

A photograph of three young people, two women and one man, looking off to the side with thoughtful expressions. They are positioned in the upper half of the page, with the title 'EXECUTIVE SUMMARY' overlaid on them in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The background is a warm, slightly desaturated image of a city street with stone steps and a railing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic engagement is important for healthy democracies and healthy communities. For communities that have been historically excluded from political processes, building power can be particularly transformative. Examining ballot initiative organizing ecosystems helps to illuminate insights that can support civic engagement and power-building. This study offers an analysis of the conditions and strategies that can both help and hinder power-building, based on three ballot initiative issues that each have the potential to improve community health outcomes:

- Affordable Housing
- Medicaid Expansion
- Criminal Justice Reform

Political activity, and civic engagement in particular, is seen as an important social determinant of health. However, studies have shown mixed results when examining how civic engagement affects health outcomes. Most relevant here is the work that suggests that social capital—the extent to which individuals are connected to others—has a positive impact on health outcomes. One hypothesis is that civic engagement has the potential to spur social capital, which is associated with better health.

Research on ballot measures tends to focus narrowly on civic engagement as voting and political knowledge. There is a rich tradition of scholarship on social movements, but this body of research often focuses on activation and mobilization that relies at least in part on non-traditional politics, such as civil disobedience. **More recently, scholars have begun to explore how civic engagement around ballot initiatives can build power and be a catalyst for transformational organizing.** We build on their work to deepen our collective understanding of the strategies, contexts, and connections that shape civic engagement and power-building.

The objectives of this project are to understand and map the layers and levels of support for ballot-centered power-building ecosystems and to help philanthropy gain a clear picture of how ballot initiatives drive community members to get involved in civic engagement. By focusing on power-building ecosystems that underpin ballot-oriented civic engagement, with a particular focus on low-income constituents, women, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, we help to round out our understandings of the roles of race, class, and gender in building power.

With this goal, we let the following questions guide our research:

ONE

What role do ballot initiatives play in building power and driving local, multi-faceted civic engagement activities that develop leaders and galvanize voters, especially women, low-income constituents, and BIPOC communities?

TWO

What do the maps of power-building ecosystems look like? What are their dynamics and how does this shape power-building?

THREE

What contextual factors constrain or enable ballot-centered civic engagement and power-building?

METHODS

To answer these questions, we examined six ballot initiative campaigns as case studies. We deliberately chose places with points of convergence and divergence with regards to demographics, historical and socio-cultural context, politics, and organizing infrastructure to examine the varied paths to power-building. We focused on three distinct issues in three unique regional sites: criminal justice reform in the South: Florida and Louisiana; affordable housing in the West: Portland, Oregon and Oakland, California; and Medicaid expansion in the Great Plains Region: Montana and Nebraska. All of the campaigns took place during the 2018 midterm elections.

In an effort to better understand how and under what conditions ballot initiative campaigns build power, we reviewed the literature and conducted interviews with organizers, elected officials, community members who were activated through the campaigns, consultants, and funders. Once we had identified the main themes, we returned to key respondents and advisors to confirm that our analysis and recommendations are aligned.

FINDINGS

Ballot initiatives can be a tool for power-building.


Ballot initiatives can be used as a tool to build power or signal how much power organizations have, when situated within a thoughtful long-term strategy. In this study, our metrics to measure power included whether campaigns activated new people, expanded the electorate, facilitated new organizing relationships, established new relationships with funders, attracted new audiences, shifted who holds decision-making power, adopted new frameworks to explain issues, employed new organizing strategies or tactics, brought civic engagement knowledge and skills to new groups, or respected community knowledge, autonomy, and accountability.

Campaigns that centered people who were directly impacted built more power.

Louisiana and Florida's campaigns to require unanimous jury verdicts and re-enfranchise people with prior felony convictions were led by people directly impacted by the issues. Their leadership ensured that others closest to the issues were also centered; subsequently, they built more power and had the most monumental wins.

Political conditions and ecosystems inform campaign structure and outcomes.

The campaigns we focused on grew out of different sets of conditions and organizing ecosystems, ranging from weak to robust, with a variety of demographics, ballot initiative laws and requirements, and types of infrastructure. Each of these characteristics informed campaign strategies, tactics, challenges, and opportunities, and influenced how civic engagement unfolded.



Prioritizing short-term wins over transformative change weakens power.

Organizers in almost every state shared frustrations with funders and consultants' desire to win specific campaigns overshadowing long-term goals. We often heard stories about decision-makers perpetuating harmful narratives and justifying their choices behind the rhetoric that it was necessary to win. The call to prioritize long-term goals that ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect rang out across state lines.

Outside consultants often amplify power imbalances and create challenging organizing conditions.

Issues with outside consultants was the third-most common challenge that respondents raised. Local organizers described how they were underestimated and overlooked by out-of-state consultants, and many people advocated for hiring locally for campaigns since residents are more likely to be invested in the issues and keep resources and knowledge in their communities.

Effective organizing strategies include an intersectional analysis.

Race played an important role in many of these campaigns, either as an explicit part of the strategy or as a blind spot that led to fractures and missteps along the way. Black women carried the work in many places and developed powerful, innovative strategies. Race was also central to decisions about messaging—either in framing the issue as being about racial justice or combatting white supremacy, or being purposefully left out or minimized in colorblind narratives meant to appeal to white voters. Racism among communities and consultant leadership was a challenge organizers faced in most states, while multi-racial leadership helped to broaden the spectrum of support.

Ballot initiative campaigns generally have short timelines that require fast action.

Lack of time was an issue in every state, even Louisiana where the fight to repeal the non-unanimous jury law has been underway for decades. Many of the case studies we share here consisted of long fights that culminated in short, rushed campaigns due to late approvals from the legislature; time-consuming, expensive qualification processes; and funders being slow to invest in civic engagement work.

Tailored micro-targeting can be more effective than blanket messaging that appeals to white swing voters.

Many of the campaigns tailored their messaging and used micro-targeting to appeal to different populations. Our case studies demonstrate how taking this approach can be more effective than putting out messaging that appeals only to white swing voters, both in terms of building power and winning campaigns.

Reaching beyond likely allies helps win campaigns.

The criminal justice reform campaigns in the South made connections with unlikely allies and thus were able to reach a broader audience. Conversely, Oregon and Montana's campaigns largely failed to form alliances with BIPOC organizations and thus created less community power.



This research offers both an overview of the landscape as well as a systematic analysis of activities that inspire communities to become civically engaged. Our approach centers power-building efforts, which have significant implications for health outcomes. Civic engagement, stable housing, access to healthcare, the right to vote, and freedom from incarceration are all important social determinants of health. As such, each case study offers an investigation into the nexus of two social dimensions of health. Power-building ecosystems, as well as the strategies and tactics used in ballot initiatives campaigns, offer a unique lens through which to examine civic engagement. Ballot initiatives are also of interest because they can reveal which issues are most salient for community members, what conditions facilitate ongoing civic engagement, and how to develop new community leaders.

To fully understand how and why communities choose to pursue social change through ballot initiatives, we must understand the ecosystems where the ballot initiatives develop.

