

# The case for bold c4 funding

By Dakota Hall

It is time for philanthropy to fund the bold 501(c)(4) political activities of youth-led organizations. Youth organizers building power for their communities year-round need the sustained ability to take partisan political stances on the issues. For young people, it is often necessary to employ a mix of heightened lobbying and aggressive political activity to achieve policy wins. We are at a critical moment where we cannot leave the issue education to chance at the ballot box. This is what true victory looks like.

It is harmful when philanthropy demands huge impact with small budgets. To sustain innovative and impactful organizing work at the local level, youth-led organizations need to be well-resourced and c4 funding must increase. Currently, c4 funding moves too late and only in election years. It is no secret that funders are risk-averse and do not invest in new strategies, but we cannot even maintain the current status quo with the type and level of funding that philanthropy is currently willing to give.

For local youth-led organizations in the Alliance Network, partisan political funding enables organizations to deepen their impact, be innovative in building power for their communities, and allows youth organizers to have the conversations that need to be had in our communities year-round. These dollars are critical for accountability work, growing a pipeline of strong political champions, and how we win elections and policy change. With c4 funding, youth organizations would have the ability to hire more staff to run electoral programming, provide young leaders with paid development opportunities, create impactful digital voter guides in multiple languages, and target specific communities for legislative efforts. Funding 501(c)(4) activities allows youth organizers to make lasting structural



Dakota Hall

change in their communities and deepen youth civic participation. This isn't about political parties; it's about moving the political process closer to the people. It's about investing in a more accurate and engaged electorate by allowing the groups on the ground to have the full, robust conversations our communities deserve.

Young people delivered the election for President Biden and Democrats. In 2020, 50% of all young people under 30 voted, up from 39% in 2016 - making up 13.8% of all ballots cast. This is what happens when youth organizations are invested in far before fall semester. But we know

what happens when funding goes away from the youth movement. In 2014 - after funding for youth organizing went away and the infrastructure cracked - we saw youth voter turnout lag behind more than any other group with people under 30 making up only 7.2% of ballots cast. In 2018, no age group saw a larger surge in turnout than voters under the age of 30 - growing their ballot share to 11.4%. What changed in four years? Funders saw the errors of divestment and reinvested to rebuild some of the youth infrastructure lost. But there is still much to rebuild.

We cannot afford to go back to 2014. Young people must be at the center of any winning coalition, and not be an afterthought. Youth-led organizations must receive multiyear investments, to stop the guessing game of where money will come from, not just when fall semester starts in an election year.

The brilliance of youth organizers is always evident. In Kansas, young people at Loud Light are fighting against partisan gerrymandered maps and winning. In Cook County, young people at Chicago Votes were able to



AZ Poder



New Hampshire Youth Movement

write and pass legislation that ensured that individuals within Cook County Jail had the ability to register to vote and put polling locations within that jail. In Wisconsin, because of the dedication of young people at Leaders Igniting Transformation to fight the school-to-prison and deportation pipeline, young Black and Brown students can attend school safely in Milwaukee.

The youth movement knows how to organize people. Now, we need philanthropy to organize money to deliver bold resources to match our energy, so that together we can build power to delivery victories. Investing in youth organizations to run 501(c4) programming will allow us to have the power necessary to motivate voters, and drive unprecedented turnout in November, and far beyond. This funding must be sustained year to year and not just in major election years, to ensure young people have a voice in shaping public policy that directly impacts their lives.

The Alliance supports a growing network of the best youth electoral and issue organizing groups in the country. We are in 18 states, supporting 20 groups that have been building trust and power in the communities for years – and in some places over a decade. The combined power of our network is astounding. When an Alliance organization registers a young person to vote, those young people turn out on average at least 10+ more than 10pts higher than the state average. We are

able to achieve that because we don't stop at voter registration, we organize before and after voter registration to ensure young people's voices are heard at the ballot box. We all win when young people are organized, but it takes organized money to make that happen.

Persuasion and mobilization are important. There is no mobilization without early persuasion of young voters to participate in elections. And that requires c4 funding. Young people mobilized year-round by Leaders Igniting Transformation, MOVE Texas, and New Era Colorado were 26% more likely to vote than those who were only contacted in the final days and weeks before the 2020 election. It is local youth-led political homes organize youth daily, not just for elections, but a full spectrum of activities that combines leadership development, advocacy, and civic engagement. To produce these kinds of results, our groups need investment now, especially c4 investment, to be sustained for years to come. Not just as an afterthought in September.

But this is more than just about elections. This is about movement change. For young people's vision about their community to become reality, they must be resourced. Groups that led historic youth turnout in 2020 are struggling to raise resources to keep staff on board, invest in growing team skills, adjust program, and scale to new communities

in an environment where newly passed voter suppression laws, gerrymandering, and lack of federal action set up crippling barriers to grassroots organizing.

Young people continue to lead some of the most transformative work in our country, whether they are fighting to save our planet, demanding livable wages, or ensuring our communities are thriving, safe, and healthy. We challenge philanthropy to think bigger and bolder in how it supports groups in building long-term power, infrastructure, and sustaining year-round civic engagement organizations to get the desired outcomes we want in our communities. Investing political activity dollars in youth organizing now will aid groups in laying the groundwork for what is to come in 2024 and beyond.

*Dakota Hall is the Executive Director of Alliance for Youth Action and Alliance for Youth Organizing, a national network of local organizations that works with young people to engage in our democracy as voters, organizers, and leaders. In 2017, Dakota founded an organization named Leaders Igniting Transformation ("LIT") to help Black and Brown youth in Milwaukee achieve social, racial, and economic justice. Under Dakota's leadership, LIT successfully advocated to remove the Milwaukee Police Department from the Milwaukee Public Schools and ended the use of metal detectors on campuses and suspensions for children in elementary school.*