

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: Building the Power to Govern

Introduction: Towards Equitable Citizenship

Increasing electoral participation has always been a goal of the progressive movement, but in recent years it has become a progressive imperative. The irregularities of the 2000 election in Florida demonstrated clearly that every vote really does matter...and that we cannot rely on our system to count every vote in a fair and equitable manner. The work to extend this fundamental lever of democracy has a clear goal: equitable citizenship. Our democracy must reflect the needs and interests of all its citizens. We must work to remove barriers to voting and we must actively encourage the exercise of electoral power by everyone.

When put in these terms, increasing civic participation seems so fundamental, mainstream, as American as the flag and “apple pie.” In reality, the work to increase electoral power for low-income communities, people of color, and immigrants is on the cutting edge of the political conflict between progressives and conservatives. Progressives are successfully raising state minimum wages through ballot initiatives. Meanwhile, conservatives are passing “common sense” laws requiring a picture ID for all voters — IDs that might be standard for the automobile-owning middle class, but are less than common for those living in the inner city or who don’t own cars.

Within the practicalities of voting — from how people register to how many workers staff their polling place to how the votes are counted — sit the fundamentals of our democracy. Addressing these fundamentals is difficult, resource-intensive, and does not result in immediate, short-term gains. It requires the nitty gritty basics of organizing: knocking on doors, standing on corners, making phone calls. It also requires advocating for policy changes that can seem mundane. Most importantly, it requires that voting be relevant to people’s lives.

That’s why the victory of the minimum wage ballot initiative in Florida in 2004 was so significant. As were the passage of the clean energy initiative in Colorado, the defeat of a measure in Montana to allow cyanide in gold and silver mining, and a new law in Washington to regulate toxic waste. These victories signaled a positive trend that extends beyond the Blue/Red divide. They are evidence that, when given a clear choice, voters are supporting progressive ideas — particularly on the environment and economic justice.

2004: Lessons Learned, Momentum Established

The aforementioned “silver lining” victories were not the only bright spots of the 2004 election cycle. There was an unprecedented level of financial support for c3 and c4 voter participation initiatives. There was also greater collaboration in the field: at the state level through the creation of coordinating committees, and nationally through the work of broad networks like National Voice, and through coordinated efforts like the Campaign for Communities (Earth Day Network, Project Voter, NAACP National Voter Fund, Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project).

The nonprofit sector applied more energy and innovation to the work of civic engagement. Many small grassroots community organizing groups got involved in electoral work for the first time — some with the support of the Center for Community Change’s Community Voting Project. Some social services organizations — including those serving Latino communities — connected voter registration and education to their core work. New groups such as Women’s Voices, Women’s Votes emerged to engage single women voters. Young voters were the target of a large-scale effort by USPIRG, and by innovative youth-led efforts such as the League of Young Voters (aka League of Pissed off Voters). Also significant was the expansion and strengthening of the work of progressive stalwarts like Project Vote, which worked with ACORN affiliates and other organizations to register over a million voters in 26 states. Many of these efforts used new technology

in their organizing efforts including GIS mapping tools, PDAs, and web-based outreach. Finally, the election protection work in 2004 was remarkable in bringing together a strong coalition of organizations and a cadre of thousands of volunteers. The cumulative impact of all these efforts was that turnout in historically under-represented communities increased by over 5 million, dramatically changing the face of the electorate¹.

2005 — Not Quite the Constant Campaign. But Some Progress

These achievements made it clear that, instead of waiting for the next presidential election, we need to maintain a “constant campaign” that engages citizens and builds electoral power in every election, whether for a municipal ballot initiative, state assembly, or U.S. Senate. But, despite stated intentions to maintain the momentum into 2005, the constant campaign approach to electoral organizing did not receive the funding and support it needed. Nevertheless, there were some electoral outcomes in 2005 that signal the evolving power of the progressive electorate:

- Antonio Villaragosa in Los Angeles pulled together a coalition of Latinos, progressives and African Americans to win the mayor’s office.
- California fought back ballot initiatives that bashed unions and required parental consent for abortions.
- Voters supported government spending programs including transportation bond issues in New York (\$2.9 billion) and Ohio (\$1.85 billion).
- Washington voters declined to roll back the state gas tax and Colorado voters agreed to forego \$3.7 billion of promised tax rebates over the next five years.
- Perhaps indicating a trend that voters who reject gay marriage can affirm employment rights, Maine voters declined to repeal a state law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Looking Forward

Whether one focuses on achieving policy gains or moving forward a vision of equitable citizenship, the opportunities for funding voter participation work are vast. Here are a few issues, priorities and principles to keep in mind in developing funding strategies:

- **Improve the capacity of progressive organizations** — both organizing groups and social service providers — to register, educate, and mobilize voters. Make sure that this capacity is long-term and not just for a single election cycle. Enable organizations to utilize new technology that facilitates organizing and better captures data. Support coordinated efforts between national and local groups.
- **Ensure that voting is meaningful** by supporting pro-active ballot initiatives, paying attention to local politics (which often has more resonance to voters), and pursuing electoral reform that improves the choices provided to voters (such as fusion voting and preference voting²).
- **Protect voting rights** by removing barriers to registration (including restoring ex-felons’ right to vote), improving election systems and policies, monitoring electronic voting, and securing re-authorization of the Voting Rights Act.
- **Engage with the changing demographics** of the country by prioritizing Latino and immigrant communities, young people, and single women voters.

In the following pages, we present funding strategies that attempt to address some of these priorities.

¹ Cited by National Voice at <http://www.nationalvoice.org/thanks.html>

² Fusion voting, which makes it possible for more than one party to combine forces and endorse the same candidate, is described by The New Majority Education Fund at www.nmef.org. Preference voting allows voters to rank a list of candidates in order of preference and allows for a majority vote without the need for a separate run-off election.

Funding Strategy One: ELECTION PROTECTION AND ELECTORAL REFORM: TO EXPAND AND PROTECT THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The 2000 election in Florida raised awareness of, and sparked outrage about, the inherent inequities and flaws of our electoral system. It also gave momentum to a broad range of initiatives to expand and protect the right to vote as steps towards the goal of equitable citizenship.

Some of these strategies are immediate — such as ensuring that Katrina survivors are not disenfranchised. Others focus on policy change — such as amending registration laws or expanding vote-by-mail. Some address the practicalities of voting — voicing concerns about electronic voting, or working closely with secretaries of state and local election officials to improve their systems and procedures. A major focus for others is legislative and policy action to protect and expand the right to vote for all citizens — such as the upcoming re-authorization of the Voting Rights Act, advocating for felon re-enfranchisement, and addressing the voting rights implications of recent immigration legislation and anti-immigrant initiatives.

Suggested Strategy:

With such a broad array of issues and strategies, prioritizing is a challenge. Two important activities rise to the top of the list:

- The long-term importance of the Voting Rights Act re-authorization raises this work to the highest priority. Not only is the outcome crucial — the provisions that are set to expire offer vital protections against voter discrimination — but the process of re-authorization also allows for valuable public dialogue around voting rights.
- Balancing the long-term imperative of the Voting Rights Act, the second piece of our suggested strategy is more immediate: election protection initiatives in 2006. This will build on the great success of the election protection coalition in 2004. The Katrina-impacted Gulf Coast is a critical regional priority for this work.

What to Look For:

- Make sure that national organizations are working collaboratively and coordinating their roles to ensure that efforts are not duplicated.
- Connections to local organizations and state-level activity, particularly in the Katrina-impacted Gulf Coast.
- Work that positions voting rights as a core progressive value, that is linked to a broader progressive vision.

Possible Organizations to Fund

NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS:

- Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights
- Leadership Council on Civil Rights
- NAACP Legal Defense Fund
- MALDEF
- National Voting Rights Institute
- National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
- (Local partners of above organizations)

NATIONAL LEGAL, POLICY AND ADVOCACY GROUPS:

- ACLU
- Demos
- Brennan Center
- People for the American Way
- (Local partners of above organizations)

Funding Strategy Two: CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE:

**TO BUILD AND EXPAND THE CAPACITY OF NONPROFIT SECTOR
TO MOBILIZE THEIR CONSTITUENCIES TO VOTE**

Voter engagement work — registering people to vote, educating them about the electoral process and the choices they can make, and then mobilizing them to vote on election day — has become an increasingly important part of the activities of nonprofits that engage in community organizing as well as those that provide social services. This field needs access to new technology for data collection and outreach. It needs technical guidance on legal issues to ensure that groups maintain their charitable status while engaging in electoral work. Large, established national groups — and smaller statewide or regional groups — need support for expanding their civic engagement activity to new communities and strengthening their existing operations.

Suggested Strategy:

This strategy has three priorities

- To support the expansion of voter engagement work integrated into the activities of the nonprofit service sector. Over the past two years, we have seen the impact of groups like the Center for Nonprofits and Voting, and the National Nonprofit Voter Engagement Initiative which are helping community service groups to integrate voter registration and education into their work.
- To support the expansion of voter engagement initiatives among smaller, local community organizing groups through the work of groups like the Center for Community Change — Community Voting Project.
- To support the ability of established national civic engagement and advocacy groups working to expand local capacity and engage local constituents.

What to Look For:

- Long-term capacity building
- Meaningful connections between national efforts and local organizing
- Coordination between large national players

Possible Organizations to Fund

NATIONAL GROUPS WORKING TO EXPAND LOCAL CAPACITY AND ENGAGE LOCAL CONSTITUENTS

- US Action
- Project Vote
- Planned Parenthood
- Center for Community Change — Community Voting Project
- Center for Nonprofits and Voting, National Nonprofit Voter Engagement Initiative

LOCAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- Western States Center
- Minnesota Council on Nonprofits
- Southwest Voters Education Project
- Liberty Vote (Los Angeles)
- MassVote

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE ON LEGAL ISSUES:

- Alliance for Justice

Funding Strategy Three

STATE STRATEGY

STATE BALLOT INITIATIVES

Ballot initiatives motivate voters and make voting seem directly relevant and meaningful. Sometimes this motivation is for the good (raising the minimum wage) and sometimes for less-than-progressive goals (restricting services for immigrants). On the pro-active side, in 2006 minimum wage initiatives will be decided in nine states. On the defensive side, progressives will be busy fighting off restrictions on abortion and defending the rights of lesbian/gay couples.

If 2004 was the year of anti-gay marriage initiatives, 2006 will be the year of TABOR (taxpayer bill of rights) initiatives. TABOR is a damaging ultra-conservative gimmick designed to remove spending decisions from the state legislature and thereby bankrupt core state expenditures like emergency services, public education, healthcare and infrastructure repair. After passing the only TABOR law in the country in 1992, last year Colorado citizens voted to suspend it in order to fund vital services.

Suggested funding strategy

- Focus support on 2006 efforts in states where there are pro-active efforts to raise the minimum wage and/or defensive efforts to fight off restrictions on abortion, defeat TABOR*, and defend the rights of lesbian/gay couples.
- Balance funding between national and state-based organizations. Fund national groups that address policy issues or provide technical support to initiative campaigns as well as those that have state-based and local affiliates engaged in electoral organizing. At the state level, directly support the actual initiative campaign committees (usually c4 work) or electoral organizing work on the ground.

Priority States

STATE	PRO-ACTIVE	DEFENSIVE
AR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase 	
AZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage ▪ Early childhood education (tobacco tax) ▪ Land conservation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ban same-sex marriage and domestic partnership benefits ▪ TABOR (taxpayer bill of rights)*
CA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase ▪ Election Day Holiday ▪ Alternative Energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Health care funding for non-citizens ▪ Invalidation of domestic partnerships ▪ Parental notification for abortion
CO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase ▪ Domestic partnership protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Restricts services for immigrants ▪ Abortion limitations
MO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TABOR
MT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TABOR
NV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TABOR
OH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Minimum wage increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TABOR
OR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sustainable timber harvesting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TABOR ▪ Abortion limits, parental notification ▪ Abolishing public sector unions

What to Look For:

- Collaborations that link across issues and communities.
- National efforts playing the appropriate role with, and connecting to, local organizations and state-level activity.
- Efforts where ballot initiative work combines a focus on both policy change and the long-term engagement of voters.

Possible Organizations to Fund

NATIONAL LEGAL, POLICY AND ADVOCACY GROUPS:

- Ballot Initiative Strategy Center
- Brennan Center
- Economic Policy Institute
- Planned Parenthood
- National Gay & Lesbian Task Force

NATIONAL ORGANIZING GROUPS:

- ACORN
- Center for Community Change
- US Action

STATE-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND CAMPAIGN COMMITTEES