

The Power of Grassroots Organizing on Pro-Voter Reform

Tova Wang and Melina Geser-Stark

For Presentation at the Southern Political Science Association

JANUARY 2025



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER

for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

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Acknowledgements

Much of this research was conducted in collaboration with, and supported by funding from, the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund (dpifund.org). The author is also enormously thankful to all the organizers who generously shared their extraordinary stories.

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A PUBLICATION OF THE

Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation

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Introduction

The recent passage of major state-based voting rights legislation demonstrates the critical role grassroots organizations play in protecting and advancing U.S. democracy. In 2023, grassroots organizers, working in coalition, were instrumental in securing significant election reform and voter inclusion legislation in New Mexico and Minnesota. By documenting these landmark efforts, this paper offers a fresh perspective on how grassroots organizing can drive meaningful change in the voting rights arena.

In academic literature, news reporting, and the public consciousness, contemporary voting reform is traditionally viewed through a top-down lens, with “elite” actors—such as policy advocates, lawyers, and legislators—seen as the key drivers of change. In contrast, the role of grassroots activism in shaping contemporary voting rights reform is often overlooked. As a result, the work of organizers in legislative efforts is less understood than that of those who traditionally hold political power. However, under-resourced state-based grassroots organizations are often central to moving election reform policy. They educate constituents about policies, build networks of passionate communities, and mobilize their bases to impact policy decisions.¹

This paper challenges the traditional top-down approach to voting rights reform by examining how grassroots efforts often exhibit many of the features of social movements as they have been understood in scholarship and in the public mind. Historically, when we think of voting rights movements, we most often think of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s or the suffragists at the turn of the 20th century. Here, we look at how modern voting reform efforts also display key attributes of social movements.

Social movements, as defined by Harvard Professor Marshall Ganz, are understood here as “purposeful actors . . . [who] assert public values, form new relationships rooted in those values, and mobilize the political, economic, and cultural power or translate these values into action.”² A successful social movement does two things: it enables the participation of ordinary individuals while ensuring that this participation can lead to meaningful influence and power.³ These movements are not about creating superficial or short-term change but about leveraging organizing and capacity-building to create sustained change. This lasting impact is brought about by specific strategies that enable individuals with fewer traditional political resources to engage and ultimately alter the political system.⁴

To explore voting rights reform efforts as a social movement, we focus on four key elements of successful social movements, as described in prior scholarship and reflected in these case studies:

Reshaping the political landscape: Movements do not solely react to existing political conditions; they can actively alter them to help achieve their goals. By getting involved in the politics, they can change the playing field to create more favorable conditions for success. Sometimes referred to as an “inside-outside” strategy,

this allows movements—typically viewed as external agents—to achieve change by engaging with and leveraging the power of formal political channels and actors.⁵

Building a broad-based coalition: Building a coalition of diverse actors is often key to successful social movements. Essential to this process is the capacity to unite actors with different interests and backgrounds and align them around a shared goal. In doing so, movements are able to make use of a wide range of people and resources that can be mobilized for their cause.⁶

Centering impacted communities: As opposed to top-down approaches, which tend to highlight the role of elite actors often removed from the issue at hand, social movements prioritize the voices of those directly affected by the cause. Impacted communities can play a central role as both participants and leaders in shaping the campaign, with their voices often forming the backbone of the movement, reflecting their truly “grassroots” nature. Their involvement not only provides the campaign with an authentic narrative but also shapes and actively empowers impacted individuals with the capacity to enact change.⁷ The transition from short-term involvement to empowered engagement is an important component of grassroots movements.

Building a long-term, sustained reform infrastructure: While some movements focus on small policy changes, many aim for more long-term, structural changes. As a result, having the capacity to “sustain contention” is often seen as a core component of social movements.⁸ This involves developing long-term infrastructure that continues to push for change, even after initial victories, such as legislative wins. This ensures that the movement’s goals are not only achieved but maintained over time, delivering actual change.

Each of these components of a successful movement played a role in achieving voting rights reform in Minnesota and New Mexico. In both states, voting rights organizers implemented these four overarching methods for movement success. However, their strategies differed, reflecting approaches tailored to the specific context of each state.

This paper examines the cases of New Mexico and Minnesota separately, with each one organized around these four categories. The nuances in how their methods diverged are identified through distinct subheadings. By following this structure, the paper explores how each state deployed both distinct and similar strategies when implementing these four principles of successful movements. Through examining how grassroots actors deployed these strategies, we uncover the often-overlooked ways in which they are successfully pushing for a more inclusive, egalitarian, and multi-racial democracy.

Methodology

In fall 2023 and spring 2024, I partnered with the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund to examine the factors leading to successful grassroots-driven legislative change in voting rights.⁹ To do so, a case-study approach was adopted, focusing on New Mexico and Minnesota due to their enactment of significant voting rights reforms in 2023. In both states, grassroots organizations successfully shifted power from the traditional elites to base-building organizations,¹⁰ resulting in transformative voting rights reforms.

The study primarily draws on interviews, bills, state laws, press releases, policy reports, and news articles. Interviews played a predominant role in understanding the shift in power toward grassroots actors. I sought to understand the experiences of all stakeholders pivotal to the legislative successes in 2023 and what can be gleaned from their stories that might support future state-based reforms.

A series of interviews were conducted with a range of actors, including organizers, legislators, secretaries of state, and policy advocates. Interviewing this diverse group was important for understanding the nuanced power shift between “non-elite” grassroots organizers advocating for change and the “elites” who are traditionally responsible for enacting it. By examining both perspectives, the study explores not just the outcomes of grassroots efforts but the processes and dynamics that underpin successful change, providing a deeper understanding of how power is negotiated between grassroots and “elite” legislative actors.

Interview participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowballing sample methods. Initial outreach focused on speaking with key organizations and election officials, who then referred me to additional participants, including organizers, legislators, and advocates.

The interviews were semi-structured, following a conversational approach with open-ended questions to ensure interviewees were able to discuss the areas they believed most relevant to their campaign’s success. This format enabled key insights to emerge naturally from the participants’ experience, rather than being led by topics presumed to be relevant by the interviewer.

Case Study: New Mexico

In 2023, New Mexico passed landmark voting rights and election reform legislation. The New Mexico Voting Rights Act (VRA),¹¹ an omnibus bill, included a number of reforms that voting rights leaders had been working to enact for decades. The legislation collectively expands voter eligibility and access for all New Mexicans.

Key Provisions of the New Mexico Voting Rights Act¹²

The New Mexico Voting Rights Act (VRA):

- Restores voting rights to more than 11,000 formerly incarcerated individuals immediately upon release from prison. Previously, people were required to complete probation and parole, which can take years.
- Expands voting access on tribal lands. The Native American Voting Rights Act, which passed as part of the New Mexico VRA, introduced several measures to improve voting access for Indigenous communities. This act:
 - Secures early voting on tribal land.
 - Allows tribes to designate their polling places on the same timeline as jurisdictions in the rest of the state.
 - Allows tribes to request ballot drop boxes.
 - Designates additional locations for tribal members to use as voter registration addresses, as many people on reservations do not have mailing addresses.
- Requires “back-end” automatic voter registration. If an eligible voter interacts with a state agency, including the Department of Motor Vehicles and public assistance offices, they will be automatically registered to vote and given notice of the opportunity to opt out at a later date.
- Ensures every county has at least two ballot drop boxes, making absentee and mail voting more accessible.
- Mandates same-day registration at all polling locations, enabling eligible voters to register at the polling station and immediately cast their ballots.
- Creates a permanent absentee voter list so that people do not need to reapply for a mail ballot every election.
- Mandates Election Day as a school holiday, reducing logistical barriers and encouraging voter participation.

Background

New Mexico has made significant progress in election reform over the last several years, passing key measures including automated voter registration (AVR) and same-day registration.¹³ In a politically challenging environment, advocates, legislators, and the secretary of state have successfully worked to make New Mexico’s elections system more accessible, relatively speaking. These efforts have also resulted in the development of a strong pro-democracy nonprofit infrastructure in the state.

However, prior to 2023, New Mexico still had a number of policies that restricted voting rights, especially for people of color, immigrant communities, low-income populations, and Indigenous people.¹⁴ For example, unlike in many states, people with felony convictions could not regain their voting rights upon completing their prison sentence;

instead, they had to wait and serve potentially lengthy parole or probation periods. Targeted measures to address these barriers failed to pass, leaving many without the ability to vote.

Previous efforts to pass pro-democracy legislation had been led by public policy groups and lacked a strong, well-organized base of New Mexicans putting power behind them. Without this foundation, achieving concrete wins that would benefit marginalized voters was difficult. In 2017, organizing groups committed to strengthening democracy entered the legislative arena with their work on automated voter registration. While the legislation they supported was unsuccessful at the time, this was a pivotal first step for organizers, who began building a coalition and leading the democracy reform movement in New Mexico. Two years after their initial attempt, in 2019, they successfully passed automated voter registration and same-day voter registration, demonstrating the growing influence of organizers in legislative fights.

The coalition's next major effort came in 2022, when it worked with legislative allies to pass a strong voting rights bill, similar to the New Mexico VRA that ultimately passed in 2023. The 2022 Voting Rights Act passed in the House but failed in the Senate.

Once the bill died in the Senate, State Senator Katy Duhigg and other legislators scrambled to write and introduce a similar, stripped-down bill, removing provisions such as full automatic voter registration, expanded ballot drop boxes, and a lowered voting age. The bill once again passed the House and died in the Senate as a result of a filibuster. The short 30-day session came to an end. The loss led to a feeling of tremendous despair and disappointment by organizers and policy groups in the coalition. Despite their coordinated plan, these barriers in the political landscape prevented them from getting crucial legislation passed.

After the 2022 defeat, the coalition's organizations regrouped. Through a series of difficult conversations, leadership shifts, and the transfer of certain responsibilities, base-building organizations began to lead the campaign, taking over from the policy groups that had previously been at the helm. This shift moved the coalition's focus from primarily policy advocacy to organizing and mobilizing constituencies. Coalition groups remained committed to this new structure, understanding the need to stay united to hold politicians accountable and win in 2023. By working to shift the political environment and further refining their campaign strategy, the coalition ultimately succeeded in passing voting rights legislation. This represents the crux of the New Mexico story: a campaign led by a coalition of organizations that built strong bases in communities of color, united around shared goals, and won.

Findings

The following section explores how New Mexico grassroots organizations adopted some of the core components of a successful social movement to achieve voting rights reform.

By building and utilizing meaningful relationships with legislatures, strategically framing issues to unite diverse groups, transforming leadership perspectives to focus on empowering impacted communities to lead, and sustaining efforts post-legislative wins, New Mexico organizers achieved a significant transformation in the state's voting rights landscape.

Reshaping the Political Landscape

Getting Involved in Electoral Politics

The first strategy organizers used to reshape the political landscape was proactively engaging in electoral politics. The passage of the New Mexico Voting Rights Act in 2023 followed years of stagnation in significant democracy reform, hindered by New Mexico's powerful bloc of "moderate" Democrats—later nicknamed "Corporate Dems" by the voting rights coalition—who often voted with Republicans opposed to election reform legislation. To achieve success, organizers knew they needed to overcome this opposition, and the eventual success of the 2023 bill was a product of their close collaboration with legislators and public officials. Unlike the failed 2022 effort, these groups began to partner early in the legislation writing process. This proactive approach was a key factor of the bill's success, demonstrating the long-term investment required to pass democracy reform.

Organizers knew they needed to engage with the challenging political context to pass sweeping reforms. As a result, base-building organizations, which initially operated only as 501(C)3 organizations, set up section 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations that "may engage in some political activities so long as that is not its primary activity."¹⁵ This allowed them to find and support progressive candidates to challenge "moderate" Democrats in legislative primary races—efforts that often proved successful. For example, groups like Organizers in the Land of Enchantment (OLÉ), New Mexico Working Families Party, and Center for Civic Action supported primary challengers in two districts in 2018. With strong candidates and well-funded campaigns, they successfully flipped both districts, resulting in two progressive women taking office.

In 2020, some groups in the coalition groups created the No Corporate Dems Coalition and launched an independent expenditure campaign. Led by the New Mexico Working Families Party, they coordinated to target five key races. Four of the five candidates they supported won. In 2022, the No Corporate Dems Coalition ran a strong campaign targeting the state senator who had blocked previous voting rights legislation. As a result of the campaign, he stepped down from the Senate Rules Committee, a position used to block voting rights bills in 2022. This shift in who held political power, as well as the appointment of new progressive representatives, led to a more hospitable political environment to pass democracy reform.

This success proved the combined power of base-building organizations and policy groups to shift the political terrain by holding legislators accountable to their constituents.

By strategically combining electoral engagement with grassroots organizing, the coalition was able to reshape the political landscape and create conditions favorable to voting rights reform.

Fostering Partnerships with Legislators

The success in reshaping New Mexico’s political landscape was not just about engaging with electoral politics but also about cultivating meaningful relationships. In 2023, building a coalition went beyond building a transactional relationship with those holding power; instead, it focused on fostering deep, collaborative partnerships with elite actors.

Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver, who has been working with voting rights groups for years, noted that although efforts in 2022 paved the way for success in 2023, “part of the reason why it failed was that this was a top-down initiative . . . I and the governor and the political director for the house caucus came up with this idea, and we went to the coalition.” Senator Duhigg echoed this sentiment, describing how the 2022 legislation and strategy was developed largely behind closed doors—“not in a real focused way and not in a way that had really consulted with folks like the coalition.” She emphasized early, frequent, and ongoing engagement between coalitions and legislators during campaigns to develop trusting partnerships. Knowing she had the full support of organizers and policy groups was critical to her effective advocacy in passing the bill.

The 2023 effort did not repeat these mistakes. Secretary Oliver observed, “I think the difference in having a successful bill passed in 2023 was that the coalition came together after 2022. They took that bill; they made it the new, better version of itself; and they drove the bus in 2023. They found the sponsors, they drafted the legislation, they brought me and the governor and everyone else . . . on board . . .” In developing these close partnerships, New Mexico’s coalition learned the importance of working with legislators who are passionate and knowledgeable about election reform policy from the start. For instance, Albuquerque’s State Representative Gail Chasey has held office for 27 years, and she has advocated for voting rights and criminal justice reform the entire time. Since 2000, she had worked to restore voting rights for formerly incarcerated individuals, only to see the legislation fail repeatedly. Then, in 2023, Chasey’s years-long advocacy and expertise, along with the coalition’s significant organizing power, forged the path for legislative success.

Organizers also enhanced their effectiveness by equipping representatives with tools like scripts, talking points for debates, and community-driven messaging to use in communications that. Representatives learned to follow the coalition’s guidance while listening to the stories of impacted constituencies. Additionally, passionate experts on voting rights, such as Senator Duhigg and Representative Chasey, were essential to the legislation’s passage. With legislative champions becoming true partners ready to learn from their constituents, advocacy strategies proved more effective.

Building a Broad-Based Coalition

Uniting Different Issue Groups Around Shared Values

Building long-term relationships with legislators also spoke to the coalition's understanding that democracy reform requires more than one champion or one issue-based member group. Building an organized, broad, and united base of multiple legislators and a large coalition of constituents and groups allowed them to work together to move a shared package forward.

Uniting a range of actors that held different interests around common values was a critical means through which organizers were able to build a broad-based coalition. From 2014 to 2022, policy advocacy groups and base-building organizations often worked in coalitions together, but they did not always collaborate effectively on efforts to pass election reform. The Election Administration Coalition (EAC), led by American Votes and Common Cause New Mexico, served as the primary organizer of these efforts and included groups such as OLÉ.

In 2019, policy and organizing groups began difficult conversations that would kick-start the long process of reimagining the coalition by expanding it to include a broader range of issue-based groups. Under the leadership of OLÉ, the Center for Civic Policy, Equality New Mexico, Native American Voters Alliance (NAEVA), and other base-building organizations, the democracy reform movement grew into a coalition of groups solidly aligned on a strategic plan based on shared values.

To achieve this, the reconfigured coalition emphasized that all policy issues are related to and impacted by democracy and voting access. This focus was crucial to bringing base-building organizations and their members into the coalition; they saw their policy priorities reflected in the voting rights effort, not swept aside. Significantly, the coalition included organizations that weren't explicitly focused on increasing voter turnout, such as those working on climate change. Organizers focused on these types of issue-based campaigns understood that, without making voting more inclusive, meaningful policy change would remain a challenge.

This inclusive approach allowed the coalition to launch a renewed campaign with a united front and a shared narrative that fully reflected the needs and stories of impacted communities. When the 2023 New Mexico Voting Rights Act was introduced, coalition members reviewed the bill together and agreed on the components that had to pass for it to align with every member organization's values.

By placing organizing at the center of the newly formed Voting Rights Coalition, it gained the power and leadership to ensure the movement reflected the priorities of all mobilized groups. It was the active engagement of disenfranchised communities working toward reform that powered the passage of the 2023 Voting Rights Act. This mass support would not have been possible without the coalition's commitment to fighting for all member organizations' priorities.

Centering Impacted Communities

As the political landscape shifted, with base-building groups demonstrating their power in legislative and electoral campaigns, the voting rights movement in New Mexico also underwent a significant shift toward a coalition led by organizers and groups rooted in communities of color.

Transforming Leadership Perspectives

For this shift to happen, more “elite” policy groups had to recalibrate. Until 2019, the election reform movement in New Mexico was led by Common Cause New Mexico (CCNM), a nonpartisan democracy advocacy organization. However, starting in 2019, policy groups began having difficult internal and external conversations about how their role in the voting rights movement might evolve to better reflect the constituencies they were advocating for.

Heather Ferguson, executive director of CCNM, discussed the shift that needed to take place within the organization and its implementation. She explained that CCNM recognized that its role in the coalition was to provide policy expertise and educate lawmakers on the value of legislation. However, they came to understand that while this work was critical, it was not enough. Passing policy required more than expert advocacy; it required base-building organizations to mobilize constituents and bring a mandate to the policies.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, CCNM undertook a deeper introspection of its responsibilities. “We really needed to shift our own culture as Common Cause,” said Ferguson. “We’d always been so policy-heavy and policy leaders in the space that we hadn’t been operating in a way where we looked at policy through a racial equity lens and made sure that we had all of the voices at the table that the laws, especially election laws. . . . were going to have an impact on.”

For a white-led policy organization that had dominated New Mexico’s election reform space, stepping aside and undertaking an authentic re-evaluation of its role in the voting rights fight was crucial to its success. CCNM realized that it couldn’t successfully pass targeted reforms for impacted communities without engaging and following the leadership of those communities. As a result, the organization adapted its process, taking cues from coalitions rather than asking them to get on board with an existing agenda.

In changing their approach, CCNM had to rebuild trust with the grassroots organizers which required taking responsibility for past wrongdoings. By being transparent and building strong relationships, CCNM created an open line of communication between base-building and policy groups, which enabled them to center organizers’ voices and concerns.

Following further coalition-building work after the 2022 legislative defeat, CCNM’s trajectory created a model for what policy-focused organizations can do to pass state-based election reforms. Through continuous conversation with base-building

organizers, internal reflection, and organizational changes, CCNM evolved into a true partner in the voting rights movement. This organizational shift, and the strong model developed for coalition work alongside base-building organizations, was a crucial part of passing the 2023 New Mexico Voting Rights Act.

Empowering Impacted Communities

Impacted communities were not understood simply as supporters of the campaign but were actively organized and empowered to shape the campaign's direction. Altering the previously white-dominated organizational setting within the voting rights reform space placed impacted communities at the center of the movement. The coalition worked to build a campaign encompassing all impacted and disenfranchised communities, using relational organizing and outreach to engage various constituencies.¹⁶ They were especially focused on bringing in young people of color, immigrants, formerly incarcerated individuals, and Native people, all of whom had a stake in the coalition's legislative campaign.

By 2022, the coalition's steering committee was primarily led by people of color, Indigenous leaders, LGBTQ groups, and immigrant communities, with a majority of members being women. These organizations and leaders represented the full array of communities in a multiracial state, with members who were most impacted by voter disenfranchisement and suppression.

Organizing these mobilized groups by empowering them to drive toward policy reform was key to the success of New Mexico's voting rights movement. The coalition's priority was to engage and mobilize people from all impacted communities—immigrants, young people, communities of color, and others—by creating frequent opportunities for them to tell their stories directly to lawmakers rather than being caught up in a messaging plan. This was a departure from the quiet, careful lobbying often favored by policy organizations in the past.

Young people of color were integral to the campaign, contributing to all aspects of the work while developing their leadership skills. Aline Castelan Gonzalez, the campaign and projects director at Dreams in Action New Mexico, exemplified this, bringing her personal and professional experience to the voting rights coalition in 2023.

As a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient ineligible to vote, Castelan Gonzalez focused on organizing immigrant youth—many of them also DACA recipients—to fight for voting rights. While some young activists were too young to vote themselves, they understood the connection between having an inclusive and fair democracy and making progress on the immigration issues that they cared about most. Young coalition organizers saw themselves as messengers to others in their communities who could vote.

Castelan Gonzalez's organizing efforts rallied more than 500 young people, who were also actively involved in passing parts of the legislative package beyond those explicitly targeting youth. By engaging them on the issues they were most connected to—immigration and voter preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds—she mobilized a

base that was instrumental to passing the entire Voting Rights Act. Her leadership in the coalition expanded the election reform campaign, representing and engaging impacted communities and developing new leaders.

The coalition’s work in passing the bill’s provision on restoration of voting rights for formerly incarcerated people was also led by impacted individuals. Justin Allen, a formerly incarcerated returning citizen with OLÉ, emphasized how the coalition got the measure passed by “centering the experience of people that this impacts.” He indicated that legislators “were really impressed with the humanity of our speakers,” and that organizers shifted the narrative by “showing the humanity of people that this impacts and working together as a coalition, not listening to people telling us that we shouldn’t be loud about it. And bringing the people who it directly impacts to the state legislature to advocate for themselves.”

The campaign for the Native American Voting Rights component of the Voting Rights Act followed a similar trajectory. Native American Voters Alliance (NAEVA) led the effort, spearheaded by NAEVA Executive Director Ahtza Dawn Chavez. Chavez understood the importance of building power within the Native community by having tribal members at the forefront of the campaign. “I made sure that we had tribal leaders that were speaking to the legislators, not through their lobbyists, which is how it normally happens, but literally in the building, speaking to the legislators directly,” Chavez said. This direct engagement proved crucial, and Native organizers showed up consistently, making calls, meeting with legislators, speaking in the gallery, and bringing in community members. Many interviewees, including legislators, emphasized how important it was that the coalition’s groups repeatedly showed up for every committee hearing, every legislative vote, and every press conference.

This new model employed by the coalition, where organizers from impacted constituencies are the primary leaders and voices, gave the voting rights campaign a distinct humanity and mandate from the people of New Mexico. By mobilizing the communities most impacted by these policy decisions and bringing them straight to the legislators, the coalition succeeded in creating a campaign in which the people were shaping and sharing the narrative.

Building a Long-Term, Sustained Voting Rights Reform Infrastructure

A major feature of grassroots leadership is that the bases mobilized by organizers do not disappear after an election or legislative session. Instead, they remain active, fostering long-term engagement and sustained advocacy.

Pushing for Legislative Implementation

In New Mexico, the coalitions that successfully championed voting rights reforms understood the importance of sustained engagement and worked continuously to ensure community involvement in policy implementation and keep constituencies engaged for the next big campaign.

Another important function of organizers leading democracy reform coalitions is building a constituency that will hold legislators accountable to effective implementation after the legislation's passage. By increasing power in the community, building agency among members new and old, and amplifying diverse voices, coalitions can ensure sustained momentum for change across a range of key policy issues.

However, organizers in New Mexico learned the hard way that voting rights reform does not end with legislative success and holding power accountable is not always easy. Despite the successful passage of the 2023 Voting Rights Act, New Mexico faced significant challenges in implementing the reforms around restoration of voting rights. One year after passage, due to ongoing database issues, formerly incarcerated people who had their voting rights restored were not able to register to vote online or by mail. If they did so, they received a letter saying that their eligibility could not be confirmed, and they had to register in person. The website registration form had not been updated to reflect the VRA's changes, leaving people who were no longer in prison unable to vote.¹⁷

On September 26, 2024, the Campaign Legal Center representing Millions for Prisoners—not one of the organizations involved directly in passage of the bill—sued the secretary of state, challenging the requirement that voters register in person as burdensome and discriminatory. A week later, the District Court issued an order under which the secretary and the Department of Corrections agreed “to issue updated guidance, reprocess erroneously denied registrations, exchange necessary data to implement the New Mexico Voting Rights Act, and use voter registration forms with correct eligibility criteria.” The court also ruled that county clerks had to register any of the returning citizens whose registration was denied.¹⁸

Case Study: Minnesota

In 2023, Minnesota passed significant democracy reform legislation aimed at expanding voting access. The Democracy for the People Act was an omnibus bill with landmark voting rights and election reform legislation.¹⁹ At the same time, the Restore the Vote Act restored voting rights to more than 55,000 citizens previously disenfranchised due to felony convictions.²⁰ The passage of these policies reflects the power and dedication of voting rights leaders who have worked for decades to expand voting rights.

Upon passage of the Democracy for the People Act, Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon said, “It’s a really, really big deal. Bills like this only come around about once every half century. I’d say the last time we had one this big was 1973, almost to the day, when Minnesota passed same day or election day voter registration.”²¹

Key Provisions of the Democracy for the People Act²²

The Democracy for the People Act:

- Allows 16- and 17-year-olds to preregister to vote and have their registration automatically activated when they turn 18.
- Establishes automatic voter registration at DMVs and public assistance agencies where low-income people are served. When an eligible citizen interacts with one of these agencies, they are automatically registered to vote using existing information, with the opportunity to opt out later.
- Permits voters to opt in to a permanent absentee voter list, ensuring they receive an absentee ballot every year without needing to reapply each time there is an election.
- Greatly expands access for people with limited English by requiring sample ballots, voting instructions in multiple languages, and bilingual election workers in areas with significant populations who primarily speak a language other than English.
- Strengthens the penalties for voter intimidation and deception.
- Includes provisions that significantly strengthen campaign finance laws.

Key Provisions of the Restore the Vote Act²³

The Restore the Vote Act:

- Eliminates lengthy waiting periods for previously incarcerated individuals. Previously, Minnesotans had to serve out their probation and parole before they were eligible to vote, a process that could sometimes take several decades.
- Requires correctional facilities to provide robust information about voting rights as part of the re-entry process.
- Makes the secretary of state responsible for collecting “accurate and complete information” on any changes to rights restorations.

Background

The passage of the 2023 Democracy for the People Act and the Restore the Vote Act have separate but intertwined stories. Nearly two decades ago, legislators like now-Secretary of State Steve Simon and now-Attorney General Keith Ellison began introducing voting rights bills. However, Minnesota’s constantly divided government made most of these legislative efforts inviable, relegating them to internal conversations within organizations rather than public, coalition-based campaigns. With the exception of a short-lived public campaign by Restore the Vote, which advocated for returning citizens’ voting rights,²⁴ in 2012, democracy reform efforts in Minnesota lacked the support of base-building organizations. Over the last two decades, individual organizations have engaged in legislative efforts such as automatic voter registration, redistricting, public

financing, and clean elections. But without public campaigns to back these bills, and without a broader voting rights coalition, they were largely unsuccessful.

The story of the Democracy for the People Act begins in 2020, when a new dynamic emerged in the state legislature alongside shifts in movement leadership. After years of electoral work by grassroots organizers and policy groups, voting rights champions started getting elected, presenting an unprecedented opportunity to pass sweeping legislation. With the power and influence of base-building organizations growing, the We Choose Us voting rights coalition came together,²⁵ led by grassroots organizers. This coalition mobilized a broad, multi-issue base of constituents committed to building a multiracial democracy, bringing immense power and a fierce public mandate to the 2023 legislative campaign. By leveraging strong partners in the state legislature, years of policymaking practicing and strategy, and the resources to invest in a well-coordinated campaign, the coalition and its partners passed significant democracy reform.

Within a similar timeline, the trajectory of the Restore the Vote coalition also changed. With many members also involved in We Choose Us, the Restore the Vote coalition experienced a similar leadership transformation, with base-building organizations taking the helm. Organizers became the leaders of the movement, with JaNaé Bates and Brian Fullman from ISALAH/Faith in Minnesota, one of the leading economic and social justice organizations in the state, facilitating the coalition's work. In addition, Antonio Williams from T.O.N.E. U.P. Inc, a nonprofit serving justice-impacted Black and Brown people; consultant Wintana Melekin; and Justin Terrell of the Minnesota Justice Research Center, a criminal justice reform organization, stepped into key leadership roles. While the policy had been championed by these groups for decades, the restructuring of the campaign allowed organizers to focus on building power in communities of color to drive the movement.

Findings

The findings that follow demonstrate how voting rights reform organizations in Minnesota successfully achieved legislative change by developing sustained and productive relationships with legislative actors, strategically aligning internally to build a broad-based coalition, using narrative and transformative leadership to empower impacted communities, and shifting understanding of what it means to “win” and the strategies needed to create sustained change.

Reshaping the Political Landscape

Getting Involved in Electoral Politics

By getting directly involved with electoral politics, organizers were able to shape a landscape that was more amenable to voting rights reform. For much of the last two decades, Republicans held the majority in one or both chambers of the Minnesota State

Legislature. Recognizing that passing voting rights legislation might be difficult in that environment, organizing and policy groups invested in electoral work.

These groups sought to elect progressive candidates who would support their reforms. Their first win was in 2020 with the election of Representative Emma Greenman, a long-time voting rights advocate. Greenman became the driving force behind the Democracy for the People Act, underscoring the importance of electing legislative champions.

Shifting the electoral makeup of the state legislature was also essential to the success of the Restore the Vote campaign. Representative Cedrick Frazier, elected in 2020, at the same time as Representative Greenman and many other new members, led this effort in the Minnesota House of Representatives. He ran for office with restoration of voting rights as a priority issue. Drawing on his background as a labor lawyer and organizer, he actively engaged and collaborated with the coalition. After his election, he immediately got to work, engaging with allies like Representative Ray Dehn, who had previously sponsored the bill. In addition to leading from within, he prioritized understanding how he could support the coalition rather than expecting them to come to him. He gave them regular updates about what was happening in the legislature, and together they coordinated outreach and advocacy efforts targeting different policymakers.

The coordinated effort, working alongside unions and the DFL (Democratic-Farmer-Labor, Minnesota's Democratic party) campaign, included establishing and using 501(c)4 organizations engaging in political action committee work and investing in messaging testing and polling. They developed a messaging campaign called Greater than Fear that was widely adopted. As a result of calculated base-building and political work, the DFL gained control of both the House and Senate in 2022. Many power-building groups involved in the electoral campaigns ended up joining the voting rights coalition. Their efforts culminated in the passage of both the Democracy for the People Act and the Restore the Vote Act in the spring of 2023.

Long-Term Relationship-Building for Sustained Advocacy

Developing long-term relationships that could be used to sustain advocacy efforts and improve tactics employed by officeholders proved pivotal to campaigns' ability to successfully shape the political landscape to their advantage.

The work to reshape Minnesota's electoral landscape was not simply about securing votes from key legislatures; it was about building long-term, equitable, and sustained relationships between policymakers and advocates. Years of introducing legislation, advocating on the legislature floor, grassroots organizing, and building momentum created an infrastructure of coalition groups and policymakers that could strategically carry out a legislative campaign.

Sustained advocacy ensured that issues like restoration of voting rights for returning citizens remained top of mind for voters and politicians. While various groups were working to elect progressive candidates, existing legislative champions in the Senate

introduced and debated voting rights restoration legislation, even when it clearly wouldn't pass, calling these efforts "dress rehearsals." They were forming, practicing, and altering their strategy so that they'd be ready to succeed when the political environment shifted in their favor. As a result, the legislation that passed in 2023 had essentially been ready to go for years, capturing a decade of planning and persistence.

The Restore the Vote coalition took a similarly dedicated and consistent approach. They'd been working to pass a restoration of voting rights bill for two decades. In 2003, now-Attorney General Keith Ellison, then a state representative, introduced the Voting Rights Restoration Bill. However, a divided government prevented it from gaining traction in the first 10 years. The coalition formed in 2013, and organizer JaNaé Bates joined in 2016. Reflecting on the coalition's perseverance, Bates explained, "This is my seventh session working on voting rights restoration, and every single year has felt very similar. It was never like, 'Oh, now this is the year we really put the pedal to the metal.' We did it every single year. We created a rigor and a practice in our organizing work, in our turnout game, in the prepping of testifiers, and writing letters to the editor and talking to legislators, and having lobby visits, and having big lobby days. We did that every single year. And we built a practice around it, a rigor around it, so that once we actually had the political terrain to match the possibility, it was like going from dress rehearsal to real deal. It was as smooth of a transition as possible."

Building a Broad-Based Coalition

Engaging with Key Organizers

As groups worked to elect legislative champions and advance a democracy reform agenda, they also came to understand how to strengthen the voting rights movement to achieve legislative wins. This realization led to a shift in strategy, focusing on grassroots organizing as a critical link between policy development, legislative engagement, and base-building to demand change. With more legislators supportive of voting rights being elected and the political terrain becoming more promising for reform, leading groups such as ISAIAH, SEIU, Unidxs, and 100% saw the importance of broadening their coalition to include new stakeholders beyond traditional policy advocacy groups.

Ahead of the 2023 campaign in support of the Democracy for the People Act, We Choose Us invested heavily in mobilizing impacted communities, building a broad multi-issue movement geared toward creating a multiracial democracy. This strategy motivated diverse groups to join the campaign, including environmental groups, faith groups, and others, which ultimately generated widespread support for the legislation. Minnesota Voice, a coalition of grassroots organizations, intentionally brought in smaller groups that might be seeking ways to contribute to the voting rights campaign.

The increased engagement and leadership of organizers in the emerging voting rights coalition was predicated on their understanding of the missing link between

their policy goals and the need for major election reform. This shift paved the way for base-building organizations to create a movement for a strong multiracial democracy through voting rights legislation. Much like in New Mexico, legislative campaigns for democracy reform in Minnesota had historically been driven by policy advocates, housed within a specific organization rather than a broad coalition of groups.

To bridge this gap, Lilly Sasse, Representative Greenman's former campaign manager, was recruited to lead the effort. She brought in various grassroots organizing groups and learned their bases' policy priorities, then fostered shared alignment among the various constituencies. Under the guidance of ISIAAH, the growing group of grassroots organizations investing in and leading democracy reform set the foundation for the future of the voting rights movement in Minnesota. While this work was challenging, there was a broad understanding among stakeholders that this strategic pivot from policy groups to organizers was necessary. Longstanding policy and advocacy groups, like the League of Women Voters, embraced this shift in approach to legislative advocacy.

With Lilly Sasse and ISIAAH's facilitation, engaged and united base-building and policy groups formed the We Choose Us coalition, dedicated to passing democracy reform in Minnesota. Organizations focused on building and mobilizing power in communities of color led the effort.

Achieving Internal Alignment for Collective Action

To ensure effective collaboration, the coalition adopted a structured approach that empowered grassroots organizers and policy advocates to work in unison. The We Choose Us coalition split into different working groups: policy, communications and narrative, and organizing. The organizing working group, known as the Organizing for Power cohort, took the lead and served as the ultimate decision-making body in the coalition. Meanwhile, policy groups in the coalition continued to leverage their strengths, meeting with legislators, educating on the specifics of the bills, and leveraging their existing relationships to engage a range of stakeholders. In particular, they worked to garner the support of county clerks across the state to advocate for democracy reform.

In 2022, coalition members prioritized internal alignment to ensure a unified agenda. The Organizing for Power cohort held a leadership retreat attended by 200 people from across the state to clarify strategic goals and confirm commitment for all member groups.

Additionally, the coalition's leadership held individual conversations with all partner organizations, leading to a strong collective policy agenda. The Organizing for Power cohort's retreat culminated in the ratification of the coalition's Expanding Democracy agenda,²⁶ formalizing a shared understanding of goals and responsibilities among groups. By ensuring that all groups and constituencies had a voice and stake in the agenda, the coalition built significant power.

Centering Impacted Communities

Changing from Policy- to Organizer-Based Leadership

Engaging impacted communities, some of which were not previously working on voting rights issues, helped build the public mandate that drove the passage of democracy reform legislation in 2023. The Restore the Vote coalition transformed in the year leading up to passage, now centering the voices of impacted communities. Led by experienced base-building organizers JaNaé Bates and Brian Fullman from ISAIAH, as well as Justin Terell from Minnesota Justice Research Center, Antonio Williams from T.O.N.E. U.P. Inc, and consultant Wintana Melekin, the coalition energized the campaign by engaging and mobilizing constituents.

Prior to this change in leadership, “there weren’t a lot of base-building organizations or people who are thinking about, ‘How can we leverage every action that we’re taking with the people that we are also doing this work with, to continue to build on it?’” said Fullman, the coalition leader from ISAIAH. “Instead of, what tends to happen is, ‘Okay, we turned out these testifiers, we had a rally or a press conference, we didn’t pass the bill. We’re going to try again next year, and everybody go home.’”

Having Fullman at the helm significantly changed the trajectory of the campaign. Drawing from experience as a field organizer with ISAIAH/Faith in Minnesota, he centered base-building and empowered impacted individuals to take leadership positions. The Restore the Vote coalition existed prior to Fullman joining in 2022, but it consisted primarily of lobbyists and legislative experts, not organizers. They were mainly focused on politicking and their individual relationships with legislators rather than mobilizing public support for the Restore the Vote Act.

As a returning citizen himself, Fullman also understood the importance of engaging other returning citizens and encouraging them to see the value in participation. As he learned more about the systems that feed mass incarceration, Fullman knew he needed to help other impacted individuals and their communities build a sense of agency and better understand the policy itself. In late 2022, Terell and Fullman brought in other returning citizens to be at the center of the campaign.

The Restore the Vote coalition’s organizing efforts began to gain traction. The timeline of their campaign aligned with the work of We Choose Us, contributing to both groups’ success. While they had their own leadership and structures, We Choose Us joined the Restore the Vote coalition, and the two provided mutual support and shared internal capacity.

That’s when Fullman facilitated his first coalition meeting, bringing renewed energy to the cause. He made it clear that the work would be centered around and led by returning citizens: “So I always think about that, the core of organizing for Restore the Vote, it wasn’t like we were the biggest crew up there. It wasn’t that. But every legislator was so surprised to see us up there. That’s what I kept realizing. They were really surprised to

see us, and they were excited. The legislators were feeling accountable to us. They were coming back saying, ‘We did it. I voted the right [way].’”

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon shared that organizers were especially critical with respect to passage of the rights restoration bill. They were able to bring in people whose lives were affected by voter disenfranchisement and humanize this community, which made a difference: “Those personal stories—flesh and blood personal stories, not just in a book or on a page but in person—were really, really helpful.”

Building an Effective Narrative

Storytelling through public narrative was instrumental in positioning impacted communities as active agents of change at the forefront of the voting rights campaign. Effective public narratives use personal stories to connect a group of people, inspiring collective action toward a unified end goal.²⁷ By adopting this framework, the voices of impacted communities actively shaped the narrative, ensuring that the campaign was driven by their lived experiences and opinions, as opposed to imposing a top-down, disconnected narrative.

Organizing a campaign that brought formerly incarcerated voices to the forefront, however, was not easy. Many returning citizens initially resisted; they did not feel invested in this policy fight, feeling the United States had never truly been a democracy for them. Organizers needed to shift this narrative to convey that election reform is about systemic change, not just changing voting mechanics. They emphasized a new narrative, explaining that it could help shift power, so that politicians would be compelled to listen to the community. And that new story worked.

Secretary of State Simon said, “I credit advocates, activists, organizers . . . for really working hard to humanize the issue . . . from my vantage point, what I saw them to have done very effectively was get people who were potentially affected to advocate for themselves, not just talk about them, ‘Oh, there are 55,000 people in need of this,’ but get some of the 55,000 people—it was a self-actualization—to get them to want this and to talk about this.”

Legislators committed to passing voting rights legislation also worked closely with the coalitions and their organizers. Having strong relationships between advocates and policymakers ensured that constituents’ voices would be brought to the forefront of legislative efforts and that impacted communities could tangibly influence policy’s framing, advocacy, and implementation.

“And I think that’s how it should be done all the time. Most of the legislation that legislators carry is because we’ve had a conversation with someone and we’ve been told that story, or we’ve witnessed that story firsthand. And so I think that carrying legislation should always be centered around the lives of the people that it’s going to impact with the positive,” said Representative Frazier.

This aspect was especially important for new activists in the coalition. Having the lead author in the room and actively listening gave them agency. Fullman spoke to the

importance of Representative Frazier’s leadership in passing bills and empowering the membership. “The way [Representative] Ced Frazier stood and talked about his grandfather and talked about his own family, and then lifted up the names of some of the brothers and sisters who were in our crew. He literally named us in his speech,” he recalled. “He did that because he wanted us to understand why it was so important we were there. And then you start seeing these lights go off in brothers who didn’t even deem themselves worthy enough to be named by a legislator.”

Building a Long-Term, Sustained Voting Rights Reform Infrastructure

Having Full-Time, Aligned, and Dedicated Staff

Numerous interviewees from the coalitions stressed the importance of having full-time staff dedicated to the campaign as well as values-aligned professional lobbyists. Until 2022, the Restore the Vote campaign lacked the funding to hire sufficient staff, making it extremely difficult to drive the campaign forward effectively. Furthermore, previous leadership was inconsistent, with different organizational partners (such as the Minnesota Voice Table, the ACLU, the NAACP, or just ad-hoc leadership) leading at different times. This hindered continuity and growth.

With the generosity of funders,²⁸ democracy reform coalitions hired lobbyists, who were key to their success. Organizers have long lamented the tendency of funders to provide project-based funds, and often for limited durations right before elections. Year-round support was essential for the We Choose Us and Restore the Vote coalitions. Their leadership leveraged their relationships with funders to hire devoted staff to develop and drive legislative campaigns as well as follow up on their implementation.

Redefining What It Means to Win

To sustain a movement over the long term, leaders like JaNaé Bates highlighted the importance of redefining “winning.” Leading up to 2023, she described organizers’ frustration when their work didn’t lead to an immediate legislative success and emphasized the need to shift this line of thinking and instead “make meaning every step of the way.”

Bates said, “We would have these big hearings where we packed a hearing room, that was the win. . . . It didn’t matter that the bill didn’t pass in that moment . . . But we talked about how amazing it was that so-and-so got to tell their amazing story about what it would mean for them to exercise democracy . . . you have to talk about wins that don’t always feel like wins until you talk about them that way.”

In Minnesota, organizers and community members would meet and discuss their experiences following lobby visits or other actions, building relationships and celebrating small victories to lay the groundwork for effective and well-coordinated coalitions.

Maintaining Resilience After Legislative Successes

As Minnesota’s new voting laws were implemented, challenges and differences of opinion have emerged as to how and whether they should be carried out. In June

2023, shortly after the Restore the Vote Act's implementation, Minnesota Voters Alliance, a conservative voters' group, filed a legal challenge.²⁹ The lawsuit was dismissed in December, with the judge ruling that the Minnesota Voters Alliance lacked legal standing.³⁰ In a second legal challenge, "a central Minnesota judge . . . barred at least six defendants from voting as part of their sentences."³¹ The sentences were publicly condemned by Secretary of State Simon and Attorney General Ellison, who were both active supporters of the 2023 coalition's initiatives. In November 2023, the state Court of Appeals overruled the judge's unlawful sentences, protecting the voting rights of the six returning citizens and preventing future challenges.³²

Recognizing these legal challenges as an attempt to sow doubt and confusion, the coalition stayed the course. Rather than uplifting the lawsuit or pausing their implementation work, they continued investing their resources into outreach and organizing to ensure individuals knew how to exercise their rights. Broad public and legal support and carefully crafted laws and narratives contributed to the eventual confirmation of the Restore the Vote Act's validity. Years of work produced strong advocates ready to defend the legislation and coalitions prepared to sustain the larger movement for democracy reform.

Conclusion

Common strategies of success emerged from the voting rights reform efforts in New Mexico and Minnesota, offering key lessons for the future of voting rights reform. Critically, the New Mexico and Minnesota cases demonstrate the importance of coalition-building in achieving successful voting rights reform. By uniting diverse interests under a shared vision of a more inclusive democracy, organizers created a resonant and broad-based campaign. Centering impacted communities, not only as mobilized campaign members but as active drivers of change, ensured that campaign messages authentically conveyed the lived realities of disenfranchising policies and the positive impact of democracy reform. This highlights the value of grassroots organizing; it not only unifies disparate groups but also positions impacted individuals to actively shape the push for reform.

Through long-term investment, implementation, and evaluation, the movements were able to constantly adapt, building momentum for long-term political goals. Building relationships between legislators, base-building organizations, policy groups, and constituent communities was crucial for shaping a political environment receptive to voting rights initiatives. The importance of investing in long-term infrastructure demonstrates that voting rights reform is not the product of short-term efforts but rather of ongoing investment, coalition building, and organizing beyond a single legislative session.

Areas for Further Research

The findings above build upon previous work by social movement observers, highlighting strategies that help drive successful change from the ground up and demonstrating how base-building can transform into effective mobilization for change.

Additional research could build on these insights:

- A more precise understanding of the effects of having impacted people lead reform efforts and engage directly with elected officials would be extremely useful. Such research could explore not only how this approach influences the likelihood of success but also how it empowers impacted communities and fosters future engagement.³³
- Future research could explore the dynamics between policy and legal groups on one hand and grassroots organizations on the other. Tensions often arise between national groups and state-based groups—is better alignment possible at the state level? For instance, does New Mexico’s story with Common Cause New Mexico offer a different model?
- Further research could explore the role of grassroots organizations in ensuring the implementation of voting reforms after legislation successfully passes. As discussed, after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, New Mexico faced significant challenges in implementing the reforms; one year later, it required litigation brought from outside the coalition. Future research could examine the “post-win” dynamic, looking at how grassroots organizations continue to push for change even after the successful passage of their reforms.
- Research could explore the extent of collaboration and learning among organizers across states and whether more collaboration might lead to more coordinated, national-level reform efforts. Historically, many transformations in American voting rights—such as the expansion of suffrage to women and communities of color—began at the local level and grew into national movements.³⁴ Examining historical analogies, in particular the transformation of the women’s suffrage movement from state-based actions to nationwide change, could offer insightful lessons for understanding and advancing contemporary voting rights reform

Notes

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A PUBLICATION OF THE

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