

THEY HOLD THE KEY:

INVESTING IN YOUTH OF COLOR

Research, analysis and lessons from 2020 + 2021 on youth organizing, civic engagement, sustainable organizations and the youth vote to guide investments ahead of 2024



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MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

History isn't that far away.

In early 2020, the Youth Engagement Fund (YEF) set out to conduct an in-depth survey of youth organizing and get out the vote efforts in our priority states. We didn't know a global pandemic was coming that would expose so many of the fault lines and inequities in American society – basic things like who has access to healthcare, childcare, or an economic safety net. And though the violence of racism has always been ever present for communities of color, we also didn't know we would be finding ourselves in a racial justice awakening like we haven't seen since the 1950-60s civil rights era following the brutal murder of George Floyd, Ahmaud Aubrey, and Breonna Taylor – may they rest in power.

What we learned was illuminating and inspiring – it was deep community care and radical love. Across this country, throughout

the pandemic, 2020 Census and election cycles, young people were in community leading and galvanizing their peers, elders, extended community networks and holding the moral compass along the path to a truly inclusive democracy where we all live with dignity and thrive.

And in the years since, in the wake of the first redistricting process after the U.S. Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, after dozens of anti-democratic laws were passed across the country creating barriers to the vote in 2021, after Roe v. Wade's reversal in 2022 – young people continued to show up to break records in engagement and upend long held political norms. And their influence will only grow as the nation's electorate becomes younger and more diverse.

Across YEF's priority states – Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico,

and Texas—young people showed up to navigate new voting laws, inspire movement mindsets among their peers to address voter apathy, and advocate for critical legislation to cement our democratic rights, advance education for all, and protect our civil and reproductive rights. They secured the margin of victory in key races and states, especially in Georgia and Arizona. Throughout the 2022 election cycle, polls show young people, especially young people of color, understand the need to vote and how the civic process can be used to advance key social movements like abortion access and climate justice.

In the 2022 midterms, [CIRCLE](#) estimates that 27% of young people turned out to vote, the second highest in three decades. Exit poll data puts aggregate youth turnout higher in battleground states (FL, GA, MI, NC, NH, NV, OH, PA, WI) at 31%. Across YEF priority states, young people hosted summits and fellowship programs to build leadership capacity on and off college campuses—critical programs that build community and inspire long-term mindsets in young people that combat voter apathy and create life long civic actors. In Arizona, youth organizers partnered with organizations across the state to win education funding for undocumented youth by initiative and stop three ballot measures restricting the right to vote after their pro-democracy ballot measure was disqualified due to judicial interference. In New Mexico, youth organizers created community maps in coalition with grassroots organizations to ensure a fair redistricting process. Those are just a few of the notable wins from youth

organizers in the years since we conducted the interviews that led to this analysis.

I know the power of youth organizing. And I am a product of the power of youth of color organizing. My family moved to the U.S. from Colombia when I was 7 years old. As a high school student, I became part of the immigrant youth movement that won the most prominent immigration policy we have seen in over 30 years – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). After 24 years living in the U.S., most of it undocumented, the 2018 midterm elections were the first time my family and I could vote together, and we did so at the elementary school where I learned English.

Today, I am proud to serve as Executive Director of the Youth Engagement Fund, the only donor collaborative in the U.S. dedicated to increasing and amplifying the political power of young people of color in some of the most historically underserved regions of the country – the South and Southwest.

I present to you a part analysis, narrative, and vision for the future, *They Hold the Key: Investing in Youth of Color*. The following pages contain a snapshot of youth of color-led organizing across the South and Southwest in 2020-2021 that includes the work of organizations through their COVID relief work in the early days of the pandemic and the shift to nearly all digital organizing in the leadup to 2020 elections; through massive efforts to engage new voters and stop voter suppression aimed at communities of

color; record youth voter turnout in Georgia thanks to a tradition of Black-led movement building in the state; and the resetting and reenvisioning of hybrid work and sustainable organizations that kicked off in 2021 in preparation for 2022.

I hope you will take away from this an understanding of the leadership of young people of color and why you should trust, fund and follow it.

In Solidarity,

Alejandra Ruiz

She/Her/Ale

Executive Director

Youth Engagement Fund

Youth Engagement Action Fund



GRATITUDE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Between 2020 and 2021, YEF supported 70 movement partners. This analysis draws heavily from the insights and experiences from 28 of these movement partners in our core priority states. YEF movement partners are powerful civic leaders with successful track records of building strategies and movements across issues at the municipal, state, and national levels. Their thoughts, challenges, opportunities, and stories have formed this analysis about the youth civic engagement sector in the South and Southwest told through the lens of the young people. In all, YEF interviewed more than 60 leaders mobilizing their communities. We thank each person for their time, input, and candor – all valuable contributions. Movement partner names are included throughout this analysis to provide proper credit to the thought and strategic leadership of the young people leading the efforts to address some of the nation’s most pressing issues.

This report would not have been created without the amazing women of color and gender expansive people of color team that make up the [Youth Engagement Fund](#). Special mention to YEF team members who contributed to this analysis including Liz Dupee, Impact & Learning Analyst, who served as a secondary author and editor from the vision through final copy edits, Alejandra Ruiz, Executive Director, who developed the initial vision for the landscape analysis, and Renata Teodoro, Program Officer, who provided important information about YEF’s movement partners and the young people doing this work each day. We also thank [Roey Thorpe](#) who served as the interviewer and primary author of an earlier version of this analysis, and Jessie Torrisi for her support in this version.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For too long, youth of color led organizations that center youth of color in civic engagement have been undervalued and under-resourced. Though youth of color have led social movements for centuries, organizing to access and then use the civic process to foster meaningful change across issues, modern philanthropic practices continue to underfund them and in many cases not fund them at all. Juxtaposed against the reality that young people of color under 35 are poised to be the largest voting bloc and next generation of civic leaders, philanthropy must shift practices to meet this moment and embrace youth of color leadership over the long-term. This means new funding strategies, investments in space to build together, and commitments to re- envision how to do and support the work of safeguarding and building an inclusive democracy.

This landscape analysis, *They Hold The Key: Investing in Youth of Color*, is a wakeup call to all of us who have yet to truly make room for the energy and expertise of young leaders of color. It offers case studies as models for change, data points for insights into the civic landscape at the state level, and a summary of challenges and recommendations born from 60+ youth organizers. We hope it will bring new partners into the civic engagement space and prompt more of us to get serious about increasing investment and building infrastructure for youth of color.

Some of the questions we sought to answer for this analysis included:

1. What makes youth of color in civic engagement movement building unique? What strategies can we scale and build from?
2. Where are the gaps in resources, in terms of where and how we direct funding, who we fund, what we know, and how we share power?
3. Why do we see such a gap between philanthropy's professed beliefs in youth engagement and racial justice, and how can we imagine and build new models in alignment with our values?

All these questions are important in their own right. And they lead us to the ultimate movement building challenge: *how do we increase investment in youth of color to realize their power and transform the civic landscape?*

Stark contradictions exist between the power of youth of color in civic engagement and philanthropic support. Perceptions of the general importance of youth in civic engagement are high, but actual investment in organizations advancing youth engagement is low, and youth of color get even less than the fraction allocated to youth organizing. However, the swift increases in philanthropic giving for Black and people of color-led organizations in the aftermath of

the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests revealed there are no material barriers to increasing investment in youth of color.

Youth, especially young people of color, broke records in voter turnout in 2020 with 50% nationwide, garnering even more attention from the media and philanthropy. It is unclear whether these wins will garner sustained investment from the philanthropic community over the long-term. But, shifting philanthropic practices now means more than increasing payouts and increasing grant amounts. It means a fundamental shift in what we deem fundable. Young people of color are ushering in a cultural shift not seen in the U.S. since the 1960s, defining what it means to be an organizer, to be an activist, to lead organizations, and to reflect movement values at work and home. Investments in long-term organizing efforts, general support funding, and investing in movement infrastructure are keys to building a trusted and responsive funder relationship.

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH OF YOUTH OF COLOR IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Young people of color, by virtue of their place in society and entry into the workforce, bring new perspectives and priorities to the organizations they lead. They take structural and holistic approaches, often fusing direct service with community organizing, voter engagement, issue advocacy, and relationship building. They understand the only constant is change and adaptability is critical, which helped





facilitate quick campaign shifts at the onset of the COVID19 pandemic. Young people of color also understand healing and wellness as an integral part of social movements and organizational administration, working to build the values they work toward into their organizations and individual work practices. Those interviewed also remarked on the potential for philanthropy to act as valuable partners in strategy and fundraising planning. When funders open doors to new donor relationships, connect peer and mentor organizations, and fund innovative strategies, they move beyond the traditional norms of funding—funders become trusted partners building lasting civic leadership.

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

With voter suppression efforts rampant across the South and Southwest disenfranchising the the most diverse and activated generation of youth in US history, now is the time to commit to funding a national movement for racial justice and a truly inclusive democracy. Through this analysis, movement partners were nearly unanimous in four central problems hampering dynamic, effective, and inclusive movement-building by and for youth today.

- **Lack of Trust and Agency:** Youth, especially youth of color, are often questioned on their expertise to lead on strategy or govern their organizations, which often results in less funding and a diminished decision-making power when setting civic engagement strategies and annual plans.
- **Gaps in Support, Mentorship, and Anti-Racist Political Homes:** At the state level, gaps exist in mentorship opportunities and supportive spaces to cope with and address the impacts of white supremacist ideas and structures they come up against in today's social justice movements.
- **Barriers to Building a Donor Network and Fundraising Strategy:** Young people of color often face the weight of exclusivity and and ages old philanthropic practices cemented in white supremacist ideology and structures as they navigate the philanthropic world to secure resources for their work. They often do not have established



relationships with donors and foundation staff, and implicit bias, white privilege and gatekeeping practices based on a scarcity mindset often keep young people of color –in particular youth of color leading emerging organizations – from gaining those connections –either ever or not in a timely manner to optimize the impact of their work. Intentionality about reaching out to and investing in youth of color-led organizations could help reverse this cycle of exclusion and disinvestment.

- ***Under Resourced Civic Engagement Infrastructure at the State Level:*** Young people are hungry for opportunities to develop leadership skills and learn to build vibrant sustainable movements. They have a growth mindset, but opportunities and pipelines for young people to step into more responsibility and power are sorely lacking at the state level. As a result, young people often move to the west and east coasts to pursue careers in the nonprofit sector, leaving their home towns or states – or they exit public service altogether.

We see a number of opportunities to confront these problems and equip young people with the resources to bring their groundbreaking ideas into grassroots organizing and movement building. The set of recommendations below reflect what we learned from those interviewed and surveyed. They serve as an initial plan of action to strengthen youth civic engagement, underscoring the need for increases in investment, training pathways, funding priorities, and funding practices.

- ***Invest in youth of color-led movement building and infrastructure development.*** The only way we can grapple with inequities created by decades of disinvestment in young people and people of color is to start

funding them now. This means increasing giving, prioritizing grants to youth-led groups with leaders of color, and holding ourselves to real metrics for accountability around equity in grantmaking and civic engagement. Philanthropy must also focus on building state level movement infrastructure to create space for youth of color aligned around shared visions and strategies, while building long-term and thriving networks of their peers for life-long civic leadership.

- ***Support and create meaningful training opportunities that embrace the holistic experience of movement building*** that include leadership skills like fundraising and staff management and emergent strategies like healing and wellness policies. Supporting professional development plans that includes not only training but personalized individual and/or organizational coaching where leaders can troubleshoot pain points with an external coach and receive tools they can adopt into their work style has a significant impact on organizational culture and the work that is carried out. Coupled with this, is the embracing of workplace policies that prioritize healing and take a trauma-informed approach which help nurture people for the long haul.
- ***Invest in issue-organizing and long-term movement building.*** If we want to win long-term, we can't just fund one year at a time and measure this work in numbers of voters registered or cost per vote. Integrated voter engagement has been proven time and time again as one of the strategies critical to long-term movement building. Time and again, youth organizations have delivered tremendous results when they mobilize people around issues over candidates.

Mainstream candidates cannot always overcome voter apathy, but issues that affect local communities do. There is no telling what is possible if we scale up the kinds of models that we already know are workable.

- ***Go all in! How we support and sustain movements.*** We have a real opportunity to examine how we give and who informs our grantmaking strategy and embrace how Gen Z and Millennial generations are redefining what it means to work in social movements. It will be of no surprise to you that the call is still to engage in grantmaking that includes general operating and multi-year funding models, re-examine grantmaking structures for bias and burden on grantees, and commit to incorporating feedback from grantees about how to best craft the reporting and application process. If we –philanthropy – are still hearing this it’s because there is still more work for us to do on that front.

THE POTENTIAL OF YOUTH COLLABORATIVES

Movement partners surveyed were nearly unanimous in their support of increased collaboration between organizations as central to achieving their organizational missions. Recognizing the barriers that individual organizations might have in creating staff and funding capacity to hold collaborative spaces, YEF has been working with a multitude of movement partners –primarily in Arizona, Georgia and Texas –on supporting increased state based youth of color centered infrastructure. At YEF we refer to these efforts and spaces as Youth Civic Engagement Collaboratives.

Youth Civic Engagement Collaboratives serve as a powerful model for partnership between philanthropy and grassroots organizations that extends beyond grantmaking. The collaborative model increases movement infrastructure at the state level by creating intentional space to build enduring networks, shared visions for structural reform and youth engagement, and as a vehicle for fundraising. Potential exists across the states to establish collaboratives and scale existing efforts.





pop / pöp /
noun
A carbonated beverage that is endemic
consumed in the Midwest.
Ohio, Michigan, and

THE GLOW UP YOUTH OF COLOR BRING TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

As we listened to movement partners, several characteristics emerged that appear to set youth civic engagement organizations apart from the larger nonprofit civic engagement sector. These distinctions are important because they speak not only to the present moment, but also to the future of our movements and the next generation of governance at the municipal, state, and national levels. Understanding what young leaders need and how they operate is critical to the future of movements for equity and justice as demographic trends continue and increasing numbers of youth of color grow into greater leadership roles.

YOUNG LEADERS OF COLOR BRING A FRESH APPROACH

The majority of YEF movement partners interviewed for this analysis are young people of color who started their careers in direct service and grassroots organizations. As a result, they often have deep and trusting relationships in the community, and continue to represent these communities and issues for the long haul.

They also bring fresh and innovative approaches that create long-term visions for justice, bringing communities together around issues and what it takes to address them once and for all. Without exception, the young leaders we surveyed take an intersectional analysis of power – making connections between issues and the forces

that exclude different groups of people. They reject approaches that look at issues in silos and have a sophisticated understanding of how various forms of oppression like sexism, racism, xenophobia, and classism reinforce one another and communities of color. Issues like climate change are seen through added economic and racial justice lenses to become “climate justice,” focusing on the disproportionate impact on already vulnerable communities as the basis for a long arc of actions spanning service projects to days of action and legislative strategy.

This understanding leads young leaders to embrace the view that centering the most affected people leads to gains for everyone, because it is protecting those who are experiencing the most harm. Young people see how a society must recognize the humanity, dignity, basic needs and rights of everyone. This is different from the “respectable minority” and assimilationist approaches embraced in the past, which emphasizes similarities between marginalized groups and the mainstream. In a bid for acceptance and opportunity, the old approach treats difference as something to be underplayed or explained rather than lifted up and celebrated. More importantly, it leaves the gatekeepers of power intact.

In the past, organizational goals were likely to focus on single-issue changes that would address inequities but not challenge the roots



of institutional power. The new generation's politics are rooted in a deep understanding of how power works and how communities are often pitted against one another to compete for a scarce or isolated benefit. [Texas Rising](#) noticed that the COVID-19 crisis made intersectionality more visible, enabling them to build relationships around racial justice, housing, and health care. And these relationships, both ongoing and new, have enabled the organization to respond to more community needs. Young leaders have a visceral fear, informed by decades of reality, that systems will make small accommodations without really addressing injustice and their communities' voices will not be heard. They see progress in terms of actual gains for people when it comes to healthcare, education, dignity, safety, and economic opportunity.

This intersectional approach means their goal is often transformation of our systems. Young leaders have a deep critique of white supremacy, capitalism, and how those systems prop up one another. They question or outright

reject reform of systems like prisons and policing, since that approach fails to address the root causes of violence, inequality, and oppression. This is not to say that the youth sector does not appreciate incremental change or work toward it, but their ultimate goal is building new and more just systems.

Organizations also take on an intersectional approach by working in partnership on issues that directly impact young people. Youth-led organizations are more willing to collaborate outside their key issues or demographics than more established groups, and it brings results. [Poder in Action](#) in Arizona has a focus on police violence, and they partner with [Puente Human Rights Movement](#), which focuses primarily on immigrant rights. Both organizations found common ground in opposing the school-to-prison pipeline, and began working together and succeeded in getting police and armed security guards out of schools with a focus on large school districts that are over 90% Latinx. The expertise that each brings educates both organizations about how abuse of power

plays out in different communities. Poder in Action also works with Climate Strike who has taken a public stand for POC victims of police violence, educating their own base which is primarily white. Both organizations have co-hosted events which helped to expand Poder in Action's geographic reach.

One challenge for social justice organizations with a transformational approach is tapping into the importance of civic engagement and voting. It can be hard to get young people excited about voting for candidates or issues that don't reflect their vision or desire for profound change. Simply voting against a candidate who is worse is not enough of a motivator for many young people, especially when current systems are so rife with inequities and abuse of power. The increase in recent years on white supremacist political ideology and racist attacks have motivated young people to vote, but it remains to be seen how this will play out in future elections. When lack of governmental action leads to voter apathy, we can support social movements that inspire young people to see past each cycle and instead embrace long-term visions that use the civic process as a tool in a larger set of community focused actions.

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS EMBRACE FLEXIBILITY AND INNOVATION

The youth civic engagement sector is innovative, creative, and flexible in its approach. While young people are eager to learn best practices for organizing and organizational leadership, youth-led organizations are also quick to pivot and come up with creative responses to challenging times. They embrace data and technology to solve problems and target their base, and they are, unsurprisingly, very adept

at using social media creatively to create campaigns and respond to misinformation. For instance, in the face of continued attempts at voter suppression, [United We Dream](#) launched the "[Reclaim the Web](#)," initiative, which connects people to a What's App channel that exposes misinformation, gives people the information they need about voting, and the tools to respond and set the record straight online. The channel included age-specific approaches that help people tap into their own networks to correct misinformation and stop the spread of damaging lies targeted at immigrant communities.

The ways that youth civic engagement organizations adapted their 2020 organizing plans to the pandemic is the best illustration of this creative and nimble approach. Organizations had to turn on a dime, shifting to all-virtual organizing and retooling their in-person canvassing programs and events. [New Mexico Dream Team](#) (NMDT) realized the virtual organizing tools they'd developed to make people aware of immigration checkpoints near the border could be adapted to organize around other issues. [Florida Student Power](#) (FLSPN) was building out a campus voting program in March 2020 when the pandemic hit, just before the state's presidential primary. They had voter guides and t-shirts already printed when the stay-at-home orders came. FLSPN quickly shifted to distributing voter guides online, and changing contact tactics from canvassing to text banking. They went on to host digital town halls and continue to text voters; both have become key parts of their education and outreach.

Throughout the pandemic, some of the

state and local partner organizations expanded to offer food distribution, legal aid, financial support, and mental health services – integrating direct services into their organizing around the Census, state, and national elections. This was particularly true for local organizations that approach their work in a community-centered way. The [Native Americans Voters Alliance \(NAVA\)](#) Education Project mobilized volunteers to help run a food pantry through the first year of the COVID19 pandemic, and passed out voter registration cards to people who came in to use the pantry.

The efforts of [Texas Rising](#) in 2020 and 2021 to meet their youth peers where they were, strengthened relationships that have helped them better respond to community needs in the years since. Online and in-person trainings have improved attendance than in the past, and overall engagement in digital and in-person activities has increased. The robust level of organizing gives them hope for 2024 and beyond. Indeed, several organizations found that the skills and relationships they'd already built with their communities took on a whole new energy during a time of national crisis, and their young leaders became trusted voices in the uprisings against police violence.



YOUTH OF COLOR KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALING TRAUMA

Another hallmark of youth of color doing movement building is an emphasis on care, support, resilience and healing that is markedly different from previous generations. We're not the first funder to see this rising cultural norm. As a report from the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice describes, "Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in movements recognizing the impact of generations of trauma, systemic violence, oppression and war on their communities. Organizers are refusing to separate an awareness of the traumatic impact of state violence from their strategies to build collective power."

This holistic, heart-centered approach acknowledges not only the urgency of the moment but also the impact that generations of decades of past trauma have had on communities and people. It does not expect people to compartmentalize everything they are going through – or issues that may be reignited by inequities in organizations at work. This approach has not been recognized by established progressive political organizations. That is starting to change, however, and young leaders of color avidly embrace the concepts and strategies necessary to embrace healing justice at the individual and organizational levels.

This approach can take different forms. Some organizations offer greater mental health support, open discussions and trainings on the impacts of racism, healing rituals, intentional acknowledgement of the Indigenous land they are on, and programming that uplifts histories

of resilience. What they all have in common is a strong belief in the need to deal with past trauma in order to create foundational change. Whether people intend to bring up trauma and the need for healing, the topic always comes up. People deserve safe spaces, and grounding organizational structures in a healing justice framework provides an intentional way to create them.

YOUTH LEADERS HAVE AN EXPANSIVE DEFINITION OF PARTNERSHIP

Philanthropic partners can become an integral part of youth engagement work. Many of the young leaders of color interviewed made it clear that they see the role of their funding and donor community as an essential one in the work, including some funders and donors serving as partners and trusted advisors in organizational and individual development. When asked who their most important partner was on the national level, several leaders named a foundation or a program officer. This is because of the trusting relationships they have developed and the faith that the foundations have shown in them as leaders in recent years which value honest reflection and reporting over a "smoke and mirrors" approach to grant reports that center questions on whether grantees align with funder priorities.

Youth leaders appreciate philanthropic partners for their guidance and emotional support, and for the ways they can help with problem-solving. Foundation staff have facilitated connections, particularly for youth of color leaders, to donors and movement partners who may have otherwise ignored them. In late 2019, YEF advanced an initial \$50,000 grant to [Rural Arizona Engagement](#)

(RAZE), an emerging organization at the time focused on organizing and mobilizing youth and communities in civic deserts across Arizona into civic participation. Back then RAZE was a two staff team, both unpaid Co-Executive Directors. Seeds grants such as the one YEF advanced to RAZE, help emerging organizations to add organizational capacity to scale their programmatic and fundraising strategies to build a solid foundation towards organizational growth and sustainability. Within a year of their launch, RAZE had ten full time staff and positioned their role in youth leadership development and civic engagement in key rural counties in Arizona.



BUILDING AND FLEXING YOUTH POWER

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES FACED BY THE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SECTOR

Four central themes emerged in conversations with movement partners about what is holding back the leadership and potential for political power among youth-led organizing groups. State by state, movement partners shared their concerns that they're not equipped to fully own their work, to build and grow together, and to lead where they live. It is critical to understand these challenges to make real changes in the ways we trust, listen, and resource these groups.

Moving from Charity to Trust

Youth, especially youth of color, are often not trusted as movement leaders to fully govern their organizations and strategies, which often results in disproportionate levels of funding and being sidelined or silenced during strategy discussions. As philanthropic partners, we must proactively shift our giving from an act of charity as though “we are helping them”, doing young people a favor to one where we are partners in a shared vision and thus are moving resources, writing checks, making grants, and connecting young leaders to prospect philanthropic

partners to unlock the potential to build movements, win on the issues that impact us across generations, and develop a new generation of civic leaders.

Not Enough Anti-Racist Mentors

Young people of color struggle with white supremacist norms and structures which remain embedded in progressive social movements. Youth of color are aware of the gap in mentorship opportunities and real commitment from movement leaders to dismantle racist norms and implement affirmative action and equity initiatives; center program priorities around the needs of those most impacted, and provide space for young people to take on leadership positions and decision making authority.

Young leaders of color also report a shared need for capacity-building opportunities centering on organizational management, staff supervision, fundraising, and best practices for anti-racist movement building. The need for training feels especially urgent when a leader is a first-time executive director and is thrown into the deep end of the pool with expectations to develop fundraising strategies, approve long and

short-term plans, often while managing staff and grant-writing responsibilities for the first time. This was emphasized by young leaders of color who often endure hyper scrutiny and unreasonable high expectations from funders and larger organizations.

As a result, young leaders of color report intense levels of stress around making a mistake or changing organizational dynamics. Young leaders of color also report high levels of pressure to operate within, while dismantling white supremacist norms in their organizations. To avoid high turnover, young leaders need supportive spaces and tailored coaching and capacity building opportunities reflective of their role and organization. It is crucial that young leaders of color are supported and funded to succeed in their roles –this means ensuring that all the line items in the budget are supported (ideally through a general support grant), including items such as executive coaching, hiring facilitators for staff retreats, organizational development consultants, and conflict resolution mediators. Investment in shared spaces and skill-building opportunities to this balance of talent and leadership potential help close this gap between expectation and reality.

Pressure to Bring in Money without Access to Wealth and Privilege

One source of serious pressure is the need to fundraise. Staff are counting on their paychecks. There are bills to be paid, and organizations often rely on a dizzying network of grants, business contributions, and individual donations to sustain their budgets. This pressure to sustain and grow funding is

particularly intense for young leaders of color who come from organizations that have been systematically marginalized and are less likely to have connections with foundation program officers and wealthy donors, family or friends than their white peers. Yet, fundraising trainings often emphasize building the base of a fundraising strategy on these personal connections.

There are not enough resources or bridges for young leaders of color to connect with foundation staff that hold the key to grants, support, and legitimacy. Youth of color reported the difficulty in gaining access to invitations for proposals, lunches with individual donors, and meetings with program officers, and this fuels the “imposter syndrome” that many young leaders of color feel because they often do not move in circles with, or have connections to, wealthy people. They are saddled with assumptions about access to wealth, which leaves them alienated. They struggle to feel comfortable in traditionally exclusionary spaces and, as a result, end up stressed and disproportionately focused on this systemic issue over the other critical components of executive leadership and organizational development.

Limited Opportunity at the State Level Creates High Turnover

Young people want to grow and serve their communities, but opportunities to lead at the state level are few. Young people of color, especially in the South and Southwest, often find themselves aging out of their youth political homes and organizations and considering moves to the West or East Coasts to continue advancing in social movements



where there is more nonprofit funding, infrastructure, and opportunity to make change.

This is a problem not only for the youth, but for the vibrancy of movements in these states. We have yet to invest in state-level infrastructure and pipelines to give leaders opportunities to keep advancing as they graduate from college and leave behind student organizing, move away from home, or age out of youth work altogether. Too often, the bulk of foundation support goes to national organizations centered in a handful of cities on the coasts. Movement partners share that when young people age out of youth leadership programs or roles, the most competent and promising leaders often get snapped up by campaigns or internships in Washington, D.C, New York, California or national organizations and campaigns. Local, community-based projects find it hard to compete or entice youth back home once they have secured a higher salary and time has passed since they left home. They would love support in finding ways to hold on to the leaders which go through youth leadership pipelines in their state and want to continue to grow their role and skill sets and serve in their home state. There is an open question of how organizations can provide opportunities to leaders at the upper end of the age spectrum or encourage them to stay and build state and local movements, and a distinct role philanthropy can play in incubating organizations to seed an enduring nonprofit infrastructure across the South and Southwest.

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD LASTING YOUTH OF COLOR LEADERSHIP

Our research has uncovered shared insights about the steps we should collectively take to support and strengthen young people of color centering infrastructure and skills development alongside long-term investment in holistic organizing efforts and the organizers who commit themselves to the work. The following opportunities and recommendations create a path for funders, civic engagement groups, and all those supporting grassroots organizing to confront the challenges and support thriving and enduring social movements across the South and Southwest that center youth of color from the very beginning.

Invest in Youth of Color Centered Civic Engagement Spaces

Young leaders of color are building political homes in their states and communities – to grow, develop new skills, sustain, and address the legacies of white supremacy in social change movements. Without investments in such infrastructure, we will not succeed in supporting the new generation of leaders representative of the changing racial dynamics of the South and Southwest.

Coordinated investments in infrastructure development have been successfully employed by white supremacists over the last 4 decades, concentrated in the South and Southwest, resulting in regressive policy efforts including gerrymandering, creating barriers to voting rights, criminalizing abortion, and perpetuating human rights abuses at the U.S. Mexico border. YEF priority states of Arizona, Texas, Georgia, and Florida represent

areas where bad policy is tested regularly for national implementation. Investing in leadership development and spaces centering youth of color will strengthen the ability for youth of color led organizations to respond to coordinated efforts that maintain the status quo and further dismantle our democratic values, norms, and institutions.

Now that national youth voter turnout hit 50% in the November 2020 elections and 23% in the 2022 midterm elections, philanthropy is paying more attention to young people's impact. Now is the time for foundations and donors to launch bold new initiatives investing in youth of color-led groups and to create real metrics around racial equity in grantmaking. To build a vibrant youth movements across the Southern and Southwestern states, philanthropic institutions need to embrace multi-year funding, give more general support, reexamine grantmaking for unnecessary burden on grantees, and tear down the barriers that have made it difficult for youth of color groups to not only sustain but soar with the resources and agency traditionally afforded to white-led and focused groups.

Often, implicit bias and tradition gets in the way of the investments needed. Assumptions about age and the readiness of young people to lead campaigns, incorrect and racist notions about the ability of youth of color to succeed, or to scale their work, perpetuates this shameful under-investment in youth of color-led groups. Funders can be reluctant to shift long-held funding strategies. But, when we look to history and see the impact youth movements have had on our nation, we see that youth of color are some of the greatest

movers of social progress. From suffrage, civil rights, anti-war movements to growing momentum around climate justice, gun control, and economic reforms, young people have stood up for change time and time again. The best way we can propel them to make lasting change is by building infrastructure – devoting more resources to multi-year funding streams, state-based collaboratives and networks with a real place for young leaders of color.

Provide More Training & Holistic Support to Youth Leaders of Color

Due to centuries of white supremacist thought that dismisses the power of youth of color, there is a tremendous amount of pressure on young people of color to prove themselves early on in their careers. Youth leaders of color often feel they are constantly under disproportionate scrutiny, and that if they make a mistake it will be taken as proof that they are incapable of leading. They deserve supportive spaces where they can learn from peers and work with mentors to recognize their individual contributions and build confidence in their work.

Generally, young people entering into the workforce often seek trainings on everything from the super practical aspects of nonprofit management like fundraising and overseeing staff to holistic areas like wellness and self-care. Especially in smaller organizations, youth leaders are at times hired for their organizing skills, and need support to strengthen their skill sets in areas like financial management or media relations. Skill-building opportunities focused on the best ways to use data and new technologies

is also important as voter engagement tactics become more sophisticated. Finally, all young leaders need leadership development and mentoring that is rooted in racial equity and anti-racism – programming that is sorely missing in many places.

The philanthropic community has an opportunity to get onboard with outsized investments to youth of color led organizations and programs like endowments for youth groups, safety and security funds, networking and learning opportunities, and funding more overhead and admin to ease the financial pressure on young leaders. The pressures on young leaders of color and the relative newness of so many of these organizations - all but three of the organizations that responded to our demographic survey were founded in the last 10 years - means that extra support is needed to help these organizations stabilize and thrive. It is imperative that the philanthropic sector adjusts giving practices to facilitate long-term sustainability of youth of color-led civic engagement organizations.

Invest in Integrated Voter Engagement at the State Level

Philanthropy can materially shift the civic landscape in the South and West with long-term support of integrated voter engagement strategies, those combining community organizing, issue advocacy, and voter engagement. State work is the best place to incubate and develop youth of color leadership and progressive policy ideas where their efforts can be felt at home and in their communities. Young people of color's impacts on the state level policy landscape is already immense. In 2020, waves of activism

in the wake of yet another Black man's, George Floyd, murder at the hands of police, introduced the concept of prison abolition to the public as a solution to reduce police violence against Black people with protests, bills at the municipal and state level, and voter engagement to move measures and charter amendments forward. Investing at the state level is a critical strategy to make sure we are continuing this momentum and building movements that are truly responsive and inclusive to the needs of people that come from different classes, races, religions, and cultural experiences.

Part of making progress in these states is focusing on issues over the long haul through integrated voter engagement. Integrated voter engagement embraces long-term organizing alongside issue and civic engagement to create a dynamic view of power and how to flex it. Movement partners develop an incredibly strong understanding of intersectional politics, often by building tables and coalitions across issues like climate change, worker wages, student debt, gun safety, criminal justice, and democracy reform. Embracing an intersectional strategy ensures the greatest number of people united behind the issue, and provides an opportunity for young organizers to build lasting connections with peers and community members as they build new campaigns against new and enduring injustices.



TRUST. FUND. AND FOLLOW

2020 and 2021 was an inflection point for all of us.

We needed a collective pause to better understand how we can unlock this potential and create the institutional shifts that increase funding and resources to youth of color for long-term movement building and increased self-governance.

This report was aimed at providing a fuller picture of youth organizing and civic engagement in the South and Southwest during a historic two years (2020 and 2021). Our efforts, compiling the thoughts and sentiments of dozens of movement partners alongside qualitative and quantitative data of the landscape, affirms the critical role youth of color play in democracy-building work at a time when the fundamental workings of our democracy are questioned and systematically dismantled. What we witnessed across the South and Southwest is the culmination of long-term organizing

over decades. It is full of lessons for current and new donors in philanthropy who want to double down on these efforts as a way to prepare and build the kinds of multi-racial coalitions and robust state infrastructures needed for organizing, civic engagement and sustainable organizations ahead of 2024 and for decades to come. Imagine what our democracy can look like in 10 years if the funding community and civic engagement sector at large embraced the expertise and excellence of youth of color.

We at the Youth Engagement Fund stand in our role as a philanthropic partner and funding intermediary to best serve our movement partners. We are investing in and committed to build, grow and catalyze the organizing and voting power of young people of color in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas. We invite you to join us and our movement partners in advancing a multiracial, dignified democracy for all.

Appendix A

2020-2021 MOVEMENT PARTNERS

Between 2020 and 2021 YEF granted over \$6 million to 70 movement partners primarily in the South and Southwest regions of the United States*. These movement partners reflect youth-led and youth-focused civic engagement organizations where at the time, 80% were led people of color Executive Directors and 71% of them were led by women of color Executive Directors.

A list of our 2020-2021 movement partners is below:

- Aguila Youth Leadership
- Alliance For Youth Organizing
- Arizona Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander for Equity Coalition
- Arizona Center for Empowerment
- Arizona Coalition for Change
- Arizona Dream Act Coalition
- Arizona Jews For Justice
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta
- Black Alliance for Just Immigration
- Black Phoenix Organizing Collective
- BYP 100
- Cafè New Mexico
- Campus Vote Project at Fair Elections Center
- Center for Civic Policy
- Chispa Arizona
- CorAZon Arizona
- Deeds Not Words
- Desis Rising Up & Moving
- Dream Defenders
- Florida Student Power Network
- Fuerte Arts Movement
- Future Coalition
- GA Latino Alliance for Human Rights
- GALEO
- Georgia Muslim Voter Project
- Georgia Shift
- HeadCount
- Indigenous Women Rising
- Inter Tribal Council of Arizona
- Jolt Initiative
- March for Our Lives
- Mi Familia Vota
- Mississippi Votes
- Momentum
- MOVE Texas
- MPower
- NAACP Youth + College Division
- NACA Inspired Schools Network
- Native American Voters Alliance
- New Era Colorado
- New Mexico Dream Team
- NextGen
- Ohio Student Association
- One Arizona
- One Love Global
- Organization of Chinese Americans - Phoenix
- Planned Parenthood Generation
- Poder in Action
- Poder Latinx
- Power California
- Power U
- ProGeorgia
- Puente Arizona
- Puente Human Rights Movement
- RE:THINK
- Rural Arizona Engagement
- Seeding Sovereignty
- Sister Song
- Southern Fried Queer Pride
- SPARK Reproductive Justice Now!
- Step Up Louisiana
- Student PIRGs
- Sunrise Movement
- Texas Rising at Texas Freedom Network
- United We Dream Network
- Vote Riders
- Woke Vote
- Women Engaged
- Women with a Vision
- Youth Rise Texas

*2020 giving included Response Action funding to an expanded number of states to respond to the COVID 19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on communities of color across the country.