policy ignored the will of thousands of Las Crucens, bent the interpretation of the city’s own charter, and shut citizens out of the democratic process. It really confirmed how out of touch the elected leadership had become from the interests of Las Crucens.

This is why we at PICO and CAFé were thrilled when Kasandra decided to run for City Council. One of the added values of integrated voter engagement is that it creates a pipeline for leaders who reflect the experience and diversity of our communities to seek elected office. At PICO, we are committed to dismantling structural barriers that exclude women, people of color and young people from seeking and winning public office. In our research studies, including our efforts to assess volunteer leadership in Let My People Vote, we found strong indications that women of color are drivers of increased voter turnout and increased volunteer mobilization. These findings make clear that the leadership of women, and particularly women of color, deserves focused investment and research in future cycles.

Kasandra won her election, and entered her new role on the City Council grounded by her past experience in organizing and bolstered by CAFé’s values of accountability to the Las Crucens who work hard and want a city that works for them.

One of the most valuable outcomes of organizing-based IVE programs is that they increase their participants’ sense of personal agency by developing leadership skills and political efficacy. We’ve found that feelings of personal power and impact explained increased civic participation more than the demographic indicators like race or education most often used to explain gaps in civic engagement. The way that Kasandra’s leadership developed through the minimum wage campaign and her subsequent decision to run for City Council presents a vivid example.

BUILDING A FUTURE

Because integrated voter engagement is an alternative to a typically transactional and commercialized voting industry, our volunteer-based infrastructure ensures that people make meaning of democracy through relationships and not mass communications.

This long-lasting model allows us to build real independent political power to govern. Today, tens of millions of people are sitting on the sidelines of democracy, ignored by traditional voter engagement programs. Campaigns and candidates aren’t speaking to the kitchen-table economic and racial pressures these people experience. Many are not registered to vote. When they are turned off from voting, there are profound consequences for our country. As Let My People Vote in IndyCAN and CAFé show, this is not inevitable. Instead, we can transform our country when we give those with the least power and agency the resources to hold elected officials accountable – and to join the political process on their own terms.

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Notes
