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How Integrated Voter Engagement Builds Power and Changes Policy

By Kristee Paschall

With a collective membership of more than one million families working through 54 local federations, PICO National Network is the nation's largest network of faith-based community organizations. A growing majority of the communities we organize are predominantly communities of color, and our clergy and grassroots leaders have strong representation from African American, Latino, white, Asian Pacific Islander and other ethnic groups. As part of the larger social justice movement, PICO is bringing thousands of new people of faith into political life to make fundamental changes in our economy and society.

As Pastor Kenneth Sullivan of New Direction Church, a member of PICO's IndycAN, said:

"People are tired of this polarizing political climate. Inspired by Pope

Francis' call to end a 'throwaway culture,' we made a conscious choice to make [the 2014 mid-term elections] about reaching out to those who feel most overlooked in our society and to working families typically ignored by partisan politics to say, 'Your lives matter. Your vote matters.'"

PICO'S HISTORY OF INTEGRATED VOTER ENGAGEMENT

In 2012, PICO embraced Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE), a year-round program that connects voter engagement to issue-based organizing to build power, sustainability and impact over multiple election cycles. By contrast, traditional electoral programs are seasonal operations that leave no infrastructure behind.

To maximize both our impact and learning, we made a commitment in



Photo courtesy of Kristee Paschall.

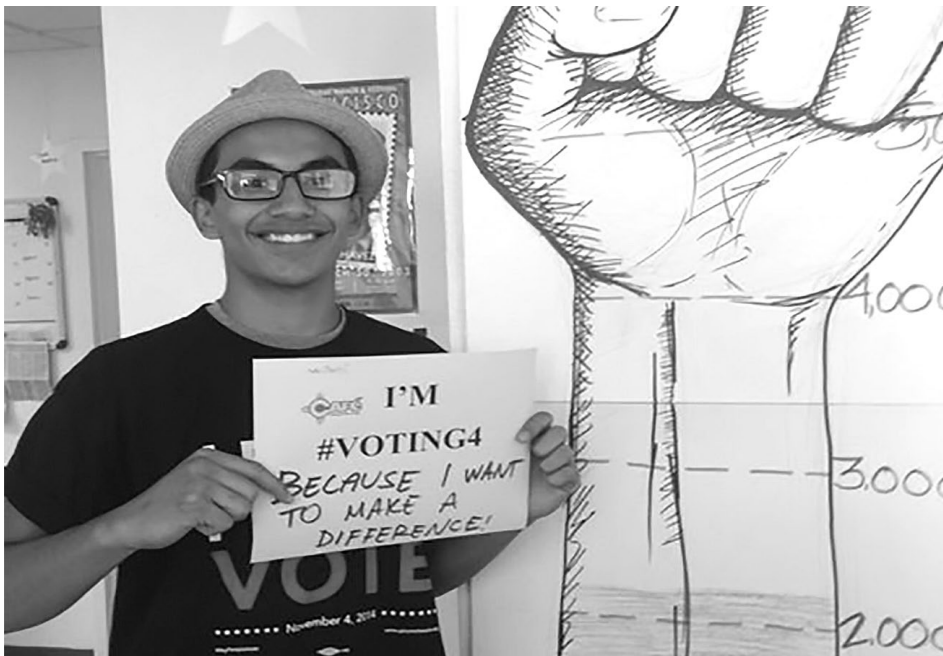


Photo courtesy of Kristee Paschall.

2014 to launch a research program to study our voter engagement work.¹ Consistent with PICO's DNA as a learning organization, our goal was to improve over time and contribute new knowledge to the field of IVE for both organizing and voter engagement. To support our research, we convened a team of experts from the Analyst Institute, Dr. Hahrie Han from University of California at Santa Barbara and Dr. Paul Speer from Vanderbilt University.

We believe the real return on investment for IVE programs extends far beyond election day. PICO's research seeks to broaden the metrics our movement uses to assess voter mobilization programs and identify metrics that capture not only whether people turn out to vote, but also the extent to which they become full participants in our democracy. In other words: Does the way we invite people to participate in our democracy move them to reconsider their role in it? We aspire to measure:

- The impact of organizing on voters' and volunteers' sense of agency and political efficacy.

- Our collective capacity to organize across race, gender and other differences.
- Our ability to translate the power built during elections into far-reaching policy change.

During the 2014 midterms, PICO led the largest nonpartisan volunteer-driven direct voter contact program in the country. While overall the midterms suffered from a low level of public interest, it marked a new chapter in PICO's Let My People Vote (LMPV) program. LMPV is a hybrid of IVE, leadership development and issue-based organizing designed to empower thousands of volunteers to effect change in their communities.

LMPV has been most successful in places where ballot initiatives created the possibility for concrete and positive change or where the organization did an exceptional job framing the election around an issue platform. Two of our federations participating in LMPV programs, Indiana's Indianapolis Congregation Action Network (IndyCAN) and New Mexico's Comunidades En Acción

Y De Fé (CAFé), demonstrate the enduring power of IVE programs that integrate issues and elections. Not only do they impact election turnout, they also secure policy victories and develop powerful constituencies.

BUILDING POWER FOR CHANGE IN INDIANA

IndyCAN amplified its influence by building a new bloc of faith voters often marginalized by traditional "get out the vote" efforts. Now that we are several cycles into IndyCAN's program, we see a growing IndyCAN constituency aligned around a set of issue platforms that are not only building powerful organizing campaigns, but also are having a ripple effect on the local elected leadership. This is especially clear in their work around criminal justice reform, a huge issue in the state with the nation's fifth-highest incarceration rate.

Leading up to the 2014 midterm elections, IndyCAN talked to thousands of voters through their "Redemption Voter" program, infusing each conversation with clarity about their issue platform to elevate jobs and treatment over incarceration. Volunteers garnered more than 15,000 pledges to vote, building a new cross-racial alliance to end criminalization and mass incarceration of people of color, expand good jobs and keep families united. This included talking with more than 5,000 unlikely voters, predominantly low-income people and people of color, who, based on these shared values, pledged to vote in both 2014 and 2016.

Furthermore, under the banner of its Opportunity for All Platform, IndyCAN brings together people of color and white people of faith who have a different vision for Indiana than the prison pipeline status quo. When Indianapolis announced plans for a new \$1.75 billion criminal justice center in

the summer of 2014, residents feared it would only intensify the rampant criminalization of generations of African Americans and Latinos. Fueled by their own experiences of families torn apart by the misuse of jails, IndyCAN's leadership base of formerly incarcerated people and people of faith organized to successfully stop construction of the facility.²

IndyCAN's campaign brought together an unparalleled coalition of business, government and community leaders that convinced the Indianapolis City Council to stop the project from advancing and commit to criminal justice reform strategies such as transitional jobs and community-based services. Following the victory, IndyCAN clergy and community leaders reached out to 4,925 voters to understand how the racialized criminal justice system impacts families, and invited them to give feedback on IndyCAN's work.

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IndyCAN has been particularly successful at leveraging the existing social networks within congregations to strengthen its voter program. Researchers have long confirmed the value of interpersonal relationships in organizing voters. PICO's strength comes, in part, from its ability to build on congregations as networks for social relationships. For instance, our research found

that people who signed pledge cards in their congregation were more likely than other pledge card signers to turn out to vote weeks later.

BUILDING LEADERS IN NEW MEXICO
CAFé is a PICO federation that recently combined leadership development and civic outreach to raise wages for 18,000 residents of Las Cruces, New Mexico. A multiracial coalition of community leaders collected the signatures of nearly 10 percent of the voters in the city – three times the number needed – to put a minimum wage increase on the 2014 ballot. From there the measure went to the City Council, which, in a surprise vote, declined to refer it and instead passed an alternative policy. While there was a historic wage increase, it was a very mixed victory for CAFé's organizing staff and the hundreds of volunteers who worked with CAFé, including Kasandra Gandara, a long-time Las Cruces resident. The new

Research & Experimentation Working Group



If funders and field organizations are to make the data-informed decisions needed to move civic engagement beyond election-cycle work, we must cultivate a shared understanding of research and develop a set of best practices for conducting experiments. To this end, in 2015 the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) created a Research and Experimentation Working Group with goals to:

- **Build a network** of researchers interested in civic engagement.
- **Foster collaboration** between researchers and practitioners to create a common agenda, identify research priorities and develop a better understanding of field organization needs.
- **Support creation of a clearinghouse** accessible to grantmakers and grantees for key research findings.
- **Ensure support for "translating" research results** into materials funders can use.
- **Create a forum for funders** to share research priorities and funding strategies and align them when possible to create greater impact.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Employing strategies like empirical and qualitative studies, public opinion research and legal and policy analysis, the research will cover a broad spectrum of subjects including:

- **Electoral issues** such as campaign finance; election administration and protection; redistricting; and voter registration, education and turnout.
- **Non-election activities** such as civic education and leadership, organizing and engaging around the policymaking process, mobilizing and advocacy around specific issues or constituencies.
- **Good-government policies, tools and strategies** pertaining to immigration reform, budgeting, civil rights, rule of law, open government and government performance.

For more information, visit <http://www.funderscommittee.org/resources/publications>.



Doing Good, Done Better

Are You on the Map?

Funders Share Data to Strengthen Civic Engagement

Relaunched in 2015, the Foundation Center's Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy (FFUSD) is a free mapping database that gives a clear picture of philanthropy's role in our democracy by showing who's funding what and where. Survey the field, find collaborators and fine-tune your strategies at <http://democracy.foundationcenter.org>.

While FFUSD is poised to become an indispensable tool for civic engagement grantmakers and grantseekers, it needs input from as many funders as possible. FFUSD relies on data from "Get on the Map," an e-reporting project that combines the analysis power of the Foundation Center with the convening power of the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers. If you're not already on the map, consider joining at <http://foundationcenter.org/grantmakers/ereporting/gotm.html>.

policy ignored the will of thousands of Las Cruces, 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 Cruces.

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 Cruces 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. ■

Kristee Paschall is political director at PICO National Network.

Notes

1. See Kristee Paschall, Michelle Penson, Dr. Joy Cushman, Dr. Hahrie Han and Dr. Paul Speer, "Integrated Voter Engagement Research Report," PICO National Network, Fall 2015, <http://www.piconetwork.org/ive2015>.
2. Brian Eason, "Criminal justice center likely dead," *IndyStar*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2015/05/11/criminal-justice-center-likely-dead/27151755>.