

# Beyond voting: Building power in BIPOC communities

By Karundi Williams and Kavita Khandekar Chopra re:power\*

In a year like 2022, it is simply impossible to turn our attention away from the relentless attacks on our democracy and our people. While this country has never fully realized a democracy that represents us all, for the last 50 years a strategic, a well-funded, and deeply organized effort has been building to erode any progress that we have made. In just the last two years, states across our country have been systematically restricting voting rights through gerrymandered redistricting, laws targeting who can register voters, increased voter ID laws, and more. And they are not stopping there - moving swiftly to restrict [or erode] other personal freedoms like the right to protest, the right to live in our identities and love whomever we choose, and of course our right to the autonomy of our own bodies.

But let's be clear - this American democracy was never built for us. It was not built for the Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, Asian & Pacific Islander communities who have always supported but never benefited from this democracy. Still though, we fought to build power for our people and started transforming our democracy by getting the 13th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 24th and 26th amendments ratified. Despite these advancements, the cornerstones of our democracy - the rights to vote, to dissent, to be treated equally under the law - have never been equitably applied to BIPOC communities. And this battle remains central to the narratives at play in 2022 and beyond.

When things feel so bleak, it is hard for even the most politically educated of us to remain engaged in a system that does not see our humanity. But the question



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at hand for us now is not *How do we get more people to vote?* The question we must ask ourselves is *What hope can we offer our communities about the outcomes of this rigged system? How can we bring about real change for our people through civic engagement?*

## WHAT ROLE CAN PHILANTHROPY PLAY TO OVERCOME THESE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE BARRIERS?

For too long, philanthropy has been focused on civic engagement as an activity that is typically done in even-number years between May and November. Money begins to flow in with purpose - to engage as many voters as is possible to achieve the best outcomes for our communities. But this cyclical, dump-truck style funding doesn't work because it makes far too many assumptions about who is engaged, how communities will vote, how to engage different communities, and ultimately what this engagement is for.



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Part of the problem is that philanthropy is often measuring the wrong things. They're focused on voter engagement as the outcome, instead of recognizing it as the *lever* by which we see transformational change for our people. As head of the New Georgia Project Nse Ufot said recently in her panel at the Funders Committee on Civic Participation, voting is a "flex" of the power that communities have built over time. Voting is not the end.

If philanthropy is actually concerned with changing the material conditions of Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, East, South and Southeast Asian, & Pacific Islander communities - as opposed to focusing on holding and retaining power for elected officials - then the philanthropic sector must do the following:

1. Move the majority of civic engagement dollars to organizations that are led by and serve Black, Indigenous, Latiné & AAPI communities.



A Data Strategy course, one of the trainings re:power offered responding to the pivot to virtual.

2. Transform your understanding of civic engagement beyond the transaction of voting. Invest in power-building, base-building, narrative-shifting, governance, and racial justice work as a part of your civic engagement portfolio.
3. Recognize the long-arc of civic engagement and create a civic engagement strategy that is longer than the 2- or 4-year cycle. Include training, capacity-building, and pipeline strategies for the whole movement, not just elected officials, as part of this strategy.
4. In addition to your c3 grants, begin moving c4 money out of your institutions to the movement. C4 dollars are more flexible and allow organizations to do more meaningful and engaged work with our communities.

Let's break these down even further. You might be curious as to why we're calling on you to invest the majority of your civic engagement dollars to organizations that are led by People of Color - don't worry, I'll tell you. According to census projections, the United States will no longer have any one racial group in majority by 2045. In certain states, like Georgia, this transformation will happen even sooner. It is imperative that the money of philanthropy, wealth that has

been extracted from communities of color, is redistributed appropriately back to these communities.

And this money must come with the trust that has long been afforded to white leadership. Unrestricted money that allows for leaders to serve their communities best is essential. We have been surviving for decades and not only do we know what we need, we know how to achieve it. Philanthropy can support power-building and boost civic engagement by treating BIPOC-led organizations and leaders as real partners, worthy of long-term investment, and not just the trend du jour.

Believing, and I mean GENUINELY believing, that civic engagement work can move beyond being transactional, to being transformational, must be embodied in your funding strategy as well. If your strategy is just focused on voters, you overlook important community leadership, and ultimately undermine your own strategy of engaging as many people as possible. Communities of color know, and have known, that elections are just one strategy that can be used to move us toward the changes we really need to see. And that strategy hasn't achieved the results we need for decades. This lack of transformation has led to deep distrust of the electoral and civic engagement apparatus as a whole.

For us to build trust in the civic engagement system within communities of color, philanthropy must recognize the need for a multi-prong approach that incorporates large-scale and community-level narrative shifting, strong base-building that engages communities year-round, and strategies that help communities hold our leaders accountable, recognizing that elected leaders are our partners. Voter engagement campaigns aimed at mobilizing voters of color in a one-off way to elect candidates who have zero commitment to represent the interests of communities of color is not an original or effective means of winning social change. Additionally, this approach assumes that communities of color will vote a certain way and assumes we're a monolith. Political education and ongoing engagement is key in a civic engagement strategy. And, it's not enough to just invest in one organization serving a specific population, invest in numerous organizations serving the same specific populations

In addition, a robust civic engagement strategy also needs to address the deep racial injustices that have kept our communities from liberation. It is unconscionable how little funding is directed towards groups working towards racial justice and racial equity. According to a recent report from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, there remains a mismatch between the kind of support the movement is calling for and what



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fundings are supporting. Only 1.3 percent of racial equity funding and 9.1 percent of racial justice funding supported grassroots organizing. Preliminary data from 2020 also indicated that much of the increase in overall funding did not reach movement organizations led by and for communities of color.

Strong civic engagement strategies, and ones that are currently creating wins for our people, like we see out of Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan, are centering Black liberation - in recognition that Black liberation means liberation for all people. re:power made the decision several years ago to shift our focus to center the needs of BIPOC communities and leadership. And that decision has resulted in wins and real change, even as white supremacy has tightened its grip on so many of our sectors. As an organization we had the audacity to believe that BIPOC leaders, particularly women of color, needed the space to organize and advocate for themselves. Because of this many of the people we have trained delivered key wins in their communities and are poised to be leaders of the future, transforming this country, block by block, city by city.

What would it take for philanthropy to set a 10-year, maybe even a 20-year, strategy around civic engagement and fully commit their dollars to this work? This means you don't change course at year 4 when we didn't win the seats we had hoped to win. You don't arbitrarily push money around from one Latiné group to another because you think their work overlaps too much

in states like Texas that are so massive it will literally take every single organization working non-stop year-round to see any real shifts. And you recognize that movement leadership, from top to bottom, doesn't just develop on its own.

re:power knows that our movement leaders and organizations are constantly searching for highly-skilled folks to help fulfill their missions. We train people interested in running for office as well as people who want to manage campaigns and help raise money for campaigns. We train people on the basics of grassroots organizing, how to tell their stories, and how to do computer programming. We get real about data and how we can harness its power to work for our communities, instead of against. We make sure folks have a digital component to their organizing so they can reach more people, and we train newly elected leaders on how to govern effectively and stay accountable to their people. BIPOC leaders and BIPOC-led organizations invest in our communities year round. Philanthropy needs to have that same kind of energy. We need multi-year investment in organizations that train, coach, support and connect BIPOC leaders that speak up, speak out, and organize our communities.

Finally, let's get real about civic engagement dollars. c3 civic engagement work can only go so far and do so much. As I've laid out in this article, for philanthropy to fund transformational civic engagement work, they need to be willing to push beyond the c3 line. More and more philanthropic organizations are learning about ways

in which they can move c4 dollars to their grantees and this is an essential step to winning real change for our people. c4 dollars are more flexible and allow organizations to do the full breadth of their work with their communities. Organizations like Alliance for Justice have been helping foundations understand how they can move c4 funding to their grantees. And that funding needs to come *in ADDITION to* the c3 funds they are already providing, not as a replacement of those funds.

Elections are not the beginning or end of our work - they are simply a measurement of where we are as a country. And the upcoming midterms, though important, are no different.

As Amanda Gorman would say - our democracy is "not broken but simply unfinished." It is up to us to continue building this democracy and progressive philanthropy can help shift the power into the hands of Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, Asian and Pacific Islander communities to build a democracy that works for us.

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