



Civic Engagement Narrative Change Project

ADDRESSING THE MOST PRESSING
OBSTACLES TO INCLUSIVE
DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

PROJECT AT-A-GLANCE

The **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT NARRATIVE CHANGE** project is a national effort that addresses the most pressing obstacles to inclusive democratic participation by integrating rigorous research, scientific testing, narrative development, strategic communications, and organizing. Grounded in a unique partnership of leading equity and racial- and economic-justice organizations, the project leverages its partners' expertise and networks to tackle problems of voter disaffection and racial, religious, and anti-immigrant *othering* by building strategy, narrative, and infrastructure for advancing inclusive “we” identities in civic life.

- » **Distinct digital [Get-Out-the-Vote campaigns](#)**, featuring videos tailored to youth and communities of color in Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Las Vegas, and several counties in Florida and California. The videos had a total of 490,000 views in the week before the midterms.
- » **Webinar training on relational organizing and bridging** in the “populist moment.” The webinar created a space for shared analysis and peer-to-peer learning across organizers in four states.
- » **Research to sharpen GOTV messaging.** The project designed and analyzed new research on inconsistent voters in Illinois, and extracted lessons from existing research elsewhere to meet partners' requests for evidence-based outreach recommendations.
- » **Funding support for three voter activation programs** in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Nevada. The funds supported organizations whose field operations were informed by core project goals of targeting inconsistent voters and bridging across under-represented groups.
- » **Two statewide baseline surveys** to examine attitudes and beliefs about identity, inter-group relations, the role of government, the efficacy of voting, and the upcoming 2020 census. The Nevada and Florida survey results fill knowledge gaps for partners looking to strengthen year-round civic engagement programs. Both include samples of over 1,700 respondents, and statistically reliable sub-samples of different ethnic/racial groups, young people, inconsistent voters, and residents of major metro areas.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT NARRATIVE CHANGE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

The project takes “both/and” approaches to the major debates ensnaring equity-centered civic engagement efforts today:

Strategic narrative *and* relational organizing infrastructure.

Reaching the disaffected *and* practicing bridging that connects those who have been divided.

Near-term victories *and* long-term power-building.



TRAININGS

Webinar training on relational organizing and bridging in the “populist moment.”



CONVENINGS

Held to align analysis, articulate shared goals, and set work agendas.



RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

Research to sharpen GOTV messaging.



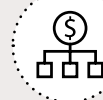
MULTIMEDIA

Distinct digital Get-Out-the-Vote campaigns targeted to communities of color in Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Las Vegas, Florida, and California.



SURVEYS

Two statewide surveys examined Nevadans’ and Floridians’ attitudes and beliefs about identity, inter-group relations, the role of government, the efficacy of voting, and the 2020 census.



RESOURCES

Funding support for three voter activation programs in Florida, Pennsylvania, and Nevada.

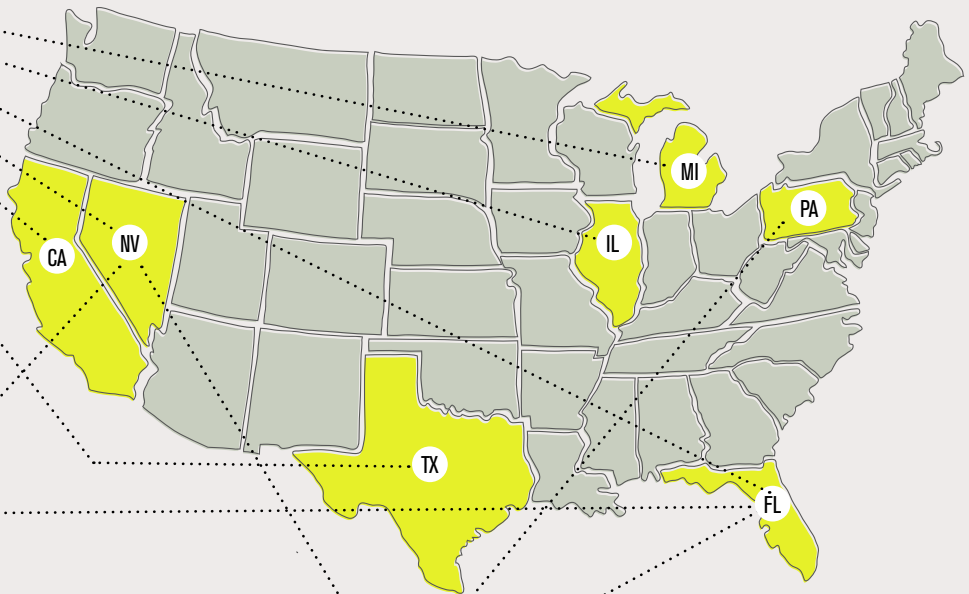




Image from the
Civic Engagement
Narrative Change
Get Out the Vote
video [“It Matters
What WE Say”](#)

THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT NARRATIVE CHANGE PROJECT HAS IDENTIFIED RISING ETHNO-NATIONALISM, EXTREME INEQUALITY, WEAKENING FAITH IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, AND CLIMATE DEVASTATION AS DEFINING FEATURES OF THIS GLOBAL HISTORICAL MOMENT.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Midway between the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterms, many equity and social justice organizations were still debating how to set priorities in voter engagement work for the coming year and beyond. Their debates centered on two great puzzles. A first concerned inconsistent voters, and the perennial problem of low and uneven participation rates in US civic institutions. Even after late-2017 elections in Virginia and Alabama saw extraordinary mobilization of groups with typically below-average turnout, many analysts continued to see the “ceiling” for participation as quite low. However unfortunate, we must accept that a large share of eligible voters—mostly low income or from communities of color—simply cannot be reached, they argued.

Where active voters were concerned, a series of studies had shown conclusively that discomfort with the country’s increasing perception of racial and cultural diversity had become much more politically resonant. Here the pressing debate concerned whether to try to change the conversation away from questions about American identity by foregrounding, for example, economic issues instead; or to focus on growing those pockets in which increasingly overt hostility towards the racial, religious, cultural, and political *other* was provoking a pro-inclusion “civility backlash.”

In this context, the **Civic Engagement Narrative Change** partnership and project arose as an effort to strengthen analysis and build alignment for advancing narrative and strategy across these broad problem areas. While taking the United States as its focal point, the project locates dynamics in the country within a global rise of ethnonationalism and authoritarianism that may share common undercurrents.

The **Civic Engagement Narrative Change** project recognizes that to address *either* low voter participation *or* demographic change anxiety in isolation from the other is not a viable path forward. The partnership is uniquely situated to tackle both. Modeled in many ways on the successful **[Blueprint for Belonging](#)** strategic narrative partnership in California, it is comprised of a multi-sectoral group of change-makers from community organizing, labor, research, arts and culture, faith institutions, philanthropy, and strategic communications.

Partners include the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Center for Community Change, Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network), More In Common, Beyond the Choir, Think Rubix, Live Free, Perception Institute, Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Tides Advocacy, among others.

CONVENINGS: BUILDING A SHARED ANALYSIS AND APPROACH

The national partnership was launched through two national convenings held in New York in March 2018, and Washington, DC in May 2018. Participants coalesced around the view that rising ethno-nationalism, extreme inequality, weakening faith in democratic institutions, and climate devastation are defining features of the global historical moment.

Against this backdrop, they agreed that racial, religious, and anti-immigrant *othering*, along with disaffection among structurally disempowered groups, were the major barriers to addressing these problems in the arena of civic engagement. Re-engaging those who have withdrawn from civic life while also building more inclusive “we” identities across demographic and movement groups were both necessary and complementary modes of overcoming them.

The group came together around an integrated set of core activities for expanding civic engagement and bridging across groups, guided by the goal of building long-term power both within and beyond election cycles.

Through its first two meetings, the national partner group developed a broad analysis of drivers of voter disaffection and mistrust, and identified gaps in conventional civic engagement strategies and

funding for counteracting them. Partners also conducted a collective scan of strengths, challenges, and needs of state civic engagement infrastructures in relation to this analysis. They brought the results of these exercises together with data on geographic areas where there was high potential to grow the electorate, and ultimately settled on the states where they would operationalize the project. The prioritized states were Florida, Michigan, and Nevada, with additional opportunities for impact in Pennsylvania, Illinois, California, and Texas.

In a third convening in Las Vegas, the national partners met with state-based organizations to discuss the challenges civic organizations confront in advancing long-term strategic goals and impact, and the keys to effective collaboration between national and state groups. The meeting was a rich exchange that helped set a model for the project’s collaborative planning process with state-based partners. That process was later applied in series of smaller agenda-setting meetings in South Florida and Detroit between the Haas Institute team and local groups.

PROJECT INTERVENTIONS IN THE 2018 ELECTORAL CYCLE

The project's partnerships across national- and state-based organizations aim for long-term infrastructure, narrative, and power building; but they also made several critical interventions in the 2018 midterm election cycle.

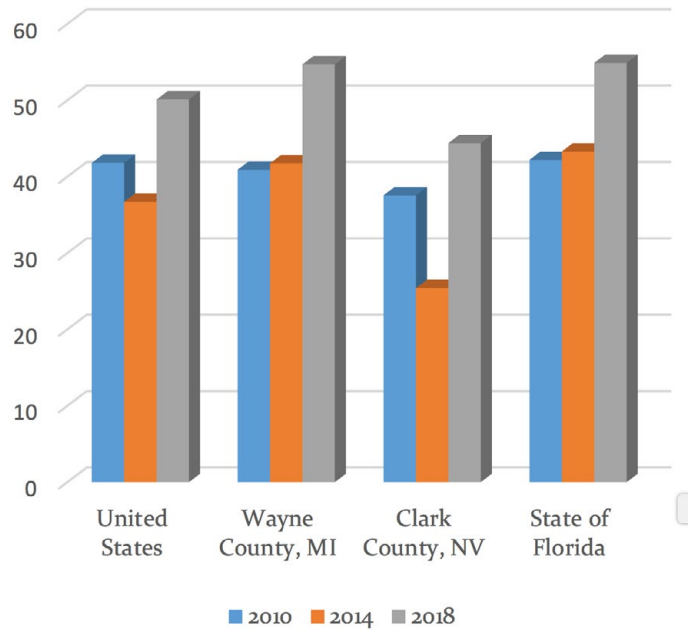
These interventions zeroed in on geographies where the project identified unusually low turnout rates in 2016, or a pattern of voter drop-off in midterms. These included the Detroit metro area, Las Vegas metro, Chicago, Houston, and several counties in Florida and California. In each of these areas there were opportunities to engage under-represented communities whose numbers are growing, or who have great potential to grow their political influence beyond current participation levels. The geographies the project targeted did in fact see dramatic turnout spikes in 2018—part of a nation-wide participation surge. The turnout rate overall for the midterms reached 50 percent, up from 36.7 percent in 2014. Turnout increased in Clark County, NV (Las Vegas) by over 18 points, and in Wayne County, MI (Detroit) by 13 points relative to 2014. Statewide turnout in Florida increased by nearly 13 points as well.

GOTV Video Content

Activating Inconsistent Voters through Local Micro-Networks

The project produced several videos to support Get-Out-the-Vote efforts for the 2018 midterms in prioritized geographies. The project's approach to the content and dissemination was

Turnout in midterm elections in priority geographies



Turnout rates for voting-eligible population

Data sources: US Census Bureau; United States Elections Project; Wayne County Clerk's Office; Nevada Secretary of State.

grounded in action items from our founding national convening:

- » Strong micro-networks, and local cultural and media influencers are under-utilized resources in efforts to reach out to under-represented groups.
- » We must better recognize and mobilize popular-culture and information-technology expertise that already exists among young people of color.

The project's most robust GOTV video campaign had the theme "Level Up!," and included [a series of videos](#) tailored for audiences in Detroit, Las Vegas, Chicago, Houston, and several cities in Florida.

The Level Up! campaign, created in collaboration with Dr. Rob “Biko” Baker of Rendertech and the Cashmere Agency, was designed to inspire and motivate young people, especially people of color, to act civically and vote regularly. The core positive message of the videos is that young people are a powerful force in the 2018 elections and beyond.

Over an eight-day campaign, the Level Up! videos were disseminated through social media, including partnerships in cross-posting and promotion by local influencers in the priority cities. This approach was particularly successful in Chicago and Houston, where the videos received several thousand additional views thanks to cross-posts by local hip-hop artists. Figure 2 lists the Level Up! videos with the most views during the week before Election Day.

A second GOTV video the project disseminated was “[#Vote4BlackFutures.](#)” This PSA, originally produced in 2016 and updated for the 2018 election cycle, uses a dynamic presentation of spoken word, music, protest footage, and beautiful black imagery to highlight issues that stand to impact the black community. The video underwent audience testing, which showed that it resonated with young African Americans, but even more with young Latinx people.

Our third and final 2018 GOTV video campaign was “[It Matters What WE Say](#)”/“[We Are California.](#)”

These videos contain a

Level Up! Campaign Views

Chicago.....	63K views
Detroit.....	34K views
Miami.....	26K views
Houston.....	26K views
Tallahassee	24K views
Las Vegas	19K views

Most viewed videos for the Level Up! campaign, Oct. 30-Nov. 6, 2018

visually stunning montage of young people in their daily lives, with a well-scripted voiceover that pours over a litany of negative attitudes expressed towards youth. Following this recitation of what “they say,” the narrator counters that “It matters what WE say,” and makes a call for young people to go to the polls.

Across the Haas Institute’s social media, these videos together were viewed a total of 490,000 times by Election Day. Furthermore, this number does not reflect all of the additional engagements—including views, shares, retweets, etc.—coming from our partners’ separate campaigns using the videos. For example, our GOTV videos were shown at a partner organization’s town hall meeting in Detroit, and pushed aggressively across several partners’ social media platforms in the days leading to the election. In 2019, we will undertake with these partners a deeper, more complete analysis of the videos’ reach.



“I SHARED THE GET OUT THE VOTE VIDEOS WITH SEVERAL OF OUR LEADERS AND THEY LOVED THEM!... VERY POWERFUL. WE GOT OVER 50,000 VIEWS—ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PSAS WE’VE PUSHED.”

- DEANGELO BESTER, WORKERS CENTER FOR RACIAL JUSTICE



WE MADE A DIFFERENCE IN HEALTH CARE, CIVIL RIGHTS,



ARE WE GON’ FACE ADVERSITY OR RUN FROM IT



BY THE PEOPLE

WE THE PEOPLE



Images from the Civic Engagement Narrative Change project’s three [Get Out the Vote](#) video campaigns.

Training Webinar

Aligning Analysis and Sharing Engagement Practices

Among the goals of Civic Engagement Narrative Change was to facilitate a strong shared analysis of the current political moment and spaces for sharing and refining approaches to tackling its biggest challenges in the field. The project sponsored a webinar training led by staff from Beyond the Choir (PA) with these goals in mind.

Titled, “Who Is the We?: Building Political Power in the Populist Moment,” the September webinar covered the history, logic, and types of populist political sentiment, and key lessons learned from community organizing in Lancaster County, PA since 2016. Participants in the training from several partner organizations asked questions and shared experiences and tips from their own work in Michigan, Florida, and California. Video of [the webinar](#) was posted to the Haas Institute’s YouTube channel and will continue to be a valuable resource in the project’s work.

Research Collaborations

Sharpening Messaging with Evidence

Civic Engagement Narrative Change began with a hypothesis that better research is needed on underlying attitudes, motivators, and concerns of inconsistent voters. The project’s state-level partners confirmed this, while adding to it another dimension. Not only did they need better research targeting the constituencies and issues of interest to our collaboration; they also need support in processing

“HAAS INSTITUTE STAFF HELPED IN EXTRACTING KNOWLEDGE FROM EXISTING RESEARCH TO INFORM THE BEST MESSAGING FOR LATINX VOTERS. HE WAS QUICK, RESPONSIVE AND INSIGHTFUL.”

- MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ, FLORIDA IMMIGRANT COALITION

and translating existing research into succinct lessons that can be applied in their programs.

The project sought to meet these immediate needs of the 2018 election cycle through three modalities:

- » **Design and analysis of new studies.**
The project designed protocols for listening sessions with inconsistent voters in Chicago, which were carried out with partners at the Workers Center for Racial Justice and ONE Northside. Three sessions were convened in September, each involving 6-10 voters and facilitated by local community leaders. The Haas Institute team analyzed recordings of the sessions, and reported key themes and conclusions to our Chicago partners. These partners directly applied lessons from the analysis to the design of GOTV video content.



» **Synthesis and translation of existing research.** The project provided support to partners who sought help sifting through and digesting existing research for their 2018 programs. In one example, at the request of the Florida Immigrant Coalition (FLIC), the Haas Institute team analyzed findings from more than a dozen 2018 polls and qualitative and quantitative studies in Florida to distill salient lessons about activation and messaging to Latinx voters into two short memos. In others, the team summarized key lessons from social science research on voter mobilization and messaging for strategic consultation with Blueprint North Carolina and MOSES (MI).

» **Peer-to-peer learning.** Relevant evidence arises not only from deliberate research, but also from experiential knowledge cultivated through practice. Recognizing this, Civic Engagement

Narrative Change created intentional spaces for practitioners from different states to learn and share their “state of the art,” air new ideas, and receive feedback. Examples include the webinar training and a workshop session with state-based groups during the national partners’ meeting in Nevada.

Funding Support for Voter Activation

As part of the Civic Engagement Narrative Change project, three local partner organizations received funding to support 2018 voter engagement work. Each of these organizations is rooted in structurally disempowered communities—in Pennsylvania, Florida, and Nevada—and committed to long-term collaboration with the project. The funding supported organizational development and non-partisan political education and voter activation informed by key project goals of targeting inconsistent voters and bridging across demographic groups.

ADVANCING INNOVATIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH BEYOND 2018

Project partners in so-called “purple” states pointed out that investment in research on the local electorate is substantial in election years, but it is also instrumental and short-sighted. Overwhelmingly, polling focuses on candidate races and what it will take to win. There is little support for exploring broader civic engagement questions about long-term movement and coalition building, expansion of the electorate, and narrative change. The project is addressing this gap with two major survey initiatives in Nevada and Florida.

Baseline Surveys

Developing effective alternative narratives of “we” requires first understanding how communities understand themselves and one another in the present. To that end, Civic Engagement Narrative Change and the polling firm Latino Decisions fielded statewide surveys in Nevada and Florida investigating attitudes and beliefs about identity, inter-group relations, the role of government, the efficacy of voting, and much more. Both surveys built on the design of the Haas Institute’s 2017 California Survey on Othering and Belonging and tailored questionnaires to local knowledge gaps and needs identified by state partners.

The surveys were fielded in the final weeks before the 2018 midterm elections. Both included total samples of over 1,700 respondents, with statistically reliable sub-sam-

ples of African American, Latinx, and white (non-Hispanic) voters. In the case of Nevada, the survey also over-sampled Asian and Pacific Islander Americans—communities that local partners said continue to be poorly understood by voter outreach efforts despite their rapid growth in the Las Vegas area. The two surveys also over-sampled young people ages 18-29 and inconsistent voters, which garner little attention in conventional voter studies.

Finally, the Nevada and Florida baseline surveys contain blocks of questions on respondents’ awareness and views on the 2020 Census—a major focus of Civic Engagement Narrative Change in the coming year. The results of these blocks will be analyzed and published by Haas Institute affiliated faculty member, and expert on public opinion, politics of race/ethnicity, and US censuses, Taeku Lee. Findings will inform strategy to help communities in the states mobilize for the census, and to push back against misinformation and census suppression efforts already underway—from dark-web white nationalists to the White House. This will be the first in a series of published products using data from the Nevada and Florida surveys.

WHAT'S BEEN MISSING: AN INTEGRATED LONG-TERM PROJECT FOR AN INCLUSIVE "WE" IN CIVIC LIFE

The first phase of the **Civic Engagement Narrative Change** project confirms the value of its core components and the need for its programmatic strengths. In particular, the unique strengths that have resonated and solidified the project's partnerships with national- and state-level civic engagement organizations include:

- » an approach committed to tackling simultaneously the pressing needs to expand civic participation and build bridges across lines of difference;
- » an analytical focus on underlying drivers of disaffection and division that moves beyond short-term fixes to long-term sustainable transformation;
- » a unique, multi-sectoral and transdisciplinary collaboration, able to integrate landscape analysis, targeted research, narrative development, strategic communications, and organizing;
- » success in facilitating dialogue and efficient coordination of resources and capacity across national- and state-level civic engagement infrastructures;
- » methods for synthesizing the best available evidence from social science and experiential knowledge into applicable lessons for refining situated outreach practices.

Each of these strengths met tangible needs among partners in 2018, and will carry the project forward into its next phase. Numerous state-based partners have attested that our collaboration improved their messaging in campaign literature and at the doors, and pushed them to see the critical import of strategic narrative to their work.

This refinement and innovation of on-the-ground strategy will continue as we analyze the data from our baseline surveys in Nevada and Florida in 2019. Partners are eager to take lessons from the results of these unique surveys, and draw on the Civic Engagement Narrative Change partners' capacity to scientifically test the new approaches they spark.

Overall, the Civic Engagement Narrative Change project's experience has shown the critical need, appetite, and desire across our partners for **"both/and"** approaches to the debates in which their work is implicated. Near-term victories **and** long-term power-building. Strategic narrative **and** relational organizing infrastructure. Reaching the disaffected **and** building bridges that connect those who have been divided. The work on the frontlines affirms that this is the route to transformative change, and achieving the "we" in civic life that includes all of us, equally.

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