Othering
& Belonging
Institute

# Civic Engagement for Empowerment and Belonging

Edited and introduced by
Joshua Clark

With papers by Alicia Garza, Blueprint NC, Bob Fulkerson,
Leo Murrieta, Marleine Bastien, and Michael McBride

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### About the Editor

**Joshua Clark** is Political Participation Analyst at the Othering & Belonging Institute, and a researcher for the Institute's Network for Transformative Change program. He holds a Ph.D. in socio-cultural anthropology from the University of California, Irvine.

Author affiliations are provided at the end of the collection.

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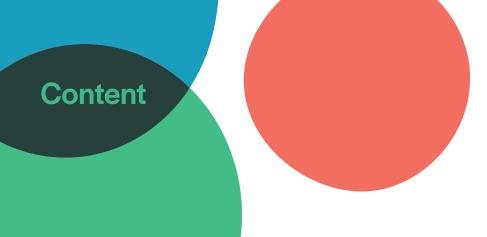### Layout & Design

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# Content

Civic Engagement for Empowerment and Belonging

# Building Power, Building Belonging

Joshua Clark

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TODAY** is less about preserving democracy than it is about re-founding it. Democracy in the United States has always been an incomplete and aspirational project. And as anywhere, it has always been subject to both expansions and contractions in terms of representativeness, accountability, and participation. It is fair to say that the past decade has not been good to the

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democratic project in the U.S.—that it has been squeezed from all sides. We see an unprecedented amount and influence of money in politics; new restrictions that make it much harder for some citizens to vote than others; inequality in how votes translate into representation due to extreme partisan gerrymandering and the Electoral College; new norms of "data-driven" campaigning that other and exclude "unlikely voters" from the outreach pool; and related popular narratives that tell people they are not prepared to participate, or that they don't belong.

These squeezes are reflected in the electoral system's grades at the ballot box. Voter participation is not nearly the only marker of a healthy democracy, but it is a significant one. We know that turnout is not simply a function of individual choice, or degree of voter interest or "initiative." It is about socio-political systems and structures, and whether and for whom

they confer a sense of civic belonging. In any given electoral system, if voter turnout is consistently low, it raises questions. Where participation is differentially distributed across voter groups, those questions become pressing. But where the gaps consistently show those with greater access to resources and opportunity voting at higher rates than those who would seem to have the most to gain from policy change, it should set off alarm bells. This final scenario is what prevails in the United States—a voting electorate that is consistently older, whiter, and with a higher income and more formal education than the population of all eligible voters. And according to recent research, the racial "turnout gap" between voter participation of whites compared to all other groups has not been shrinking since the 1960s, but trending larger.[1]

This collection of papers offers lessons from civic-engagement and movement leaders meant to help organizers, strategists, donors, and others sharpen their efforts to reverse that trend. When the Othering & Belonging Institute launched the Civic Engagement Narrative Change project, the U.S. was coming off of two general elections in which turnout was weak and incredibly lopsided even by U.S. standards. In 2016, the presidency was decided by three states in which turnout fluctuations and third-party voting played a significant role in Donald Trump's victory.[2] Yet public discourse following the election was dominated by talk of who had "flipped"

from Obama to Trump, and why. Debates about the magnitude and reason(s) for the shift among white voters without a college degree in particular drowned out a larger point: These "non-college whites" were a larger *share* of voters due in large part to voters of color who had cast ballots in 2012, but dropped out of the electorate in 2016.[3] People of color became even more under-represented than in recent presidential elections, their growth in population outpacing their growth at the polls.

In the previous national general election—the 2014 midterms—turnout was nothing short of abysmal. The best estimates place the overall participation rate that year under 37 percent of eligible voters—the lowest rate for a midterm since the height of World War II.[4] As to differences in turnout across groups, the voting electorate always skews older and less ethno-racially diverse in midterm years even more than in presidential elections. But in 2014, the drops in Latinx, Asian American, African American, and especially young (18-29 year-old) voter participation rates relative to the previous presidential were even more dramatic than usual.[5]

The general elections of 2014 and 2016 were acute cases in a larger, persistent cycle in U.S. electoral politics. It is one in which campaigns, candidates, and elected officials invest the least in representing and responding to constituencies that their data and consultants tell them are "disengaged;" this othering and neglect further disillusion those constituencies from regarding elections as meaningful vehicles for improving their lives; and their justified pessimism leads higher rates of under-represented constituencies to refrain from voting, thereby reinforcing the self-fulfilling prophecy of their label as less likely to vote.

The authors of the papers included in this collection are on the frontlines of work to end this toxic cycle. They are leaders in organizations and movements whose electoral work closes participation gaps by centering people who are often pushed aside or counted out. They are re-founders of our democracy who equip those same people to effectively claim their rightful place in decision-making processes that affect their lives. As their papers make clear, their success relies upon approaching constituents as more than

just prospective voters to be "turned out." Instead, voter mobilization is but one piece of broader, year-round, and people-centered engagement efforts that strengthen identity and capacity for the full range of civic and political action.

This type of programming drew the attention of mainstream politicos in 2017 and 2018, in part thanks to the work of this collection's authors and many other partners with whom the Othering & Belonging Institute has the privilege to collaborate. By Election Day 2018, voter participation reached a scale and spread that is truly without precedent in U.S. midterm history. The turnout rate nationally increased from 2014's dismal 37 percent to just over 50 percent of eligible voters for the first time in a midterm in more than a century—since before women won the right to vote.[6] Upticks in participation were consistent across ethno-racial groups, with voters of color even shrinking the turnout gap relative to 2014 and 2016.[7] Concerted efforts to reach out to young people also led to a huge increase in participation among voters ages 18-29.[8]

Throughout 2019, the Institute commissioned papers on the lessons and persistent challenges coming out of the 2018 electoral cycle. We chose to turn to organizations and movement leaders dedicated to building the power of historically under-represented communities for best thinking on what works, what more is needed, and how those committed to expanding participation and growing the "we" in our civic life should move forward. Generations of scholars—especially in political science—have wrestled with questions about the drivers of voter participation;[9] but this collection is unique in its vantage point. It brings to bear decades of frontline experience from authors who have worked across all levels and locations in civic and political engagement. The collection was designed to speak across—and to offer applicable lessons and recommendations to—readers from the diverse sectors in the Othering & Belonging Institute's networks, including community organizing, strategic communications, philanthropy, and more.

Each of the papers offers rich contributions to ongoing dialogues in the country about how to combat the profound imbalances in political

influence and power across U.S. society. Together, they also make clear that building the power of under-represented communities must involve multiple touchpoints, or be operationalized across different "layers," in order to be effective. The remainder of this introduction gives a brief overview of some of the collection's key lessons, organized around three engagement touchpoints or levels: that of individuals; of relations within and across groups; and of stable institutional structures people use to strategize, coordinate, communicate, and mobilize—often collectively referred to as "infrastructure." These touchpoints are not discrete or mutually exclusive—quite the opposite. But we break them out in this way to stress how the collection as a whole shows the indispensability and interdependence of each touchpoint in the struggle to build power and belonging among those who have long been excluded from the U.S. democratic project.

**Engagement must *both* make space for new constituents' whole selves, *and* make them equal "co-owners" of the agenda and struggle. The former without the latter is inclusion without belonging.**

## Growing Constituencies, Elevating Leaders

Most election news coverage—and certainly campaign strategy—shows far less interest in the democratic problem of disparate turnout and representation than in the calculus of winning and losing. In those cases in which campaigns and pundits do consider how to bring new or inconsistent voters into the process, it is usually only with a view of them as atomized individuals who need convincing to vote. The papers in this collection agree that that approach is both mistaken in its individualism and multiply flawed in its execution.

One of the lessons present across the papers is that effective engagement should begin not with a pre-set endpoint (e.g. voting), but with constituents approached on their own terms, and as whole persons. Alicia Garza's paper, in fact, is not framed around voting at all, but a more open-ended project of individual and collective empowerment. She points

out that far too often progressive agendas expect people situated at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression not to bring their own fight, but to join another's fight—and one whose success will ultimately not be measured against their lived experiences. Efforts that "engage" on these terms are bound to fail; they are themselves oppressive, and the persons they attempt to recruit know it.

Michael McBride likewise stresses that organizing for a society in which everyone belongs requires going to wherever the people are, and writing no one off or out. His context is election outreach specifically, and one critique he puts forward is of the prevailing way voter data are used to steer resources and priorities. There is nothing wrong with using advances in individual voter data to target and tailor outreach; the problem is when this turns into *triaging* based on indices like "voter propensity scores" that say some voters are not worth the trouble. Campaigns, like other institutions, too easily read these types of simple, precise numerical scores as authoritative—as "data-driven" instructions.[10] But when we step back, we can recognize the perversity of equating one's (vote) history with one's (vote) potential. McBride's paper argues instead for engagement driven by a "new and principled math" that is fully inclusive.

Other papers emphasize the need to start from local issue and policy priorities as entry points for bringing under-represented communities into the political process. This requires deep rootedness in those communities, and concerted, methodical *listening*. As Leo Murrieta points out, often when national campaigns identify a "new" group for outreach, they bring a one-dimensional image of its members. Murrieta's paper provides a systematic roadmap for how engagement efforts can learn the issues that most animate communities that are chronically "under-asked," and do so through a process that itself activates and empowers them.

A headline that connects all the papers' lessons about reaching inconsistent voters, new voters, and non-voters is that the guiding question should not be how to persuade them, bring them in, or turn them out. It should be how to create genuine belonging in which they are seen and heard, and through which the work itself can be made something new—and *for them*—through their presence. Engagement must *both* make space for new constituents' whole selves, *and* make them equal "co-owners" of the agenda and struggle. The former without the latter is inclusion without belonging.

A final common thread on engagement at the level of individuals is the papers' emphasis on belonging and empowerment through concerted investment in elevating leaders from under-represented communities. The major takeaway here is that "investment" means *investment*. Even as year-round civic engagement programs tend to be committed to leadership development, this component of their work often gets short shrift due to funding fluctuations vividly described in Bob Fulkerson's paper. Fulkerson connects the dots between reaching under-represented groups, elevating local leaders from those groups, and committed funding of organizations either through unrestricted or dedicated leadership-development giving. Murrieta's and Blueprint NC's papers provide concrete examples and lessons for organizations to incorporate development and advancement of members in their work.

## Relations and Bridging

Several authors in this collection offer lessons on another intervention point for transforming democratic participation and civic life—our relations, or ways of relating across persons and communities. Blueprint NC's and McBride's papers in particular discuss the need for introspective and self-critical spaces for examining how well relational practices in civic engagement efforts live out their commitments to equity and belonging. Blueprint NC explains how it

vigilantly monitors how racism and white supremacy— as powerfully engrained cultural features—might leach into even civic work committed to racial justice. The organization is intentional about removing these toxins from everyday interpersonal and cross-organizational interactions to change the ways people relate to one another.

The papers also reflect the importance of *bridging*. For the Othering & Belonging Institute, to "bridge" involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive "we" identity. The new "we" that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a shared empathy and lasting stake in one another. While bridging's power for civic engagement is often overlooked, authors in this collection point to ways in which developing relations that bridge across difference can heal some of what alienates people from political participation.

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Garza's paper underscores that real bridging could not happen without a politics in which people bring the whole of their identities and experiences to the table. After all, how could people share empathy and find connective similarities if their relationships are predicated on suppressing critical parts of who they are? McBride's description of Black faith and civil-rights leaders' learning and engagement with Black youth after the Ferguson uprising is also about bridging. It reminds us that not all bridges are long,[11] but that we must bring just as much care where seemingly "shorter" bridges are needed to renew or re-make a "we" whose ties are fraying or frayed.

Finally, Marleine Bastien provides numerous lessons about bridging through her critique of the failure of environmentalists to reach out to communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis as civic partners with a shared cause and concerns. She describes

the toll of the crisis in low-income communities as slow-moving, persistent, and largely invisible to the established environmental movement. Her paper calls on that movement to step up, but she is clear about the relations adversely impacted communities expect. They are not asking for charity or leadership, but for others who are active on climate issues to recognize themselves in the struggles that those living the climate crisis daily are *already leading*, and to connect these struggles to their wider networks and resources.

## Institutions as Infrastructure

A final critical set of lessons in this collection deal with the building and maintenance of institutions as an ongoing civic engagement "infrastructure." Many lessons noted in the sections above have implications for institutions as well, of course. For example, much of Blueprint NC's discussion of creating new relations calls for instilling those relations at the organizational level—in institutions' muscles and tissues. But the papers offer some distinct lessons about developing and cultivating institutions *as infrastructure*—which is to say, as built systems and resources that serve as stable conduits of civic education, organizing, mobilization, narrative, and memory.

The Blueprint NC paper is invaluable for its reflections on what it takes to build a statewide civic engagement "backbone" organization like itself as an infrastructure that holds equity and belonging at the center of a wide network. The Blueprint story is essential reading for other existing or prospective coordinating bodies or "tables" looking to build alignment and durable civic infrastructure across diverse organizations.

But because proper financing is so critical to developing solid infrastructure, most of the collection's lessons on this theme are for the funding community. Fulkerson lays out a systematic argument for why civic engagement funding must change, built around a history of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) that is also the story of dozens and dozens more year-round organizing and civic engagement groups across the country. It is a story of the status quo boom-and-bust funding cycle as a

form of *underdevelopment* of the civic-engagement infrastructure—and in particular infrastructure serving under-represented constituencies. We should recall that "underdevelopment" does not mean an absence of development, or just "too little" development. Rather, it refers specifically to a form of development that is lopsided in its focus, where investment flows dependably only to those metaphorical roads and tunnels that serve narrow, immediate goals.[12] The routes and byways towards more far-reaching objectives—especially those whose impact is difficult to quantify in the immediate—go largely unattended. Fulkerson's paper deftly explains how this uneven and short-sighted funding pattern not only stunts collective power building, but is also less effective for the narrower objective of mobilizing inconsistent voters.

Finally, McBride's paper points out that many of the right civic "conduits" are already up and running, but have gone under-recognized and under-leveraged relative to their potential. McBride brilliantly moves across a number of scales at which funders are overlooking the most effective institutions and messengers for engaging voters of color—from networks of religious congregations, universities, and social organizations to culture makers and young people savvy in digital media to community leaders at the grassroots. His and Fulkerson's paper together provide as clear, sharp, and timely a call to the pro-democracy funding community as we have seen in print.

This brief synopsis and set of reflections in no way captures all of the critical lessons and recommendations contained in this unique set of papers. We hope that readers will take the time to read each one, and consider how each speaks to their own respective roles in changing practices and narratives around civic engagement. There is truly no time to wait in taking the steps needed to re-found our democracy—to make it one that belongs equally to everyone in our country, and in which all and each belong.

# ENDNOTES

**1**    Bernard L. Fraga, *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

**2**    The states were Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In all three, Trump got fewer votes than President Barack Obama had in 2012. In Wisconsin, fewer total votes were cast in 2016 than in 2012. In Michigan, fewer combined votes were cast for the two major-party candidates in 2016 than in 2012, as 250,000 voters cast ballots for third-party candidates and an estimated 75,000 left the presidential portion of their ballots blank. See Joshua Clark, "What *Didn't* Happen? Breaking Down the Results of the 2016 Presidential Election," Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, University of California, Berkeley, CA, November 2017.

**3**    *Ibid.* Analyses using proprietary voter file data suggest that Black turnout rates lost ground to white rates by 6 to over 10 percentage points in five of the six states that flipped from Obama to Trump. According to these estimates, in 2016, Black turnout in Florida went down by 4.2 percentage points relative to 2012, and white turnout went up by 3.5; Black turnout in Michigan went down by 12.4 points, and white turnout went down by 2.6; Black turnout in Ohio went down by 7.5 points, and white turnout went down by 1.3; Black turnout in Pennsylvania went down by 2.1 points, and white turnout went up by 5.2; and in Wisconsin, Black turnout dropped by 12.3 points, and white turnout dipped by just 1.6 points. Bernard L. Fraga, Sean McElwee, Jesse Rhodes, and Brian F. Schaffner, "Why did Trump win? More whites—and fewer blacks—actually voted," *The Washington Post/The Monkey Cage*, May 8, 2017.

**4**    United States Election Project, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present," http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present.

**5**    Joshua Clark, "Realizing a More Inclusive Electorate: Identity, Knowledge, Mobilization," Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, University of California, Berkeley, CA, August 2018, p. 11.

**6**    United States Election Project, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present."

**7**    United States Election Project, "Voter Turnout Demographics," http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics.

**8**    The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), "New National Youth Turnout Estimate: 28% of Young People Voted in 2018," May 30, 2019, https://civicyouth.org/new-national-youth-turnout-estimate-28-of-young-people-voted-in-2018; and Nancy Thomas, Adam Gismondi, Prabhat Gautam, and David Brinker, "Democracy Counts 2018: Increased Student and Institutional Engagement," Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2019.

**9**    Turnout variance across time and place has proven stubbornly resistant to political science's favored grand theories, as discussed, for example, in André Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote?: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000. Some of the more innovative and empirically rigorous recent work on the topic calls for combining insights from across contending schools of thought. See Fraga, *The Turnout Gap*, p. 16.

**10**    On numbers' boundedness and precision as sources of authoritativeness, see for example, Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, The University of Chicago Press, 1998; and Susan Greenhalgh, "Science, Modernity, and the Making of China's One-Child Policy," *Population and Development Review* 29(2): 163-196 (2003).

**11**    john a. powell, "Bridging or Breaking?: The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit," *The Nonprofit Quarterly* 26(4): 46-50 (2020).

**12**    For a classic statement on underdevelopment, see Michael Parenti, *Against Empire*, City Lights Books, 1995, Chapter 1.

# Identity Politics
## Friend or Foe?

Alicia Garza

**THE TERM "IDENTITY POLITICS"** was first coined by Black feminist Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective in 1974. Identity politics originated from the need to reshape movements that had until then prioritized the monotony of sameness over the strategic value of difference.

The "second wave" feminist movement fought for body autonomy, pushed for women's equality and demanded that women be treated as human beings. However, much like the first wave of feminism, which was largely centered around women's suffrage and gaining the right to vote, white women became the default standard for all women.

While segregation was no longer formally the law of the land in 1974, racism and discrimination based on class was still deeply embedded in efforts to achieve change, again, because the change desired was progress for white women and not all women. Women who identified as feminists were encouraged to join together on the basis of a common experience of discrimination based on sex, with no attention paid to the fact that not all women's experiences were the same, and further, that sex was not a category that could adequately describe gender.

This is the context for the emergence of identity politics. Stated simply, identity politics is the assertion that "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."[1] The Combahee River Collective detailed how their experiences as Black women were different than those of white women, and this mattered because understanding the ways in which racial, economic, gender, and other oppressions were linked and shaped their lives helped to make sure that no one could be left behind.

The purpose of this paper is to explore "identity politics" and whether or not it is a useful tool for civic engagement and movements today. In this paper, I argue that identity politics is not only widely misunderstood, but intentionally distorted

*Recognizing oneself and one's experiences in politics is a motivating factor for participation in that which is political.*

in order to avoid acknowledging the ways in which "identity" shapes the economy, our democracy, and our society. I explore the Black feminist origins of identity politics, and explore how and why identity politics is being weaponized among progressives and conservatives—and with what consequences for increased participation by marginalized groups in mainstream politics.

Ultimately, I argue that identity politics is indeed a critical tool for organizing and civic engagement. Recognizing oneself and one's experiences in politics is a motivating factor for participation in that which is political. At a moment when America is facing some of the sharpest political polarization that it has seen in decades, anyone looking to secure the participation of marginalized groups had better start acknowledging that they're marginalized in the first place, and second, working to design policy solutions that leave no one behind.

# What We Get Wrong about Identity Politics

Leaving no one behind is ideal, and, despite the best intentions, people are always getting left behind in social movements—particularly when the differences that emerge as a result of various forms of oppression are erased or intentionally ignored.

Social change work is a series of scientific experiments. In experiments, to determine whether or not change has occurred, you have to have a control. The control in a scientific experiment is, by definition, a sample that remains the same through an experiment. The control helps you to determine whether or not change has happened. The control must remain the same or equal at all times to ensure accurate measurement of results.

In social change movements in America, the control is often based on the progress that white people are making in their lives against a white standard. In the women's movement, for example, the measure of progress is taken as whether or not change and progress is happening in the lives of white women.

It's well known that there is a lack of parity in wages between cisgender (people for whom their

reported making less than $10,000 a year, and 34 percent of Black transgender and gender non-conforming people report the same.[3]

It is significant that discussions of the gender wage gap often start off with the assumption that all women make 85 cents to every dollar men make, since that is only true for white women. Without this qualification, one might think that all women make 80 cents to each dollar a man makes. Time and time again, the experiences of white communities are used as the framework from which to understand inequality, and yet the communities experiencing inequality from a range of factors, all at the same time, are communities of color. From abortion rights to pay equity, comparing the conditions of white women to white men has been the way to assess whether or not change is actually happening and progress is being made.

Identity politics holds us accountable to ask more questions about for whom progress is being made. The significant gaps in wages for Black and Latinx women indicate that while some are making progress, others continue to lag behind.

Identity politics says that no longer should we be expected to fight against someone else's oppression without fighting against our own, too. The Combahee River Collective was concerned with how our lived experiences shape our lives, and identity politics offered social movements, like the women's movement,

**Identity politics says that no longer should we be expected to fight against someone else's oppression without fighting against our own, too.**

gender assigned at birth matches their gender identity) men and women. On average, cisgender women make 85 cents to every dollar a cisgender man makes.[2] Women of all racial and ethnic groups make less than their male counterparts, and also make less than white men. Black women make 65.3 cents to every dollar that a white man makes, and 89 cents to every dollar a Black man makes. Latinx women make 61.6 cents to every dollar that a white man makes, and 85.7 percent of what a Latinx man makes. Among Latinx transgender and gender non-conforming people, 28 percent

the gift of uncovering what had been ignored or devalued. Black women who were poor and working class wanted feminism as much as white middle-class women did. Identity politics not only showed Black women that we were worthy of feminism—worthy of being treated as human beings—but it also gave white middle class women the gift of understanding that for feminism to succeed, feminism could not pretend that the world revolves around the struggle for parity between white women and white men.

# Whiteness as the Standard

The worldview and experiences of white communities is also shaping the debate about identity politics. Racial identity is an invented series of social categories which have impacts on power and agency socially, economically, and politically. Though race is socially constructed, it has material and practical implications for the lives of those who have been assigned racial categories at the losing end of the spectrum of power. Racial categorizations that fall on the side of the spectrum that are non-white tend to lack power and agency vis-à-vis those that are on the white side of the spectrum.

Whiteness in America functions the same way that a "control" does in an experiment. In an experiment, to measure whether or not change has happened, you have to have a control—largely considered to be a standard against which change is compared. You know if change has occurred through your experiment when the entity being experimented on changes as a result of your intervention—because the control does not change.

In the social experiment called America, progress or change is determined by whether or not conditions have changed for white people and against a white standard.

Another way to look at this is not as an experiment, but instead, through the lens of what is considered "normal." If I go to the store right now and look for Band-Aids, the color will be compatible with white skin, not mine. If I look for a pair of pantyhose, it's not as likely I'll find a shade that matches my skin. And up until a year ago, it was close to impossible for women of color to find shades of foundation. In America, "nude" or "flesh-toned" means white. Again, the standard in America is what is white—what appeals to white people, what makes sense to white people, what activates and motivates white people, and so on. It's not just true at the beauty store—it's true throughout the economy, our democracy, and the rest of our society.

If whiteness is the standard, it also is the criterion used to determine whether ideas, actions, or experiences have worth, merit, or value. Whiteness attempts to determine what is valid. Too often, whiteness dismisses the experiences and worldviews of people who are not white, because the opinions, values, needs, and beliefs of people who are not white are not considered to have merit, particularly when compared to whiteness.

When the Black Lives Matter movement exploded across the world, whiteness worked to define whether or not the anger of Black people was legitimate and justified, and at the same time, whiteness attempted to redefine the movement as dangerous, aimless, misguided, and violent. Whiteness attempted to de-fang the power of Black Lives Matter as a slogan and a rallying cry with "All Lives Matter" effectively erasing any mention of race. Changing "Black Lives Matter" to "All Lives Matter" turns what was a discourse on structural racism, police, and other forms of state violence into a two-dimensional conversation where race either does or doesn't matter. Race-neutral language is a core tenet of whiteness—race, and racial oppression or racial exclusion, is made invisible on the surface while at the same time being allowed to organize the economy, democracy, and society.

Whiteness is the control and the standard because whiteness is fundamentally about power. Whiteness attempts to shape worldviews, ideas, and experiences because whiteness seeks to maintain the power it has been afforded, and subsequently affords to people who have been designated as white, for the purposes of implementing whiteness and, as such, implementing power.

The debate over identity politics is no exception to this rule.

Not everyone sees identity politics as a gift. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, a plethora of articles appeared in news outlets, slamming "liberal identity politics." Television pundits began to decry "identity politics" as the reason that Democrats lost the presidential election.

There are a number of arguments that are deployed against identity politics, and they are deployed for a number of reasons. One such argument declares that a fixation on diversity renders people incapable of seeing outside of their own experience, preventing

them from being able to build relationships with those who do not share their experiences. And, in the political realm, they argue that a focus on differences, rather than what we share in common, is a strategic mistake in elections. It is worth noting that these arguments are primarily deployed towards those who are not white.

These arguments rest on the notion that identity politics, as they define them, leave people out—and yet they fail to acknowledge that the politics of identity are not responsible for the prevalence of those identities. Identity is only important when—through no fault of your own—you are assigned an identity that promises worse life outcomes than those who are not assigned an identity that is marginalized from power.

Following the logic of contrarians of identity politics, no one should pay attention to the fact that being assigned "Black" almost guarantees that your life chances will be worse than someone who is assigned a "white" identity, because it could alienate a white person and leave them out of the conversation. Instead of addressing the fact that Black people are more likely to die in childbirth than white people, that Black people with disabilities are eight times more likely to be shot and killed by police than their white counterparts, that Black people on average are twice as likely to be poor or to be unemployed than white people, or that white households are 13 times as wealthy as Black households, critics of identity politics would prefer we not address these disparities, for fear of alienating people who are not experiencing them.

The real problem in America isn't identity politics and making difference visible—it's that those discrepancies exist in the first place.

Critics of identity politics, intentionally or unintentionally, uphold a logic of whiteness that functions in similar ways to that of the edict presented in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*—they want you to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

## Does Identity Politics Bridge or Divide?

Another fallacy from critics of identity politics is that identifying and addressing differences somehow prevent people with different histories, backgrounds, ethnicities, identities, or experiences from finding commonality.

For example, Black communities are not the only ones who suffer from the ways in which whiteness distributes power unevenly in favor of white communities. Communities who are not white are not a monolith—and communities who share an experience of marginalization or disenfranchisement can and often do come together, across their differences, to end that marginalization. But this doesn't and shouldn't mean that they leave their identities at the door. Just like Black communities experience the negative effects of entrenched white power, so do Latinx communities, Arab communities, Muslim communities, Pacific Islander communities, Asian diasporic communities, and so on.

To be clear, these communities do not just come together because they are marginalized. They come together to achieve a common goal—freedom and equality for all of us.

Critics of identity politics are correct when they caution that a focus primarily on experience can detract from building alliances or developing a plan of action. That certainly is true when identity politics isn't geared towards shifting the balance of power.

**Demanding that anyone divorce their lived experience from their participation in political action is not only dangerous, but it serves to reinforce power dynamics that are bad for the collective.**

However, critics of identity politics should be careful not to paint with such a broad brush. The Combahee River Collective wasn't a knitting circle—they were a group of Black women, many of whom identified as lesbian and poor, who pushed the movements they should have been a part of to be more effective in acknowledging the impacts of race, class, gender,

disability and more on the issues they were trying to impact, together, for the sake of the collective.

Demanding that anyone divorce their lived experience from their participation in political action is not only dangerous, but it serves to reinforce power dynamics that are bad for the collective.

What's ironic about the controversy surrounding identity politics is that few seem to take issue with the white identity politics shaping our lives. The critiques of identity politics only arise when those who are marginalized and disconnected from power assert that their experiences matter, and demand action to ensure that they can, in fact, achieve parity socially, economically, and politically with whites.

In the lead up to the 2016 Presidential election, Donald Trump ran on the slogan of "Make America Great Again." Making America great again insinuated that America was great before, leaving one to ask: "What are we trying to restore America to, and what are we trying to change it from?" Throughout the campaign, the answer became clear—America, apparently, was great before its demographics changed, before women had rights, before Black people could stand up for their rights, and so on. The America invoked by Trump was an America run and dominated by white, Christian, heterosexual men. That America was powered by blue-collar manufacturing jobs, and in that America, people of color, women, and others did not have equal rights to white men. In that America, the one that Trump and before him President Ronald Reagan idealized, it was illegal for Black people to share public accommodations with white people.

The problem that those who decried identity politics had, then, was with what identity politics did when used to empower those who lacked power—in society, in the economy, and in American democracy.

Identity politics is a threat to those who hold and wield power, because it destabilizes the control against which all else is compared. Identity politics is a threat to white power because it asserts that whiteness has shaped all of our lives in ways that do not benefit us—even those who possess that privilege. Far from being an edict of political correctness, identity politics asks us to see the world as it actually is, and more than that, it demands that we equalize the playing field.

Those who claim that identity politics is counterproductive and divisive often seek to build movements on that which they claim we all have in common, and cite economic status as an equalizer that everyone can get behind. Yet in an economy that is racialized and gendered, such notions are wishful thinking at best, and willful ignorance at worst.

## The Consequences of a False Debate

The fight over identity politics is a false one; it forces false choices and even worse, inauthentic ones. Conservative movements have identified race and gender in particular as arenas where neutrality is strategic to maintain white, heterosexual, male, cisgendered power, at the expense of everyone who does not occupy those social positions. They have identified that inequality resulting from race and gender, and other social indicators that have economic implications, is best left undiscussed, lest it be uncovered that there are people that benefit from the disenfranchisement and oppression of marginalized communities. Simultaneously, the same forces inside of liberal and progressive movements have adopted the same stance, using talking points from conservatives to justify their resistance to upending oppressions other than that resulting from economic inequality.

This, of course, has consequences for progressive movements and civic engagement efforts. A refusal to acknowledge inequities inside of a movement almost guarantees that those inequities will not be addressed in any substantive way, which guarantees that the lives of those who depend on transformative social movements the most will not change in any substantive way.

We should be concerned about this because it is, in fact, exactly the agenda that our opposition hopes to achieve—no real substantive changes in the relationships of power, or their outcomes.

# ENDNOTES

**1**    Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," reproduced in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, Rutgers University Press, 1983.

**2**    Nikki Graf, Anna Brown, and Eileen Patten, "The narrowing, but persistent, gender pay gap," Pew Research Center, March 22, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts

**3**    Jaime M. Grant, Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling, *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011. See further Mara Santilli, "What the Wage Gap Looks Like for Transgender and Gender Non-Binary People," *Brit + Co*, December 11, 2018, www.brit.co/what-the-wage-gap-looks-like-for-transgender-and-gender-non-binary-people; and Ishani Nath, "Yes, Men Get Paid More than Women…But What About Trans Women?," *Flare*, February 8, 2018, www.flare.com/news/trans-women-pay-equity.

# Racial Equity in Service to Collective Impact and Movement Building
## The Blueprint North Carolina Story

Judia Holton, Emelia Cowans-Taylor, Erin Byrd, Roxane Richir, and Ivanna Gonzalez (Blueprint NC)

## Introduction

In 2006, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, a Winston-Salem based philanthropic organization, called on several civic engagement and advocacy groups to have facilitated dialogues about progressive reform strategy. Initially referred to as the "Aqueduct Group" (named for the space where the meetings were held), participants in these dialogues continued to have conversations for more than a year before committing to move forward with something new to North Carolina: a permanent organizational infrastructure for civic engagement that didn't dissolve after each election cycle. The project was named Blueprint NC.

This paper shares the Blueprint NC origin story, organizing principles, and lessons learned from the North Carolina 2018 midterm elections. Blueprint NC was formed out of a critique of the existing civic engagement infrastructure and a need to protect families and communities that were left behind and/or excluded from participation in the processes of democracy. The experience of Blueprint NC offers a community-centered, visionary approach for civic engagement organizations elsewhere that are looking to embody racial justice as an ongoing practice—not just an ideal destination—for movement-building.

## Story of Self

Today, Blueprint NC sees itself as a movement-building incubator that provides opportunities for training, resource-sharing, and convening for partner organizations. Our partners include a network of more than 60 non-profit organizations spanning the state of North Carolina. These organizations use civic engagement and education to advocate for a healthy democracy that works to remove barriers, and to provide the resources communities need to achieve opportunity, security, and well-being. Blueprint NC insists that the larger progressive agenda that will produce better, more equitable, and healthier movements requires a commitment to combating racism and all forms of discrimination. This means critically examining the unique role race has played in shaping power, division, and white supremacist ideology in the United States. Unless the idea that white people, their ideas, culture, and actions are superior—and its operation as the status quo—is actively challenged and replaced, it will continue to manifest internally, interpersonally, institutionally, and culturally. In this struggle, Blueprint NC believes there is no neutral path.

The Blueprint NC vision has been shaped by and through history—with changing political tides, injustices, and openness to self-reflexive examination and critique of our approaches to social change at every step of our journey.

When Blueprint NC was created, Democrats had control of the North Carolina General Assembly. For organizations committed to building democratic, economic, and social inclusion and well-being, policy change seemed the simple and obvious route. "You could just go lobby; you actually didn't even need community," explains founding member and current Executive Director of Blueprint NC, Erin Dale Byrd. "If you hired a good lobbyist, that lobbyist would go and do your schmoozing, and then your bill would pass."

This approach of organizing to influence policy was active until the November 2010 election, which resulted in the Republican Party claiming a supermajority, taking control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The last time Republicans had control of both chambers of the General Assembly was during Reconstruction.

By the 2013 Legislative Session, the state of North Carolina passed some of the most conservative legislation in the nation, including fracking, mandatory drug testing for people on public assistance, attacking labor unions, and defunding

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public schools. The most notorious piece of legislation was a 56-page bill aimed at influencing elections dubbed the "Monster Law." Its blatant attacks on voter access and voting rights—which a judge ultimately ruled targeted "African Americans with almost surgical precision"[1] —prompted outrage in the form of lawsuits and protests, including Historic Thousands on Jones (HKonJ) and the Moral Monday movement led by then-president of the North Carolina NAACP, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II.

Attacks on communities of color in North Carolina—and the Black community in particular—shown as a microcosm of what was happening on the national stage, with Black people increasingly murdered with impunity by police, increased visibility of state violence, and the creation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. These circumstances were the catalyst for Blueprint's consciousness to shift from lobbying for change in Raleigh to centering base-building in communities of color and racial equity. It was a decision born of resistance to injustice: "If you build a base of support, they can't run roughshod through your community, especially if you have thousands and thousands of people to resist...or at least they can't do it quietly or easily," says Byrd. "At least make them fight for it!" This

shift represented a real transformation in the thinking, culture, and budget priorities of Blueprint NC and its partners. In 2014, Blueprint NC and other organizations in the movement started investing in base-building, first and foremost by hiring organizers instead of lobbyists.

Grounded in the principles and values described in the next section, Blueprint NC has grown through this history into the backbone of a growing network of 66 non-profit, non-partisan organizations. These groups work together across issues and racial lines to advance equity and social justice in North Carolina.

Our partnership brings together organizations with different capacities, access to resources, theories of change, and organizational goals. As a collective impact backbone organization, Blueprint NC is intentional about establishing permanent work groups, networks, and task forces driven by a critical mass of partners with a clear decision-making structure, established common agenda, and dedicated staff support. Sustainable networks created out of Blueprint NC include Raleigh PACT (Police Accountability Taskforce), NC BLOC (Black Leadership Organizing Collective), Black Women's Roundtable, the Eastern North Carolina Work Group, Redistricting Work Group, and the North Carolina 2020 Census Taskforce.

## Blueprint is YOUprint
Our Organizing Principles and Values

Progressive state tables historically have used an economies-of-scale share model. In this model, organizations that needed access to a set of tools or resources purchased them together instead of each buying their own. While financially beneficial, this model by itself was unable to connect organizations working in silos, and could not take the place of actual labor and time that is required to build cohesion. "The economies-of-scale model should be

seen as a cost-saving measure and a fine first step, but it doesn't build trust," explains Roxane Richir, Deputy Director of Civic Engagement. "It is our job to build relationships, process, and programs, and not wait for tools to do it." These insights informed the decision for Blueprint NC to adopt collective impact as an organizing principle and an intentional means of collaborative partnership.

## Collective Impact

For Blueprint NC, collective impact starts with facilitating collaboration between partners by establishing clear decision-making structures and building a common agenda through work groups. Work groups operate on basis of an egalitarian process of dialogue to set an agreed-upon vision and theory of change—a common acknowledgment of the conditions to be addressed and a shared belief of what will fix those conditions.

Another key ingredient for building collective impact is to set agreed-upon metrics of tracking success. These answer the question, "If we all agree that there is a vision, what are the mutual measurements and benchmarks we must achieve to get there?" Lastly, collective impact requires having a core group whose primary purpose is recognized as being the backbone that provides progressive infrastructure for all of the other organizations doing this collective work. Blueprint NC is that backbone.

## Racial Equity

Blueprint NC and its partners recognized that the organizing principle of collective impact alone was not enough. Our staff has always wanted to center racial equity as well, but what should that mean?

Racial equity is a practice and a muscle that affects every move an organization makes. It must live in the cells of the organization. It is all of those small shifts that help subvert the culture of white supremacy that teaches us to be detached from shared humanity. For Blueprint NC, racial equity allows us to build alliances and coalitions based on actual real relationships—not just via email. It is about dismantling the things that seek to divide us and instead exploring opportunities to work in solidarity with communities.

Blueprint NC evaluates all aspects of our work and operations through a racial equity lens. This lens has an intentional focus and analysis on dismantling structural racism and intersecting systems of oppression (classism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and beyond) through civic education, leadership development in communities of color, and active advocacy for public policies that promote equity in all its forms. Blueprint NC shapes strategy to prioritize historically under-resourced communities in alignment with our values.

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What does this lens and commitment to racial equity look like in the everyday? It looks like an active commitment to resisting white supremacy culture in hiring practices, examination of power dynamics, views on accountability, and support and trainings for partners. Blueprint's approach has been to carefully resist urgency when hiring for major internal positions, and to build networks of vendors of color. A component of racial equity is transparency about who holds power to make decisions with staff and with partners, and holding ourselves accountable. That accountability involves hearing feedback and integrating it. Blueprint NC is meeting people where they are, because their input is vital. And because living racial equity means continuous learning and reexamination, Blueprint NC provides trainings to explore how white supremacy manifests itself in new and unexpected ways in our movements.

Most importantly, how racial equity is embodied on a day-to-day basis is by honoring humanity. Blueprint NC recognizes the complexities of building authentic relationships and humanizing people and their lived experiences. This is achieved within Blueprint NC and its partners by being conscious and consistent with check-ins with people so that they feel equipped to show up in their roles. This can only happen when real relationships are prioritized, and by asking how we show up for each other acknowledging the identities, and positions of power and privilege, that we each hold as we make decisions that affect one another. Blueprint NC sees addressing hierarchy and power as a necessary grounding component of the world that we are trying to create.

## Shared Values for Aligning Our Voices

It is a Blueprint NC foundation that shared narrative helps partners working on diverse issues communicate a united front in the face of ever-emboldened and well-resourced opposition. We are committed to advancing six shared values across issues, constituencies, and geographies to leverage governing power for the benefit of the entire partnership, its members, and supporters. Our 2017 Shared Narrative Taskforce set these shared values, and shaped key narrative themes for our partnership.

**1. Equity** – The benefits and burdens of society, and where we have the opportunity to go in life, should not depend on what we look like or where we come from. Equity means embracing our differences, giving everyone what they need to be successful based on those differences, and challenging stereotypes.

**2. Community** – We share responsibility for each other and for the common good. Our strength depends on the vibrancy and cohesiveness of our diverse population.

**3. Opportunity** – We need an economy that works for everyone where the roadmap to opportunity is clear and available to all. This means making collective decisions to prioritize people over profit for the few.

**4. Security** – We should all have the tools to meet our own basic needs and the needs of our families. Without economic and social security, it is impossible to access the other rights and responsibilities society has to offer.

**5. Voice** – Our government and communities should be a reflection of the people. We should all have a say in the decisions that affect us. Our voices must be recognized at the polls and beyond – at public forums, in elected officials' offices, and in the media.

**6. Safety** – We should have the ability to shape the emotional, physical, and spiritual health and autonomy of our bodies.

## Shared Narrative 2.0 (Culture before Policy)

Most recently, the 2018 electoral cycle challenged our partnership to move and communicate in alignment like never before, as we responded to six detrimental ballot initiatives that aimed to amend the state constitution. These dense and complex policies, their misleading language on the *back* of the ballot, the tight timeline, and dirty politics posed formidable challenges to communicate about the amendments collectively.

Our partnership's commitment to speak with blunt honesty about the racialized intent and harm of the amendments is what led us to connect with Dēmos, which has been leading research on a race-class narrative.[2] Throughout the campaign seasons, By the People (our anti-amendment referendum committee) and partners experimented with implementing this narrative, which names how Black, brown, and white working-class people are being intentionally pitted against one another for the benefit of the wealthy few.

We have plans to deepen our exploration of a shared race-class narrative and to use "transformative cultural strategy" in the coming years.[3] It is clear to our team that no single tool will shift the pendulum on our public dialogue, so we are doubling down on strategies of culture and narrative toward a vision of an inclusive, anti-racist democracy—bringing the same

level of resourcing, rigor, and curiosity for learning as we do to traditional civic engagement tactics.

In 2019, our aim is to create space for partners to propose investments in their long-term capacity to sustain narrative-shifting work and/or implement experiments in culture shift strategy with the support of Blueprint staff and other partners who want to form a part of a learning community.

## 2018 Elections
## Lessons in Adaptability and Getting the Vote Out

The historic 2018 midterm elections in North Carolina brought distinct challenges for Blueprint NC and its partners, but ultimately these affirmed the principles and approach we've refined through our history. Our versatility and successes stand as a testament to years of strategic planning, experimentation and learning, intentional relationship building, and adaptability.

The obstacles we faced began with the usual challenge of activating voters in a year with no presidential, U.S. Senate, or gubernatorial campaigns, when turnout is always lower. Communities with large populations of voters of color or young voters are especially unlikely to be fully reflected in voter turnout and registration in these "off" years.

Blueprint and its partners work year round towards the goal of equalizing political representation across racial groups, engaging and educating people about what will be on the ballot and what is at stake for constituents. We know that elections are just one day, and every day until the next one should be spent equipping communities with the tools they need to become leaders and create real change. Taking seriously the goal of equal representation means that Blueprint both shapes outreach using the voter file—official electoral data—and goes beyond it by equally utilizing the knowledge, expertise, and insights of partners on the ground. We conduct experiments and testing to see which tactic works best with different

groups of people so that everyone has what they need to cast a ballot.

The turnout challenge was exacerbated in 2018 by misleading constitutional amendments on the ballot, and devastating natural disasters. Our approach was put to the test in particular by the impact of Hurricane Florence, which hit the eastern region of North Carolina less than eight weeks before Election Day. Eastern North Carolina, known as the "Black Belt," is home to the largest number of Black residents in the state. Existing poverty and environmental injustice from hog farming and contaminated water are exacerbated by such increasingly frequent disasters. As Florence approached near the end of the election season, Blueprint NC realized it had to shift gears to support thousands of people with food, water, and supplies, while partners registered voters.

Due to years of relationship and community building in the region, a network of people that trusted each other already existed. This network had existing norms and systems on how the work should happen. As a result, we were able to quickly and collaboratively move between civic engagement and recovery work. In the end, Hurricane Florence was an opportunity to raise awareness and learn how to talk about the political realities of Eastern Carolina, while simultaneously offering aid.

In the end, North Carolina saw historic numbers for voter registration and turnout in 2018. Voters defeated two of the six proposed constitutional amendments, and many hearts and minds were changed through outreach and education. Blueprint NC will continue to participate in every election cycle because it believes that voting is a part of building a robust democracy, and that a better world needs higher participation from everyone.

## Conclusion

Blueprint NC was formed from a critique of the non-profit industrial complex which existed within the infrastructure. It has grown into a movement-building incubator, and the backbone organization for a robust network of organizations across the

state. Over the years, Blueprint NC has been shaped by the lessons learned through experimentation, dreaming of the North Carolina we want to see, and placing those most directly impacted by injustice, internalized oppression, and lack of resources at the center of decision-making processes. Grounded in a shared narrative and guided by organizing principles of collective impact and racial equity, Blueprint NC and its partners are creating a vision for an inclusive anti-racist democracy.

### Tips from Blueprint

- Dismantle all the things that keep us apart.
- Invite personal transformation through the work.
- Build authentic relationships.
- Call out white supremacy.
- Be accountable.
- Dream of changes you want to see.
- Recognize the humanity and dignity of all people.

## ENDNOTES

**1**   *North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP v. McCrory*, 831 F. 3d 204 (4th Cir. 2016).

**2**   Dēmos, Race-Class Narrative Project, https://www.demos.org/race-class-narrative-project.

**3**   The Movement Strategy Center, based in California, describes transformative cultural strategy as "strategy that turns the present into the embodiment of our vision and values of love, generative power, and interdependence."

# Trusting the Leadership and Power of Latinx Communities
## Lessons from the Road

Leo Murrieta

**IN NOVEMBER 2017**, Make the Road Nevada (MRNV) launched its operations in the state by leading a mile-long march through the neighborhoods of East Las Vegas. The March started around Desert Pines High School, in some of the densest Latinx neighborhoods in the state, where both low-income and middle-income immigrant families call home. Our initial group of 200 marchers carried signs and shouted chants demanding justice for immigrants, protection for DREAMers and temporary protected status (TPS) recipients, and dignity and respect for working families. Most importantly, we encouraged members of the community to join the march and take a stand in support of immigrants and justice. With bullhorns blaring chants and a mariachi band leading the march through the neighborhoods, dozens of families came out into their front yards to find out what was going on. After seeing and hearing what we were there for, over 100 community members joined our march and we were more than 300 strong by the time we reached our destination—a block party at MRNV's offices. Two of those who joined our block party were young brothers Hector and Xavier, who saw our signs and heard our music from a hot dog stand down the street, and decided to come learn more about what MRNV was bringing to the community.

That day, Make the Road Nevada zeroed in on neighborhoods that candidate campaigns rarely do, and engaged community members used to being asked *for* something, but never to be *a part of* something—much less given a chance to lead. I serve as director of MRNV and have been a part of campaigns ranging from city council and school board elections to national campaigns advocating for comprehensive immigration reform and LGBTQ equality. Working in the civic engagement space all across the country, I have seen time and time again how campaign strategy often involves figuring out how best to pigeonhole voters of colors—especially Latinx voters—into narrow issue priorities, extracting votes without any regard for community leadership development beyond winning elections for Democrats.

This paper contributes to the Civic Engagement Narrative Change series by shining light on shortcomings of political campaign investment in Latinx communities, and showing an alternative

*if year-round civic engagement organizations were resourced even a fraction of what campaigns are, we would see impacts up and down the ballot. We might also get the kind of policy agenda that would remind low-income people across the board that government really can be made to improve their everyday lives.*

route grounded in trust, respect, and empowerment of community voices. It draws on MRNV's recent experiences to illustrate how it looks to invest in the people themselves: to cultivate not only voters, or informed voters—though that is important—but also leaders and change agents in their own right. This is a different way of approaching political participation; it is one that should call the attention of progressive

donors interested in transformative change aimed at altering the very way political power works.

I get why it is satisfying to give to an inspiring candidate with an admirable platform. But my experience tells me that most candidate campaigns underappreciate and underutilize many of the supporters and volunteers best suited to expand turnout and bring fresh ideas on behalf of those most in need of progressive change. Latinx volunteers in particular are often seen as just Spanish-language vessels for pre-set scripts on the phones and at the doors. Though many of these volunteers are ready for leadership roles, and could be powerful "validators" in their communities, campaigns do not set processes that would allow them to bring ideas and influence from the ground up. Then they wonder why communities that they only know how to talk to in one way—for example, through the issue of immigration—continue to turn out at below-average rates.

Those low turnout rates in turn mislead donors into blaming the people, when in fact it was the campaign that was deficient. But if year-round civic engagement organizations were resourced even a fraction of what campaigns are, we would see impacts up and down the ballot. We might also get the kind of policy agenda that would remind low-income people across the board that government really can be made to improve their everyday lives.

In this paper, I focus on Latinx voters because this is the group I know the best and where I see the shortcomings of the status quo approach as particularly acute. The next section lays out some of the flaws in this approach in greater detail.

## The Status Quo Approach to Latinx Voter Activation

Seemingly like clockwork, every year and a half, a crop of consultants, funders, and others who determine the course of resources appears to make far-reaching decisions about what voter engagement will look like in the coming electoral cycle.[1] One of the key calculations made early in

this process is around messaging for voter groups—usually narrowly defined by demographic labels that reduce voters to one or two aspects of their identities. The result is that groups like "white women," "middle-class whites," and first-time or young voters emerge and become the targets of sophisticated messaging efforts on a variety of issues that impact their lives.

As much as we hear that campaigns are working hard to win Latinx voters, our experience with messaging on the ground has been very different. Especially in Spanish-language media, Latinxs too often encounter messaging that suggests that all we need to know is which candidate is good or bad on the issue of immigration. When Latinx voters receive messaging in campaign commercials, literature, digital ads, or door-knocking materials, it is overwhelmingly light on policy platforms or commitments that go beyond that one issue. While other groups are treated to an array of policy proposals that dive deep into jobs, the economy, the environment, housing, women's rights, LGBTQ equality, and other hot topics, Latinxs are presumed to care about one thing only.

This shallow approach to engaging Latinx—especially Spanish-language—voters leaves them on the hook to research for themselves how candidates and campaigns feel about the many other issues that matter to their families. According to a 2018 report by the consumer research firm Nielsen, "Hispanics have a voracious appetite for relevant and authentic online content and use social media as a means of connecting with their personal and extended communities."[2] A study by the Pew Research Center supports the point that Latinxs in the U.S. rely on the internet as much as television to obtain their news.[3] This research offers evidence that campaigns eager to court the Latinx vote should get serious about how to use digital media and networks to engage Latinx voters in genuine political conversations. Latinx communities should be seen as voters who would naturally gravitate towards more content, but are instead treated as a bloc that solely cares about immigration.

I am myself an immigrant from Mexico. My family

arrived in this country—in Las Vegas to be exact—as missionaries through the Evangelical Church when I was roughly a week old. I have lived in a community of largely immigrants, and worked in the civic engagement space for over twelve years, with a significant focus on immigrants and immigration reform. I am not saying that candidates and campaigns can ignore the topic of immigration—they shouldn't. But it simply cannot be their only point of engagement with Latinx voters.

Consultants and funders would be helping themselves if they put more time and resources into understanding Latinx voters, hearing their concerns, and authentically engaging and reflecting them in outreach. As I know firsthand from Make the Road Nevada's work, Latinx voters, their families, and their communities have leadership and network potential far greater than most conventional campaigns appreciate. Developing that leadership in real and meaningful ways would be an incredibly smart investment, and would pay dividends in election and policy work now and into the future.

## Make the Road Nevada Walks the Walk

The latest in the Make the Road family of organizations, Make the Road NV (MRNV) is a dues-based membership organization that dedicates itself to building the power of Latinx, immigrant, and working families in Southern Nevada to create concrete and positive change for its members and their families. We do this by engaging our members and the community on a weekly basis through membership meetings, where we develop and work with members and member-leaders to conduct informative sessions and political education modules that build the capacity and skillset of our members so they can lead campaigns that matter to their families.

In what follows, I describe the steps MRNV took to ensure that our members were fully engaged *and empowered* in what was our first official election cycle as an organization in 2018. MRNV lived our

commitment to following our members' priorities and developing them as leaders, from the beginning to the end of our midterm work. As a member-driven community organization, we see it as our goal that our members will ultimately be the ones shaping and leading the campaigns we work on, and in the directions most crucial to them. We think that this is what all civic engagement operations could and should look like.

## Ground-Up Agenda Setting

MRNV began 2018 by assessing the needs of our membership through weekly discussions about key issues impacting their families. We began this process by putting our members into direct dialogue over a series of weeks to identify common shared priority issues. We recruited member-leaders to help facilitate these conversations, working in small groups to hold open discussions and list out problems and issues. These ultimately led to a member vote held over the course of two weeks to set legislative priorities.

Many of our members experience difficulty affording their bills and rent, and being able to take care of themselves or their children if they become sick. With these consistent themes, our members concluded that MRNV should focus on engaging the wider community on: earned sick days, raising the state's minimum wage, and tenant protections that include rent control and eviction protections. With our agenda set, our staff began the process of developing educational modules for membership meetings, ensuring that all of our members are aware of the agenda that was agreed upon as well as a strategy for pushing legislative solutions.

## Building Strategy and Agency

To achieve the agenda our members laid out, we established modules explaining the difference between tactics and strategies for our campaigns, and equipped members with the information necessary to lead campaigns rather than being told what to do by paid MRNV staff. As stated above, our focus is on building the leadership of our members

and member-leaders, so we started with the basics of campaign planning to make sure all members could be included in the process.

Our first session covered basic components of a campaign plan, discussing what our members saw as the right end result and goals to meet along the way. In addition, we worked with our members over the course of two weeks to build strategies for communications, community engagement/education, and electoral/legislative mobilization. Throughout this intensive process, we made sure that all materials were available in both English and Spanish and offered fully translated meeting spaces so that every member could participate in their native language. At the end of the process, we emerged with a strong cohort of members and member-leaders who were now fully informed about the upcoming election cycle, and how to demand that their priorities be electoral priorities for candidates up and down the ballot. This built up their capacity as political actors, and ours as a year-round, sustainable civic engagement organization

**Our organizing model intentionally includes and develops our members' skills, so that they know how to make certain their voices are heard in political discussions.**

## Field Testing and Feedback Loops

The agreed upon community engagement/education strategy put our members' messages into MRNV's ongoing canvass operation in the neighborhoods of East and North Las Vegas. However, when our canvass teams went to the doors, they discovered that the messaging developed with our members was not yielding the desired results.

We found a lot of confusion and concern about raising the state's minimum wage, because individuals were concerned that rent and other living expenses might surge if wages rose. This was not the response we had anticipated. We expected that those we were engaging would immediately support a minimum wage increase that would likely apply to them or their family.

At this point, most campaigns would turn to a consultant. But for MRNV, what we heard at the doors needed to go back to our membership, immediately. At our next meeting, we consulted across our canvass leadership and our members about the initial resistance to our campaign, and determined that we would need to reconfigure our canvass scripts. The experience reminded, or re-taught, valuable lessons:

- to always monitor community responses closely rather than switching to a sole focus on increasing outreach numbers once the agenda is set;
- to create spaces and feedback loops for people in the community (not just MRNV members) to inform our campaigns based on their understandings and needs.

## Turning Members into Leaders

Another component of the campaign plan included making our members' agenda a political/electoral issue in the midterm election cycle. This meant that our members would have to engage in elections for the first time. In order to grow the skills and knowledge of our members, our staff developed training modules about the upcoming election, with key dates, races, and potential opportunities to impact the dialogue on the campaign trail.

By March, our members were also beginning to evaluate which elections they'd like to target. So while MRNV's staff was developing education modules, we also began developing electoral modules to help our members learn about the political process for the 2018 midterms.

During meetings of our electoral education modules, our members decided to create a smaller committee to more closely analyze particular elections to determine in which races we could have a significant presence. This led to the creation of our political committee, a seven-member committee that would make decisions about priority races. MRNV

members also laid out processes for how to work as a committee that represents the membership at large, and how to communicate out the committee's work. It was an exciting process for our members because this was the first political experience for many on the committee, and it offered real, consequential experience in political leadership.

In sum, MRNV developed real-life training modules that would educate our members about the political process, involved them in the decision making-process all along the way, and also asked them to lead in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and their families on the important issues that impact their lives. Our organizing model intentionally includes and develops our members' skills, so that they know how to make certain their voices are heard in political discussions. They are encouraged to express and prioritize whatever political goals and priorities are most important to their everyday lives—not just immigration.

## Conclusion

Throughout the course of the 2018 midterm elections, MRNV's engagement became an increasingly mature and fluid political conversation in which members developed ideas and solutions through a sophisticated political lens. We were intentional about how we engaged our members throughout every step to make sure that their knowledge, skills, and roles in the work would all continue to grow. Because we took the steps to develop our members' leadership, by the end of the 2018 midterm election, our members had formed a larger ten-member political committee, weighed in on

**With candidate campaigns, the return on investment is uncertain at best, and always narrow. The real power to create long-term change lies with community organizations committed to developing real leaders from the grassroots up the ladder of leadership.**

key races, organized membership-driven canvasses and phone banks, and even hosted roundtables and in-person meetings with key political players to push them on their legislative agendas.[4] Our members were successful in getting then-candidate (now-Governor) Steve Sisolak to publicly support and endorse earned

sick days legislation,[5] raising the state's minimum wage, and addressing the growing need for affordable housing and tenants' rights. Our members even launched a successful effort to unseat an incumbent member of the Clark County School Board of Trustees, and elected one of the first Latinas to that elected body in county history.[6]

I can't help but wonder if this is part of the reason an approach to engagement like MRNV's is not embraced by candidate campaigns—and why there's such commitment to the status quo. Is there a fear of unleashing the real power of these constituencies to decide what—and who—is best for them? Some might say that it's not the job of candidates or parties to make the kind of investments in constituents' skills, leadership, and advocacy capacity that MRNV did in 2018. Maybe they're right. But if so, all the more reason progressive donors should take a long hard look at how they make *their* investments in supporting the social and political change of tomorrow. Only very rarely will transformative change—changing *power*—be on the table as a return on investments made in candidates. But with checks written to groups that grow not only votes but also *leaders*, it always will be.

With candidate campaigns, the return on investment is uncertain at best, and always narrow. The real power to create long-term change lies with community organizations committed to developing real leaders from the grassroots up the ladder of leadership.

Truly people-powered movements express the voices of those most directly impacted, and invest in their engagement, development, and aptitude for creating positive change for their families and their communities. MRNV learned very quickly that our members have a far-reaching network of individuals in their lives who pay attention when they speak about political issues. We take every opportunity to uplift their voices on social media, in the press, and at events. Latinx voters and immigrant communities are not one-dimensional. Their families

live full and diverse lives. Political campaigns should not overlook or discount their reach, their credibility within their expanded networks, or their ability to retain and operationalize complex political information.

Given the outcomes of the midterm elections in Nevada, I have to think that serious political analysts and operatives will take notice of our members' contributions. We hope they will see that Latinx voters are a constituency not to be ignored. Decision makers at all levels should engage them early and continuously if they would like to continue seeing positive results. Our members have shown that Latinx voters and Spanish-speaking communities can truly impact the political landscape of the state. Through their continued commitment pushing to pass earned sick days and the rest of their legislative agenda during 2019's legislative session, they will show that they are more than "turnout" or immigration voters.

# ENDNOTES

**1** Community organizations in some ways rely on these resources to grow infrastructure, though what is made available to them is consistently outpaced by funds sent to private consultants and paid canvassing vendors whose only goal is to win elections. But that is the topic of another paper!

**2** Nielsen, "Descubrimiento Digital: The Online Lives of Latinx Consumers," August 2018, https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2018/descubrimiento-digital-the-online-lives-of-latinx-consumers.html.

**3** Antonio Flores and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Among U.S. Latinos, the internet now rivals television as a source for news," Pew Research Center, January 11, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/11/among-u-s-latinos-the-internet-now-rivals-television-as-a-source-for-news.

**4** Michael Lyle, "Forum highlights need for paid sick leave, higher minimum wage," *Nevada Current*, September 28, 2018, https://www.nevadacurrent.com/2018/09/28/forum-highlights-need-for-paid-sick-leave-higher-minimum-wage.

**5** A video is available on Make the Road NV's facebook page at: https://www.facebook.com/MakeTheRoadNV/videos/584830891966502.

**6** Colton Lochhead and Ramona Giwargis, "Campaign 2018: Nevada voter turnout doubles 2014 showing," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, November 3, 2018, https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/nevada/campaign-2018-nevada-voter-turnout-doubles-2014-showing-1518406.

# When Boom Goes Bust
## Why Civic Engagement Funding Must Change

Bob Fulkerson

**THE PROGRESSIVE LEADERSHIP** Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) is a permanent, statewide progressive coalition founded in 1994 by 12 member groups including the Nevada AFL-CIO, Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada, Nevada Women's Lobby, and the Sierra Club. The founders shared the belief that bridging divisions of race, class, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic regions was critical to creating a cohesive force to transform democracy and create a more just and humane state. Now 25 years in, PLAN has established itself as a leader in non-partisan voter mobilization, progressive policy, base-building, and leadership development in Nevada. Not everyone remembers that the coalition nearly folded after just one year of existence, when expectations of national foundation funding didn't materialize and in-state donor funding had been maximized.

This paper tells the story of PLAN in order to illustrate a common set of challenges that permanent civic engagement groups face in navigating the always uncertain waters of financial viability. Groups like PLAN have been held back by the pattern in which voter/civic engagement funding comes in boom-and-bust cycles—strong in even years and especially presidential years, but precipitously dipping in "off" years. The story will no doubt be familiar to my colleagues in other organizations and states, even if we don't always talk about it in mixed company.

So far, PLAN has been successful; but not all organizations are so fortunate, even if they are doing critical, committed, and innovative work. Moreover, arguably *none* is able to reach its real potential—to make the most of the even-year "boom" funding

investments. This paper examines PLAN's funding history in detail, and notes what we have been able to do with the steadier funding received in recent years. It then concludes with some recommendations.

It's important to note that it's much better to have national funding, even when it is a boom-and-bust cycle, than none at all. But the pattern of single-year funding during hot election years holds groups back in many sinister ways, leading to dysfunctional planning, staff turnover, loss of momentum, and painful employment decisions that have real life consequences for paid organizers and overall state movements. Moreover, it severely diminishes the work of voter and civic engagement organizing.

## Getting Started to Change What's Possible

For the first 14 months of PLAN's existence, in-state donors, notably Nevada philanthropist Maya Miller, provided nearly 100 percent of funding—a $30,000 budget that supported 1.5 staff persons. After nearly folding, the organization received its first grant in December 1994, in the amount of $25,000, from the Rockefeller Family Fund. An additional general support grant in 1995, with continued support from in-state donors, allowed the organization to hire its first full-time organizer in Las Vegas. This made PLAN, at 2.5 FTE, the largest and only statewide progressive organization in the state. PLAN was able to establish its organizing roots in the state, conducting major events such as a massive rally with organized labor to protect workers compensation, providing organizing

assistance and building collaboration among member groups, and working to defeat anti-choice measures and make Nevada the 13th state to pass comprehensive hate crimes legislation.

In those years, Nevada was still not seen by many national organizations as a major target for expanding participation among what is now called the New American Majority. At the time of our founding, the Nevada electorate was 90 percent white, but trending toward increased populations of immigrants and communities of color. In order for PLAN to build real power, let alone remain relevant, we needed to expand our solidarity with immigrants, youth, and communities of color. But without additional funding, this would not be possible, since it required—at a minimum—hiring organizers from those communities. Our first three staff members were white.

In PLAN's first years, the concept of "year-round civic engagement" wasn't fully formed, let alone funded. We knew that going into low income and communities of color every two to four years to say "register and vote" was tokenizing and shallow. Yet that was the prevailing pattern—in a sense the only available option—as dictated by funding. How were we going to establish roots and trust in Native, Black, Latino, youth, and other largely excluded communities that were essential to building long-term power by showing up one year and disappearing the next?

We were able to raise more in-state funds, but barely enough to support one staff person, and had an extremely difficult time raising money from national foundations. This story is likely familiar to a lot of groups that seek to change what is possible in their states, and who want to stop politicians from rigging the system on behalf of big corporations and the wealthiest. That takes organizing that is smart, sustained, and well-resourced. We only had the first third of that formula.

During those early years, progressive statewide coalitions were also forming in other western states including Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, and directors from those states came together quarterly to discuss funding and organizing strategy. When Nevada emerged as a swing state by barely going for Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996 (thanks to Ross Perot's third-party challenge), Nevada hit the national funding radar and PLAN was able to attract resources from national foundations, unlike these other state coalitions who floundered without national support.

## Of Booms and Busts

The absence of multi-year funding means that grant revenue is never predictable. This makes budget planning and contingent staffing decisions sophisticated guesswork for boards, and a source of never-ending anxiety and sleeplessness for executive directors. As the work inevitably suffers, this leads to a diminishing return on investment. Instead of cultivating a deep bench of leaders and building lasting relationships, funding troughs cause us to lose local leaders whose homegrown, on-the-job experience is the secret sauce of long-term

*funding troughs cause us to lose local leaders whose homegrown, on-the-job experience is the secret sauce of long-term results in movement building—from policy gains to organizational strength.*

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For PLAN, during the boom years, we scrambled to hire organizers and canvassers. It is always a welcome change to be able to "staff up." But even in those boom years, decisions are hampered by unpredictable funding and checks that usually come in the fall, sometimes after Election Day. PLAN didn't have a full time field director until 2012, relying instead on program organizers to hire and supervise temporary canvassers and phone bankers.

Our biggest boom year to date was 2012, when we broke a million dollars in revenue for the first time. It was followed by our worst bust year ever. In 2013, we barely raised $400,000, had to lay off most of

our staff, and as a result, severely diminished our tax, economic justice, and immigrant rights organizing. We also pared down our travel budget, which really hurt because in a statewide organization whose main offices are separated by 440 miles, building cohesion by face to face meetings among leaders is key. The momentum we built in 2012 died as we lost experienced organizers, undercutting the investment from the previous boom year.

Much organizing language, such as "field," is rooted in war and military theory, so the old story about the lack of a single nail leading to the defeat of a kingdom (lost horseshoe, lost horse, lost rider, lost message, lost battle, lost kingdom) is apt here. Because we had to make such deep cuts in 2013, we lost the momentum going into 2014, where we faced one of our biggest battles in our history—to eliminate

**We've got to speak candidly with funders about the mistaken way they are investing in civic engagement organizations, or we risk them thinking it is the organizations' model that is to blame.**

big mining's special tax loopholes that had been enshrined in the state constitution since 1864. We lost our 2014 ballot initiative by less than 1 percent.

After the funding debacle of 2013 and our mining tax defeat in 2014, I went on a YOLO (You Only Live Once) fundraising trip to New York and spoke very forcefully and frankly to national funders about this harmful boom-and-bust cycle. I remember breaking down in tears at one office when I talked about what it was like losing close battles like our mining initiative, and talking to our staff about whom to lay off and which programs to cut.

The Table A shows PLAN's grant funding over the last 15 years. The peaks and troughs coincide with election/non-election years, with notable upticks during overlap of US Senate and Presidential years:

Individual donors have given consistently on even and odd years, and have increased steadily over the years to more than $150,000 in 2018. Contrast this steady, predictable funding by individual donors with temperamental financial support from foundations,

and you can see why we have invested in expanding our individual donor base.

## What Can Be Done with Reliable Funding

As the table above shows, in recent years PLAN has seen a leveling off of funding, primarily due to building stronger relationships with funders. Additionally, the value of year-round civic engagement in progressive philanthropy is slowly taking hold. National partners such as State Voices, Community Change, and People's Action, as well as the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation, are educating foundations about funding civic engagement work in off years.

The recent leveling off and more consistent funding has enabled PLAN to vastly increase our organizing and deepen our commitment to the communities in which we work. We have built the Nevada Immigrant Coalition into a cohesive force for immigrant justice with consistent staffing from immigrant leaders. We have deepened and expanded our work in Black communities and Native communities with full-time senior organizers running volunteer leadership teams. We've built internal capacity by hiring communications and development staff.

Building this capacity pays dividends for civic engagement success, and progressive politics and movement building, far beyond the initial year of funding. Hiring and retaining organizers from communities most impacted by the issues of injustice we're seeking to address—such as mass incarceration and an unfair immigration system— sustains a strong ethos and ethics of community leadership. In turn, this leads to creating community-based solutions that the "experts" and others who didn't live through the experiences of these injustices could never imagine. Additionally, our policymaking

## TABLE A
## PLAN Funding, 2003-2018

| Year | Total Grants Received | Key Races |
|------|----------------------|-----------|
| 2003 | $309,000 | |
| 2004 | $612,000 | Presidential, senate races |
| 2005 | $521,000 | |
| 2006 | $747,000 | Governor, senate races |
| 2007 | $602,000 | |
| 2008 | $945,000 | Presidential |
| 2009 | $552,000 | |
| 2010 | $735,000 | Senate, governor races |
| 2011 | $686,000 | |
| 2012 | $1,052,000 | Presidential, senate races |
| 2013 | $431,000 | |
| 2014 | $583,000 | Governor, mining tax initiative |
| 2015 | $926,000 | |
| 2016 | $903,000 | Presidential, senate races |
| 2017 | $1,085,000 | |
| 2018 | $1,453,000 ($723,000 to PLAN; $730,000 to PLAN Action) | Senate race |

bodies are replete with professionals and bereft of those with real life experiences. Sustaining community leaders builds an experience-rich bench for future runs at public office. Finally, having a dedicated development director to work with organizers and board members to create a culture that infuses fundraising with organizing is essential to building long-term capacity that supports expanded and sustained leadership development.

Still, the one consistent fact about civic engagement funding is that it is never reliable. PLAN entered 2019 with only $200,000 in foundation commitments out of a $1 million budget. As of mid-February, funders who gave us a combined $400,000 in 2018 and 2017 were non-committal about whether they would ask us for a proposal, let alone provide funding, in 2019. This shows a complete lack of respect for the field—as if we're not even supposed to ask questions of those holding the purse strings.

Other state groups are in the same boat. While foundations have a good rap about sustained funding, it's hard to name very many that have genuinely addressed and internalized the hard lessons about boom-and-bust funding cycles. If they spent a few years in this chair, building up one year and watching it evaporate the next, they'd get it.

Being open and honest with national funders about the strategic and psychological damage wreaked on state groups and leaders by their boom-and-bust cycles, single-year, and inconsistent funding, is also key. The status quo of civic engagement funding is a losing strategy. We've got to speak candidly with funders about the mistaken way they are investing in civic engagement organizations, or we risk them thinking it is the organizations' model that is to blame. They can be educated if they hear it from enough of us.

## Concluding Recommendations

Boom-and-bust funding kills the spirit and momentum of otherwise powerful civic engagement non-profit organizations. To end this and create a transformational funding model, both organizations and the funding community can employ different strategies.

For organizations, PLAN's experience recommends affiliating with national stars like Community Change and People's Action. Not only have these networks provided us funding; they have also gone to bat for us nationally and made our case at funding tables normally off limits to state groups. For years, PLAN eschewed joining with national groups for fear of losing our identity and being imposed upon by outside interests. But that never happened. State groups should become polyamorous and join national tables and coalitions to help elevate their interests.

But the most pressing changes must come from the funding community.

The silver bullet to end boom-and-bust funding and build the strongest organizations possible is multi-year funding, preferably for ten years and unrestricted. Unrestricted funding allows for groups to maximize their creativity and to think about opportunities to build sustained mobilizing power and develop leaders in ways unrealized in narrow grant restrictions. If unrestricted multi-year funding is not possible, funders could adopt a model in which they commit to give in odd years 75 or 80 percent of what is given in the previous (election) year. The predictability this would provide to organizations would be a game changer.

Foundations can also build stronger organizations by directly funding long-view and deeper leadership and professional development. This might include making opportunities like the coveted year-long Rockwood Leadership program more accessible to leaders of state groups, or expanding Western States Center's Western Institute for Leadership Development for emerging leaders.

Finally, civic engagement donor collaboratives should be supported and expanded. Here I am thinking in particular of institutions like the State Strategies Fund of the mid 1990s, and the powerful examples of the Four Freedoms Fund and the State Infrastructure Fund that continue today. Not only do these donor collaboratives provide larger grants and technical assistance on an array of critical issues from compliance to donor expansion. They are also able to leverage reduced administrative and overhead costs to get more reliable funding to the field.

As many have pointed out, such as on the blog "Non-Profit AF," conservative funders are dead serious about building long-term state power, which is why they routinely make multi-year, long-term grants. They prefer that the organizations they fund spend their time doing the real work, instead of eking out a Darwinian survival by chasing grants. Why national progressive philanthropy isn't doing the same is the most vexing and important question we must ask.

# Ending Electoral Sharecropping
## Black Legacy Institutions Win Elections

Pastor Michael McBride

**In his historic 1984 speech** at Tindley Temple Church in Philadelphia, Rev. Jesse Jackson declared, "Our defeats are characterized by the margin of despair and the fracture of our coalitions." In an effort to explain both the challenge and a way forward, Rev. Jackson invoked the well-known story of David and Goliath. He told of how David, a shepherd boy, was able to defeat the giant before him by using the wealth of tools at his disposal and within his reach: rocks, laying on the ground. By picking up these rocks, David defeated Goliath.

Our task, he continued, is to pick up our "rocks laying around" and defeat the giants of racial exclusion and economic exploitation through a massive effort to activate infrequent and low-propensity voters across the political spectrum. Particularly important were those from communities of color, colleges and universities, and poor communities.

This paper will argue why progressives need to radically re-think how investments are made in the infrastructure and expertise needed to close the razor-thin margins that characterize our defeats at the polls. For the past six years, I've been part of a talented and ambitious network of strategists, organizers, and everyday people who are Black, brown, formerly incarcerated, youth, women, men, and queer folks, all committed to activating lower-propensity voters in our country. Many of us have been part of faith-based organizing networks, political campaigns, and millennial-led organizing groups. Over the years, we experienced significant victories around criminal justice reform, voter access and re-enfranchisement, gun-violence prevention funding, and upstart political candidates who champion such issues. These victories have convinced us that if we scale our successes and learnings, we could defeat many more of the political giants our communities face daily.

Unfortunately, these lessons are not easily embraced by progressive electoral and political establishment decision-makers. For decades, the groupthink of many consultants has calcified around the near-exclusive pursuit of securing support from "white working-class" voters, at the expense of voters of color and poor people in communities across the country. Many of us in the network I mentioned have sat in meetings with philanthropy, campaigns, donors, and consultants, and attempted to lay out the roadmap for this new "Rising American Electorate." Indeed, research now confirms that the most reliable base of progressive political constituencies include Black women, young people, religious communities, and people of color.

What does not follow, despite this ample evidence, is the continuous investment needed to leverage the power, moral authority, and infrastructure of existing Black legacy institutions which serve as an institutional home of many of these voters. These Black legacy institutions include: religious congregations, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and other social and civic organizations that are trusted by these communities. Below, our lessons intend to explain how Black legacy institutions help us win elections, and why investing early and often in the infrastructure working to leverage Black legacy institutions can help us pick up our rocks and defeat the giants.

## Defining the Rocks
### Black Legacy Institutions

In retrospect, events that unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 turned many of us who are the metaphorical rocks laying on the ground on to politics in new ways. The killing of Michael Brown, and the subsequent state sanctioned terror unleashed by local and regional law enforcement agencies, sharpened our analysis, tested our tactics, and clarified who our enemies are. The subsequent uprisings intensified and accelerated our sense of urgency to imagine a more transformative way forward. In the crucible of this fire, a network of intergenerational activists, organizers, faith leaders, and everyday people emerged with a renewed commitment to fight systemic oppression by centering a radical framework of inclusion and democratic participation that would deepen our coalition efforts.

Given this network's unique situatedness in Black legacy institutions including Black churches, HBCUs, Black street organizations, and Black social clubs, we discovered lots of rocks laying around. But so too were young Black college students in St. Louis, Baltimore, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Tallahassee, and elsewhere becoming increasingly engaged. Large numbers of unemployed and underemployed youth were filling the streets demanding justice with an uncompromising voice that shook institutions to their core. Faith leaders and clergy members from Black congregations across denominations began to wrestle with our collective impact and generational divides. National organizing bodies and historic civil rights organizations had to rethink our approaches and outdated assumptions. We accepted the challenge put forward by young people who demanded our organizing work result in changes to everyday people's material conditions. We assessed how our work fueled the fragmentation of our coalitions and leaned differently into the many existing and newfound relationships which were before us. And we owned our responsibility as stewards of Black legacy institutions and sought to coalesce around a common strategy, as well as align our work, resources, and talent differently. This alignment reinforces the possibility and necessity of investing in political infrastructure, intent on leveraging the

*The benefit of building this internal capacity is that it allows these concrete skills to live within organizations and communities beyond election cycles, rather than leaving our communities when out-of-town consultants leave after each election.*

inherent power, moral authority, and infrastructure of our existing Black legacy organizations.

## Picking Up Our Rocks
### Owning the Margins

Rev. Jackson's speech powerfully recounted the numbers of votes that decided the 1980 presidential election, and contrasted them with the number of voters left unregistered to vote, or who did not turn out to vote. It was a stunning display of the margins of despair that decided too many elections. While in Ferguson, we began to test some of these ideas, particularly during the immediate midterm election cycle of 2014. We poured over voting records and began to see the low number of registered voters, the low voter turnout, and the low margins of victory and/or defeat of local elected officials. How to pick up some of these rocks and close some of the margins? The answer was clearly to go to where the people were. We quickly began to mobilize folks from churches, colleges, street organizations, and other allied groups to see if we could engage our lowest propensity voters. These voters are the ones that are not even on the lists when most candidates and campaigns put together their ground strategy. They are entirely written off, and thereby left out. But to call someone a "low-propensity" voter is about probability, and we believed that these folks' *potential* eclipsed the scores assigned to them.

With this "new and principled" math directing us, it soon became clear that the individuals unregistered and unengaged within our small to mid-size churches were indeed the votes needed to close these margins. The neighborhoods steeped in street organizations, largely unregistered and unengaged, were the votes needed to close these margins. The students in the HBCUs—away from their homes and parents, often unregistered and unengaged—represented votes needed to close these margins. Our job then became clear: we must operationalize a civic engagement program that takes seriously culture, faith, and institutional infrastructure to activate these rocks laying around.

Within Faith In Action, Andrea Marta and Risa Brown have been key catalysts in building this capacity across our civic engagement programs. Tapping into the deep pool of organizers and directly impacted leaders of color within Faith In Action's federations, their teams have been able to successfully train skilled electoral strategists, organizers, and campaign operatives across the organization's network. This has increased voter turnout especially in down-ballot races, particularly related to prosecutors and sheriffs. The benefit of building this internal capacity is that it allows these concrete skills to live within organizations and communities beyond election cycles, rather than leaving our communities when out-of-town consultants leave after each election.

Likewise, LIVE FREE and New Nation Rising's robust relationships in movement and campaign spaces, introduced us to highly skilled operatives of color who felt underused, invisibilized, and ignored by the progressive establishment. These individuals and their under-appreciated expertise helped us execute the kind of programming strategies mentioned above to activate new voters. We used traditional voter tools, as well as nontraditional tactics. For example, we utilized Voter Sabbaths and Holy Weeks of Activation as an onramp to braid our institutions together. Rather than fly in out-of-town canvassers to connect with families, we invested in neighborhood residents and directly impacted people to make the case. And the rise

in successful activations was significant. Our program also leveraged the reach and power of culture makers and influencers who shared our commitments and ends. These were tactics we felt confident would tantalize the interest and participation of our important Black institutional constituencies, because they were steeped in the culture of these legacy institutions.

While we were unable to fully realize a victory in the midterm election of 2014 in Ferguson, by 2016 and 2017, we began to see huge results in our work. In 2016, we began to put the infrastructure together for the first ever Black Church PAC, which would leverage the influencers of Black religious institutions. Thanks to the brilliance of DeJuana Thompson, the architect of Woke Vote, we built Black church-specific engagement strategies and college-specific engagement programs that helped move millions of dollars to Black-led organizations in Alabama. We were able to move more than 30 percent of Black Alabamians to the polls and help deliver a historic victory to the state of Alabama in an off-year election by electing a Democrat to the US Senate.[1]

We continue to be convinced that owning the margins only happens when we deeply invest in Black legacy institutions across election cycles so infrastructure can be continuously sustained and scaled. We learned there are an abundance of skilled operatives with the cultural competency and relational connections to connect to the spectrum of Black folks who are left unregistered and unengaged around elections and democratic participation. These skilled operatives have a more difficult time securing employment than their white counterparts. Most political strategy firms with huge budgets do not hire Black and brown political consultants, strategists, and managers during off-year elections. The result is a disrupted electoral engagement apparatus which leaves the momentum built in our base constituencies to peter out post elections.[2] These lessons and more continue to inform how and why we organize the way we do.

# Black Tide vs. Blue/White Wave

We continue to experience the insidious vestiges of racism in the electoral sector of progressive politics. Despite the growing evidence, and hard-earned victories grounded in Black voter engagement—particularly Black women—we see the groupthink of the establishment and political elites endure. Too many remain stubbornly convinced that the "blue wave" can only happen with the bulk of investment going to persuading white rural and working-class voters. Tristan Wilkerson, one of our architects and key strategists rightly says: "There can be no blue wave without a Black tide."

In spite of the robust data and research that underscores the loyal base of Black voters—largely situated in Black legacy institutions—the investment in our institutions post-elections and across electoral cycles is sparse. Steve Phillips has described in great length the "billion-dollar blunder" of 2016, in which Democratic and allied groups failed to spend early and effectively on educating and engaging Black and brown voters.[3] Below are some recommendations which could offer a radical course correction to these avoidable missteps:

## Extend Engagement Beyond Election Day

As organizers working to change the material conditions of our loved ones daily, governance matters. As a matter of fact, bad governance produces de-facto voter suppression by reinforcing the belief that elections can't really change anything. Too many of our families do not experience significant improvements in their well-being even if those for whom they vote actually win, because too few officials ultimately govern with our families in mind. Investing in legacy organizations who engage before, through, and after elections is critical because it allows us to circle back to voters and connect them to a base of civically engaged citizens who will influence governance and hold elected officials accountable.

## Amplify Issues and Not Candidates

While inspirational candidates are critical to winning elections, we must have principled issues and transformational policy agendas to match as well. We are finding in many states that the earlier a community gets clear about their policy agenda, the more voter engagement can be done, regardless of the candidate. This means we need a well-resourced army of indigenous organizers who remain in communities to help cultivate and clarify such an agenda. In many of our most engaged communities, we have created scorecards and reports that are contextualized to the cities and counties where people live. This has allowed electoral engagement to be an extension of good, solid organizing which happens 365 days a year. Such a process with the community, led by Black legacy institutions supported and resourced by organizers and strategists that have a continuous presence in these communities, is critical if we are to scale our impact and work. We cannot just parachute people and money into communities in the 11th hours for voter registration and GOTV.

## Invest Early and Often

The unfortunate reality for too many of us has been the lateness of resources to activate the most loyal base. Rather than receive the necessary investments six-to-nine months ahead of elections, we usually see a huge influx six-to-nine *weeks* before Election Day. And this investment schedule is very racialized. Large white-led consultant firms specializing in communications, data, and polling receive large sums of dollars beginning many months before an election, while mid-size Black-led groups receive paltry leftovers when it's crunch time. Often just one black organization is selected for investment—as if to check a box—while consistently many white-led organizations are chosen. This unfairly pits Black-led organizations against one another, creates a perverse incentive to compete and differentiate rather than align their programs, and further fractures our coalitions. If a more robust vision across electoral cycles existed, the work to scale this targeted outreach would be less laborious and much less transactional with our communities who largely feel progressives care more about our votes than our actual lives.

## These Rocks Can Win

Can we call for audits of state parties, philanthropic partners, and donors to assess the proportion of their investments across base constituencies of progressives? Can we reframe these investments beyond election-year strategies, and see them as mini-stimulus packages for Black legacy institutions and the communities we serve that can sustain the work past Election Day? Too often, elections create windfalls of cash for white-led firms who freeze out reputable groups on the ground. The vendors, the consultants, and the institutions that are rooted, and have credibility, in Black communities can keep the energy of civic participation alive if doing so offered a sustainable material benefit to them beyond one day every few years.

Needless to say, the commitment to invest in Black legacy institutions is not the muscle memory of progressive leaders. To do this will require a radically different way of structuring the work. But we do have a coalition that is formidable. Like David, we are facing many giants. Yet, we have many rocks laying on the ground. They are within reach. And we have shown we can win with these rocks. The question is: Will we pick them up, strategically align them, and deploy them in service of those whose backs are most against the wall?

## ENDNOTES

**1**    For only those African Americans who were registered to vote in 2017, analysis of voting records found turnout rates as high as 40 percent among registered Black men and over 48 percent among registered Black women.

**2**    For more on how the status quo approach to civic engagement funding squanders power-building gains, see Bob Fulkerson, "When Boom Goes Bust: Why Civic Engagement Funding Must Change," this volume.

**3**    Democracy in Color, "Return of the Majority: A Roadmap for Taking Back Our Country," June 2017, democracyincolor.com/update.

# Little Haiti is Fighting Climate Change
## Where Are Our Allies?

Marleine Bastien

**WHEN MOST PEOPLE IN FLORIDA** close their eyes and think of the places most affected by climate change, overwhelmingly, the image drawn in their mind's eye is one of a beach. One can hardly expect otherwise given the treatment mass media gives the topic, with most television segments on climate change using footage of tidal flooding, hurricanes battering exposed shores, and red tide leaving marine life to float lifeless unto toxic sands.

But in the dynamic neighborhood of Little Haiti, where I work, the real frontline communities of the massive climate challenge our state faces are increasingly aware that they'll be hit first and hardest by the coming crisis. Even as expensive properties facing the water are getting most of the attention for now, it's been clear for some years that the most wrenching effects of a changing climate will fall on us.

That's why over the span of several years, as a leader in the Haitian and Haitian-American communities of South Florida, I've been fighting to make sure our neighborhoods and the people who live there claim the climate fight is *their fight*. After all, when disaster hits, our communities are usually first in the line of fire, as tends to happen to under-served neighborhoods. This paper explains how climate change has been a rude awakening and a harsh reality for our communities, and why we need help so as not to have to face it alone. It argues that climate change's effects on Little Haiti and other low-income communities have largely been ignored, and calls for committed action from the great majority of those who say that they are with us in fighting climate change. Communities like those in Little Haiti have shown we can lead, but should not have to go it alone. We need our partners to step up—change cannot wait.

## Everyday Effects of Climate Change, Hiding in Plain Sight

It is a guiding principle of community empowerment that the most impacted by injustice should lead the struggle against it. While it can't always be captured in 30-second clips or social-media-friendly images, the impacts of a changing climate and rising sea levels are most pernicious and significant by far when it comes to working and immigrant communities already struggling to thrive.

There are no pictures on the 6-o'clock news showing the families displaced by climate gentrification, even though being priced out of one's home or business by speculators looking for higher ground has more of a permanent impact than, for example,

> **Communities like those in Little Haiti have shown we can lead, but should not have to go it alone. We need our partners to step up— change cannot wait.**

being temporarily displaced by a storm. The newspapers rarely talk about how extreme weather made worse by climate change is putting a strain on our community's migration pattern, or how extreme heat has been shown to worsen everyday

gun violence. Rarely do cable pundits talk about how the current immigration enforcement policies that disproportionately affect our communities put people at risk by making them scared of seeking shelter or interacting with government—even during times of natural catastrophe.

Much less are other issues tangential to a changing climate and rising seas, and that most affect the poor, ever in the public eye. I think in particular of septic tank failure, heat stroke from lack of air conditioning during extreme heat events, crop damage from salt water intrusion, and spikes in mosquito-borne pandemics, to name a few.

Yet all those realities make climate change a far bigger threat to our historically Haitian-American community in Miami than most risks facing the coast. Consider the first of the issues just mentioned: climate gentrification. A study released in April 2018 by researchers at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and Kennedy School of Government projects that climate change will rapidly accelerate gentrification in Miami-Dade County.[1] The authors write that "climate change impacts arguably make some property more or less valuable by virtue of its capacity to accommodate a certain density of human settlement and its associated infrastructure."[2] In other words, vulnerability to climate change is transforming how investors conceive and calculate some properties' value, and inverting what count as desirable and undesirable places to live.

Before long, the wealthiest in Miami will abandon coastal properties for higher ground and safety from flooding, setting their sights on neighborhoods like Little Haiti. It and other inland neighborhoods have historically been left out of development investments that would benefit our communities, and disfavored by those who can afford to live closer to the shores. But with sea rise, lower-elevation areas of the city will see the prices of their homes depreciate dramatically. Landlords will sell their properties. Wealthy developers and buyers will create fancy studios elsewhere, like those already on Little Haiti's NE 71st Street, with no affordable housing on site.

Not one inch of flooding needs to be present on our inland streets for our communities to be devastated, perhaps even wiped out, by this unrelenting dynamic.

And indeed, what I describe is already happening. Many in higher-elevation neighborhoods in Miami have already been evicted from their homes and businesses due to these sales or increased rent, leaving the lives of the poorest among us displaced and upended before the next storm even comes. And when it does, people of color and the poor will be hit twice as hard, yet again.

Perhaps the most egregious part of this reality, however, is that because it is flying under the radar and not being explicitly linked to climate change, local taxpayers are 100 percent on the hook for any costs associated with addressing the problems. With climate gentrification ignored or tabulated as yet another indistinguishable part of the affordable housing crisis our county is experiencing, we are basically tying our hands in making sure those truly responsible for these effects are held accountable. We don't even know what the true cost of this phenomenon is and have no true sense of what the toll will be due to the fact that Miami—ground zero for climate change—still does not account for the costs associated with it.

## Little Haiti's Leadership in the Climate Fight

We need state and federal resources to address our growing climate crisis. When will state and federal actors step up? In their absence, how can our communities—our taxpayers—be expected to shoulder the costs ourselves for a crisis we didn't cause?

In Little Haiti, whether or not we created the problem, we are working toward solutions. The organization that I lead, Family Action Network Movement (FANM, formerly for Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami, or Haitian Women of Miami), has decided to lead in the climate equity fights at our local, state, and national levels. We are *not* just sitting back and complaining or asking for charity. We are taking matters into our own hands and making bold steps forward.

One thing FANM is doing is leading work to build a resilient green local economy in Little Haiti. Haitians are resilient people and we will rise to establish Little Haiti as the nation's first 100 percent resilient neighborhood. What exactly does that mean? Climate resilient neighborhoods are those in which communities design, plan, and implement ways to adapt social, economic, and infrastructural systems to minimize risk and harm from climate change. Becoming truly climate resilient requires considerable public investment, as I have already emphasized. But Little Haiti is making concrete steps, leading locally. Already plans are in the works to launch a circular economy in Little Haiti through establishing a thrift bazaar mecca, a folk art bazaar mecca, a food bazaar mecca, and a green jobs program. FANM wants to lead the way to making Miami the first designated resilient city in the United States.[3] We want to do so by establishing Little Haiti as the hub of our region's circular economy.

We are inspired partly by the work we have seen our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters do in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria to come together and address the effects of climate holistically. We have supported their calls to action and rallied with leaders in that community that are demanding the economic and human horrors caused by that disaster be understand as a price exacted by a changing climate. But it cannot be only after tragedy that we come together.

**There is a glaring gap, for example, in the work of civic engagement groups nationally to draw durable connections between the global climate crisis and voting and other ways of being civically active.**

There is a glaring gap, for example, in the work of civic engagement groups nationally to draw durable connections between the global climate crisis and voting and other ways of being civically active. We know from numerous studies and polls that more and more people in our country recognize the seriousness of climate change as a global issue. At the same time, even those who say they are most concerned about the issue may not use it to evaluate candidates, or to push themselves to the polls at all. This is clearly reflected in the Haas Institute's recent survey of Floridians, which found much higher rates saying that climate change was "very or extremely serious" than saying it was "very or extremely important" to their voting choices.[4] Non-partisan organizations need to think critically about how to close this gap that mainstream environmentalism seems to be overlooking.

Family Action Network Movement understands this clearly, which is why we meet weekly with members in our community to educate them about the impact of climate change and climate gentrification on their lives. This way, come election time, they can hold candidates accountable. Haitian-Americans constitute a dynamic group of voters. We organize year-round to build educated constituents because if we wait until "election season," it is already too late! FANM needs the appropriate resources to continue leading this fight in Little Haiti.

If we are to come together and bridge our divides against a threat with broad implications, it cannot be—as we have seen in other settings—by way of convenings led by the wealthy and powerful where those on the frontlines participate in a discussion or sit at a table as less than true equals.

Where are our allies in this fight for our very survival? While FANM has always stood proudly with our nation's social justice and immigrant rights communities in their legal and moral struggles, we need them now to stand with us in this struggle for our survival as a community.

And we need the growing majority of people and civic organizations who recognize the seriousness of climate change to be engaged with its real impacts beyond the flashpoint moments that make headlines. They may not see these impacts directly in their day-to-day lives, and may not be aware of how tangible climate change is to many low-income communities. But the fight is underway in places like Little Haiti, Liberty City, and Overtown. The view from here is of far too many environmental and civic groups sitting on the sidelines.

A broad consensus has been reached across academic, scientific, non-profit, philanthropic, media, and financial sectors that climate change is threatening our safety, health and economic futures. But we need leadership. When will all these people who know the gravity of this crisis step up and join the low-income communities struggling on the frontlines?

We must fight for our communities like their very existence depends on it, frankly, because it does. We're all in this together. Let's be the change.

## ENDNOTES

**1**    Jesse M. Keenan, Thomas Hill, and Anurag Gumber, "Climate gentrification: from theory to empiricism in Miami-Dade County, Florida," *Environmental Research Letters* 13 (2018).

**2**    *Ibid.*, p. 2.

**3**    The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines resilient cities as those "that have the ability to absorb, recover and prepare for future shocks (economic, environmental, social & institutional)." Further, resilient cities "promote sustainable development, well-being and inclusive growth." OECD, "Resilient cities," http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/resilient-cities.htm, Accessed February 25, 2019.

**4**    Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society and Latino Decisions, "Nevada and Florida Baseline Surveys – Civic Engagement Narrative Change," Executive Summary, March 2019.

# Author affiliations

**Marleine Bastien** is Executive Director of Family Action Network Movement (FANM), formerly known as Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami (Haitian Women of Miami), an advocacy and social service agency located in the heart of Little Haiti, Miami, FL.

**Emelia Cowans-Taylor**, **Ivanna Gonzalez**, **Judia Holton**, and **Roxane Richir** are staff at Blueprint North Carolina, a movement-building incubator and network of non-profit, non-partisan organizations working together across issues and racial lines in North Carolina. **Erin Byrd** was formerly Executive Director of Blueprint NC, and a founder and leader of the network for more than 12 years.

**Bob Fulkerson** is co-founder of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN), where he served as Executive Director for 25 years (1994-2019). He is currently PLAN's Development Director.

**Alicia Garza** is a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Principal of Black Futures Lab, an organization dedicated to transforming Black communities into active, interdependent, responsive public partners that change the way power operates at local, state, and national levels.

**Pastor Michael McBride** is the founder and lead pastor of The Way Christian Center in Berkeley, CA. He is Director of the LIVE FREE Campaign with Faith In Action, and holds leadership roles in other organizations including New Nation Rising and Black Church PAC.

**Leo Murrieta** is Director of Make the Road NV, a non-profit organization based in Las Vegas that is dedicated to building the power of Latinx, immigrant, and working families in Nevada.

The Othering and Belonging Institute brings together researchers, community stakeholders, and policy-makers to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change.

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