work — not just as a favor, but as a genuine piece of passing their other priorities — that was critical.”

Minnesota Voice played a particular role in connecting smaller organizations to the campaign — groups like Ayada Leads, which works to ensure East African women, particularly Somali women, have access to leadership pipelines and understand the importance of their vote. Engaging these communities, many of which had not previously worked on voting rights issues, built the broad public mandate that helped pass the 2023 legislation.

The Restore the Vote coalition underwent a parallel transformation. Led by experienced base-building organizers JaNaé Bates and Brian Fullman from ISAI AH and Faith in Minnesota, along with Justin Terrell from Minnesota Justice Research Center, Antonio Williams from TONE UP, and consultant Wintana Melekin, the coalition shifted its approach and energized the campaign.



Before this change in leadership, the coalition had lacked a base-building orientation. As Brian Fullman, Lead Organizer of the Barbershops and Black Congregation Cooperative, described it: “There weren’t a lot of people thinking about, ‘How can we leverage every action we’re taking with the people we’re doing this work with, to continue to build on it?’ Instead, what tends to happen is, ‘Okay, we turned out these testifiers, we had a rally or a press conference, we didn’t pass the bill. We’re going to try again next year, and everybody go home.’”

Brian’s base-building orientation changed the coalition’s culture. As JaNaé put it: “His orientation is always going to be, ‘How am I building bases? How am I unlocking the people who are around me to feel that they are not just at the table, but decision-makers?’”

As a returning citizen himself, Brian also understood the specific work required to engage other returning citizens — people who had been deliberately excluded from full political participation and who did not initially see this policy fight as relevant to their lives. He worked to help individuals build a sense of agency around the issue, educating them about the policy and connecting it to their own power. In late 2022, he and Justin Terrell brought returning citizens into the center of the campaign.

"I think moving the formerly incarcerated came from everybody understanding that we have to bring some kind of mandate. We have to create this buzz in the community about it, and the community needs to start showing up on behalf of Restore the Vote."

**BRIAN FULLMAN**  
**LEAD ORGANIZER, BBCC**

## PERSONAL STORIES HUMANIZED THE CAMPAIGN

Secretary of State Simon credited the organizing approach as especially effective with respect to the rights restoration bill. Organizers brought in people whose lives were directly affected by voter disenfranchisement — putting “flesh and blood” stories in front of legislators rather than abstract statistics.

Secretary Simon described what organizers accomplished: “What I saw them do very effectively was get people who were potentially affected to advocate for themselves. Not just talk about them — ‘Oh, there are 55,000 people in need of this’ — but get some of the 55,000 people themselves to want this and to talk about this.”

Representative Frazier’s leadership reinforced this for new activists in the coalition. His willingness to name coalition members in his floor speech — to literally call them out and honor their contributions — demonstrated to participants that they mattered.



"The way Ced Frazier stood and talked about his grandfather and talked about his own family and then lifted up the names of some of the brothers and sisters who were in our crew — he literally named us in his speech. He did that because he wanted us to understand why it was so important we were there. And then you start seeing these lights go off in brothers who didn't even deem themselves worthy enough to be named by a legislator."

**BRIAN FULLMAN**  
**LEAD ORGANIZER, BBCC**

## **DEMOCRACY REFORM REQUIRES LONG-TERM COMMITMENT, BEFORE AND AFTER THE LEGISLATIVE FIGHT**

Interviewees consistently emphasized the importance of dedicated, full-time staff and values-aligned professional lobbyists. The We Choose Us coalition was able to hire a coordinating staffer — who started as a contractor — to lead and coordinate the initiative over time. This continuity was essential to maintaining momentum.

In 2022, the Restore the Vote campaign benefited from being well-resourced for the first time. Previously, leadership had rotated among different organizational partners without the continuity or capacity needed to build and grow the coalition effectively.

Funding from the Pro-Democracy Campaign, the McKnight Foundation, and the Piper Fund enabled democracy reform coalitions to hire

coordinating staff and lobbyists — both identified by interviewees as key to their success. The We Choose Us coalition worked with three lobbyists from O'Connell Consulting (Liz Doyle, Hana Abdelhamid, and Maureen O'Connell), whose expertise in the democracy movement and relationships with policymakers proved invaluable.

Organizers have long criticized funders for providing project-based rather than capacity-based support, often tied to election cycles. Year-round, sustained funding was essential for the We Choose Us and Restore the Vote coalitions. It enabled them to hire devoted staff, pursue multi-year legislative campaigns, and follow through on implementation — including holding legislators accountable after bills became law.

"Every legislator was so surprised to see us up there. They were coming back saying 'we did it, I voted the right way.' The legislators were feeling accountable to us."

**BRIAN FULLMAN**  
**LEAD ORGANIZER, BBCC**

Following the 2023 legislative victories, Minnesota's reforms have become targets in broader national efforts to restrict voting access. Organizations that built the infrastructure enabling these reforms have shifted to defensive postures, working to protect implementation while building capacity to resist federal-level threats to democratic participation.

## CONCLUSION

The story of how major voting rights legislation passed in New Mexico and Minnesota in 2023 demonstrates the critical role that grassroots constituent-based organizations play in protecting and advancing democracy.

In both states, success required years of relational groundwork among stakeholders and sustained practice working together; organizing leadership at the center of reform coalitions; the inclusion of broad coalitions with genuine constituent bases; the public leadership of people directly impacted by the issues; and increased, sustained funding before, during, and after legislative campaigns.

These two stories offer potential roadmaps for democracy reform in other states. Unifying diverse, multi-issue constituencies in support of enfranchising legislation — and building broad, active public engagement around that shared agenda — was essential to passing the New Mexico Voting Rights Act, the Minnesota Democracy for the People Act, and the Minnesota Restore the Vote Act.

This research makes clear that long-term investment, cross-organizational relationship-building, and extensive practice were necessary preconditions for pro-democracy legislation to pass. Coalitions in both states evolved to shift power toward organized constituents. New leadership and new campaign designs created genuine pathways for individuals to engage as leaders and strategists. Legislators who recognized the significance of this engagement became strong partners.

The path to a thriving multiracial democracy depends on cultivating this kind of leadership, constituent organizing, stakeholder alignment, and relentless, disciplined, multi-year campaigning in more states across the country.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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