Walking a Tightrope of Advocacy: Community Organizations as Mediators between Voter Suppression and Voter Participation

Commentary for the Independent Sector/ARNOVA Nonprofit Public Policy Forum

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, voter suppression efforts have increased dramatically across the U.S. These restrictions are deeply rooted in a history of exclusion and suppression of voters based on race, gender, and class. Community organizations, with their deep roots, knowledge, and trust among historically undercounted communities, have significant potential to mitigate racialized political threats in ways that counter voter suppression and facilitate greater voter participation among those communities. Scholars argue that descriptive representation, when leaders of an organization mirror the politically relevant characteristics of its constituents such as race, ethnicity, and gender, can play an important role as nonprofits mediate or bridge between historically marginalized constituents and the promise of representative democracy. Reflecting on our recent research on outreach during the 2020 census count, we argue that the labor of descriptive representation, particularly in the face of racialized political threats like voter suppression, is highly skilled and more complex than currently indicated in the literature. Staff who share a racial or ethnic identity with their constituents work to break barriers to access, provide nuanced linguistic and cultural translation, perform extensive sociocultural labor to build trust, and engage in intense cognitive and emotional labor as they weigh the benefits and risks of encouraging their constituents to engage with government. We call for greater awareness of the role of descriptive labor and increased investment in community organizations, staff, and coalitions that are essential for transforming voter suppression into voter mobilization among historically disenfranchised communities.

Walking a Tightrope of Advocacy: Community Organizations as Mediators between Voter Suppression and Voter Participation

Over the past two decades, voter suppression efforts have increased dramatically across the U.S. Aided by the Supreme Court's 2013 decision to eliminate key provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act that required federal oversight of districts, states have introduced a wide range of laws that place direct burdens on people's right to vote. During the first half of 2021, 49 states have introduced more than 400 bills that restrict access to voting, and at least 18 states have enacted 30 voter restriction laws (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). Such measures include raising requirements for identification, purging names from the rolls of registered voters, shortening early voting periods, and closing polling places. Across the country, voters have faced long lines and broken machines on election day and many states have placed limitations on absentee and mail-in voting. Some states are imposing "arbitrary requirements and harsh penalties on voters and poll workers" who violate these restrictions (ACLU, 2021). In Georgia, lawmakers have made it a crime to provide food and water to voters standing in line at the polls. In Texas, people have been arrested and sentenced for mistakes made during the voting process.

These restrictions are deeply rooted in a history of exclusion and suppression of voters based on race, gender, and class. When ratified in 1788, the U.S. Constitution contained no universal right to vote, instead granting the power to shape the rules and processes for elections to the states which largely restricted voting to white, male landowners. Since Reconstruction, periods of expanded suffrage have been met with violence and resistance with individual states contesting legal protections and restrictions, including grandfather clauses, poll taxes, literacy tests, English-language requirements, and other forms of intimidation. Often justified as procedures to reduce fraud, voting restrictions were deliberately designed and differentially applied as a way of deliberately reducing the political power of Black, Native, immigrant, and low-income residents (Clayton, 2004; Keyssar, 2000; Manheim & Porter, 2018; Schaeffer, 2019). Felon disenfranchisement, carceral debt and limited pathways to immigrant naturalization have been challenged as antidemocratic and disproportionately harmful to low-income communities of color (Cammett, 2012). The impact is clear: people of color are significantly less likely to vote than whites, particularly during mid-term elections (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). During the 2020 elections, 70.9 percent of eligible white voters cast ballots compared with only 58.4 percent of non-white voters (Morris & Grange, 2020).

Scholars have established that community organizations, with their deep roots, knowledge, and longstanding relationships of trust, have significant potential to mitigate racialized political threats in ways that counter voter suppression and facilitate greater voter participation among communities of color. Scholars have also asserted that descriptive representation, when leaders of an organization mirror the

politically relevant characteristics of its constituents such as race, ethnicity, and gender, can play an important role as community organizations conduct the outreach essential to transforming the fear and anxiety induced by voter suppression into voter mobilization. In this commentary, we build on these findings to reflect on the work required of organizations engaged in voter mobilization, arguing that descriptive representation and threat mobilization require labor that is highly skilled, culturally specific, and significantly more complex than currently indicated in the literature. In our recent research on outreach during the 2020 census count (Feit, et al., 2021), we found that staff who share a racial or ethnic identity with their constituents conducted census outreach to break barriers to *access*, provide nuanced *translation*, perform extensive *sociocultural labor* that builds trust, and engage in intense *cognitive and emotional labor* as they weigh the benefits and risks of encouraging their constituents to engage with the government. We conclude with a call for greater awareness of the role of descriptive labor and increased investment in community organizations, coalitions, and staff of color who are essential for moving from voter suppression to voter mobilization among historically disenfranchised communities.

Literature Review

Threat Mobilization

Scholars of political science have vigorously debated the impact of racialized political threat on voter participation among people of color and immigrants in the U.S. (Nichols & Garibaldo Valdéz, 2020). Some have argued that discrimination can motivate racialized groups to become more engaged in the public sphere and in politics. Multiple studies have found that the rise of restrictive immigration policy proposals and xenophobic speech in the 1990's and 2000's mobilized collective action in immigrant communities (Voss & Bloemraad, 2011); prompted changes in partisan affiliation for both Latino and white voters (Bowler et al., 2006); led to surges in new voter registration and turnout among Latinos (Barreto, 2005; Barreto et al., 2009); and increased voter participation among Latino and Asian immigrants (Ramakrishnan, 2005).

Others have argued that racialized threat may prompt risk-averse behaviors among racialized groups, ultimately dampening civic or political involvement (Cruz Nichols & Valdez, 2020). Studies have also found that accelerated immigration enforcement in the 2000's may have given new life to the immigrant rights movement, but the hostile climate caused other community members to withdraw from political participation (Gomberg-Muñoz & Nussbaum-Barberena, 2011; Andrews, 2018). And the more recent rise in harsh immigration enforcement policies has had a 'spillover effect' for Latinos including decreased mental and physical health, decreased trust in government, and increased reluctance to engage with health care professionals and police (Cruz Nichols, et al., 2018). Scholars have pointed to a pattern

of “cautious citizenship,” that involves strategic decision making before Latino residents expose themselves or their family and friends to the risk of questions about their immigration status (Pedraza, et al., 2017). Trump’s rhetoric throughout the 2016 presidential election corresponded with a retreat from public life among Muslim Americans (Hobbs & Lajevardi, 2019), and the rise of violence, harassment and hate speech directed at Asian Americans has led to greater vulnerability and fear of deportation among Hmong, Indian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, and Cambodian Americans (PRRI Staff, 2019; Yellow Horse, et al, 2021)

Many scholars agree, however, that the nonpartisan mobilization efforts of civic and community organizations play an important role in mitigating racialized political threat and can have a direct, positive impact on voter turnout. During the civil rights era, institutions such as the Black church and civil rights organizations provided the “emotional, motivational, and organizational resources” that facilitated activism and mobilization among Black Americans (Parker, 2009, p. 113). In recent decades, community organizations have also provided a critical source of political socialization and mobilization among Latino and Asian American immigrants (Jones-Correa, 1998; Ramakrishnan, 2005; Wong, 2017). Studies of immigrant political engagement have emphasized that threat alone does not increase political action (Reny, et al) and active institutional mobilization by candidate, ethnic party and civic organizations is essential (White, 2016). While political campaigns and party organizations have consistently lagged in outreach to communities of color (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2021; Ramakrishnan, 2005), community organizations can address this gap with expanded mobilization that reaches disenfranchised voters of color (Albaladejo, 2020).

Descriptive Representation

Studies have also documented how nonprofit organizations and voluntary associations serve as vital civic intermediaries in democratic practices in the U.S. Scholars, many concentrated in public and nonprofit administration, have devoted significant attention to understanding the capacity of organizations to mediate and represent the interests of their constituencies, tracing how nonprofits act as bridges to representative democracy by building essential networks, reciprocity and trust (Schneider, 2007); passing information between the grassroots and government, reducing isolation, and fostering engagement (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Harris & Milofsky, 2019); promoting civic awareness (Clarke, 2000); modeling participatory practices (Suarez, 2020); and advocating for the interests of their constituents to shape public policy (Guo & Musso, 2007). To a lesser extent, they have also studied how nonprofits facilitate more active engagement in political processes among their constituents (LeRoux, 2007), educating constituents about government offices, laws, and regulations, encouraging the development of

political attitudes and behaviors, mobilizing them for political actions, and promoting participation in democratic practices (Warren, 2001).

Scholars have also asserted that descriptive representation, when leaders of an organization mirror the politically relevant characteristics of its constituents such as race, ethnicity, and gender, can assist nonprofits to mediate or bridge between historically marginalized constituents and the promise of representative democracy. LeRoux's (2009) research, for example, suggests that nonprofits engage in political representation, education, and mobilization at higher rates when leadership is more racially reflective of the organization's constituents. Similarly, scholars in political science and public administration have highlighted how descriptive representation can impact the ability of public organizations to produce greater equity and effectiveness (Ding, et al., 2021; Meier, 2019). Empirical studies have found that constituents have more confidence or trust when they share salient demographic characteristics with the bureaucrats who are serving them (Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017). Under the right conditions, symbolic representation can be translated into more active, substantive representation and bureaucrats may push for decisions, policy, and practices that are most beneficial for constituents who share a salient identity (Ding, et al., 2021; Meier, 2019). For example, García Bedolla and Michelson (2012) show how canvassers who shared a salient identity with prospective voters had a positive influence on voter participation.

Community Organizations and US Census 2020

Far less attention has been paid to the labor required for descriptive representation, particularly in the face of racialized political threats. To gain greater understanding of the ways that staff view their role in this work, our research team conducted a study of community organizations engaged in outreach for U.S. Census 2020 (Feit, et al., 2021). Like elections, the stakes of each census count are high. Census results are used to determine political representation, enforce voting rights and civil rights legislation, distribute federal dollars to states, inform policy makers, and continuously defining the boundaries of the racial and ethnic categories used in the U.S. Unlike voting, the U.S. constitution mandates that the federal government reach every resident in the country. The Census Bureau has long struggled to meet this mandate: non-Hispanic whites are likely to be overcounted and Latinos, Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, African Americans, and American Indians and Alaska Natives consistently undercounted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In the lead up to the 2020 count, the Bureau once again urged community organizations to serve as partners to reach historically undercounted communities and mitigate a potential undercount.

Community organizations across the country took up the charge, joining regional coalitions and serving as key partners with the Census Bureau. And they performed this work amid direct racialized

political threats which threatened to discourage participation and hamper the count. Yet, the Bureau provided no funding for outreach to partners, instead encouraging philanthropy and individual states to step in. The result was an uneven patchwork of funding and coordination across the U.S. By the end of 2019, twenty-six state governments had appropriated millions of dollars for census outreach and coordination, while twenty-four dedicated no monies at all.

Our research team used critical qualitative methods to ask staff to describe their census outreach work in their own terms, conducting 35 interviews with staff and funders in Washington state, which invested significantly in census outreach, and in Texas, which did not. Critical race theory allowed us to cut through the claims of objectivity and colorblindness embedded in the census as we centered the experiential knowledge of the staff who do this work (Ravitch & Carl Nicole, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We found that staff, particularly those who are descriptively representative, dedicated extensive time and energy to outreach and communication. This work was highly skilled, requiring staff to draw from their experiences and relationships to adapt, translate, interpret, and weigh the risks and benefits of participation in the count.

We draw from our census study to expand on research conducted on the effectiveness of community organizations in increasing voter turnout (García Bedolla & Michelson, 2012) and political participation (Carlson, et al., 2020; Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad, 2008):

Access

Community organizations perform an essential role in increasing the *access* that communities of color have to democratic practices like the census. During our research, respondents described the extensive outreach work that they were doing to ensure that their constituents could respond to the census survey: communicating the importance of the census to their constituents, removing barriers to participation, and facilitating the completion of the census questionnaire. Some organizations designed special outreach events such as tabling, phone banking, and radio broadcasts while others integrated conversations about the census with their existing case work and contacts with constituents. As advocacy groups emphasize, this focus on access is also a critical component of nonpartisan voter engagement efforts. Community organizations may provide constituents with key information about where and how to vote, distribute sample ballots, and assist constituents to reach polling places (NonprofitVOTE, 2021).

Deep Translation

A focus on access and information alone, however, does not reflect the complexity of the work of mobilization. In our study, staff emphasized their role as *translators* during census outreach, focusing on the need to ensure that their constituents understood the questions in the census questionnaire. If their

constituents spoke a language beyond the 12 languages prioritized by the Bureau, staff needed to locate or translate the materials themselves. Similarly, translation is a critical factor for voter mobilization (García Bedolla & Michelson, 2012). Studies have shown that bilingual language assistance can increase turnout for Latino citizens with limited English proficiency (Hopkins, 2011; Parkin, 2011). The language minority provisions of the Voting Rights Act requires that state and local governments provide all written materials related to the electoral process in the language of the applicable minority group, but there are many restrictions (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020) and the law is not consistently enforced (Benson, 2007). The staff of community organizations, particularly those who are bilingual or multilingual, provide an important bridge between their constituents and access to the vote.

Here, staff also emphasized their roles in reframing political threat and providing cultural translation. They thought carefully about which messages would reach and address the caution or fears of their constituents. At the same time, they emphasized the need to adapt materials provided by the Bureau for their constituents, which as one respondent emphasized were "written very white." Given the racialized norms and assumptions embedded in the census questionnaire, staff also worked closely with individual constituents who struggled to translate the realities of their lives into the expectations about racial or ethnic identity, gender identity and family structure embedded in the questionnaire. As Bonilla-Silva has argued (2012), racial domination necessitates a "racial grammar" that normalizes the standards of white supremacy in everyday transactions and renders domination "almost invisible." In this work of translation, staff were required to not only be aware of this racialized grammar but also fluent in how to help constituents interpret their lives and identities into the forms and regulations of government. As community organizations conduct nonpartisan voter engagement, they confront the ways that racism is embedded in the voting process, legislation and ballot measures that impact their constituents.

Sociocultural Labor of Building Trust

During our census research, staff who were representative of the race or ethnicity of their constituents also described their role as *trust building*. Some built trust through visible markers of shared identity, emphasizing how important it was to their constituents that they "look like them." As note above, this symbolic descriptive representation has been found to have a positive impact on voter mobilization. In their study of descriptive representation of poll workers, King and Barnes (2019) found that having an in-person voting interaction with a poll worker who is of the same race increased voter confidence in the election. As García Bedolla and Michelson (2012) found, canvassers may also build trust actively, reading visual and linguistic cues, establishing a connection through dialogue, and using personal stories and shared understanding to make connections and allay concerns of risk and exposure that constituents may have had about the voting process (p. 9).

Sociocultural interactions are critical in descriptive representation, and outreach and mobilization are most effective when outreach workers situate their efforts within the specific sociocultural and historical contexts of potential voters. Political conversations, even those that are nonpartisan, are a dialogic process that helps people to interpret and evaluate political events (McGraw, 2000), activate, create, and transform collective identities (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001) and shape decision making. Mobilization requires a "deep level of organizational commitment, investment and political will" as well as specific knowledge of the lives of voters (García Bedolla, et al, 2012, p. 133). Ethnic and racial groups are not monoliths, and effective descriptive representation requires knowledge and respect for the intersecting identities of constituents (Crenshaw, 2017). Staff of community organizations often build longer term relationships with their constituents that allow for connections and nuanced political conversations that engender greater dialogue, trust, and mutual understanding.

A Tightrope of Cognitive and Emotional Labor

Outreach also requires staff to engage in the cognitive and emotional labor needed to assist constituents to grapple with the fear and mistrust that they may hold towards government. This mistrust may be rooted in past experiences with repressive regimes in immigrants' countries of origin or with the historically specific dynamics of racial governance in the U.S. During census outreach, staff grappled with their role, describing a tension between the need to ensure that constituents were counted, awareness of the historical harms inflicted on their communities in the name of democracy, and the very real potential harm that political participation could cause their constituents. Here, staff described their role as a "tightrope" or a "double-bind" as they weighed both the benefits and risks of engaging in democratic practices like the census. As Evans and Feagin (2015) argue, these careful calculations are "deeply linked" to understandings and articulations of centuries of systematic racialized harm inflicted on people of color (p. 891). Rather than frame political disengagement or apathy or a lack of concern, these staff understood their constituents' hesitancy as a "logical product of having experienced a marginalized social position" (Carson, Abrajano and Garcia Bedolla, 2020). Many of the staff shared their own analyses of the history of racialized harm inflicted by the Bureau in the past on African American, Japanese American, and Muslim American residents, and their fears that the government could use the data gathered for U.S. Census 2020 to target their constituents. They described the difficulties of asking transgender clients to misgender themselves or Latino clients to simplify the complexities of their ethnic or racial identities into the static categories on the questionnaire.

This "cognitive puzzling and strategizing" (Evans, 2015) was often less visible. Staff are practitioners of caring labor (Sandberg & Elliott, 2019) with all the complexity, ambiguity and contradictions of emotional and relationship management required of many nonprofit jobs. For staff of

color, this emotional labor is also racialized (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). The deconstruction and assessment of racism and white supremacy in institutions and systems requires the active shaping and managing of emotions and feelings within the context of structural and/or institutional racism (Hochschild, 1983; See also Evans and Clay, 2018). The work is also substantive: staff engaged in outreach must address the fears their constituents may express as they prepare for encounters with government officials or journey into predominantly white spaces (Anderson, 2015), and must assess the risks to their constituents, to themselves and their organizations as they work to transform fear, anxiety, and anger into political mobilization (Cruz Nichols and Valdez, 2020; Valentino, et al., 2011).

Looking to the Future: Investing in Community Organizations & Staff of Color

Even as community organizations are being asked to mitigate the effect of rising political threats and increase political engagement among communities of color, they are called on to address many other inequities. In recent decades, governments have increasingly come to rely on community organizations to fill the gaps left by failures of the public and private sectors (Alexander & Nank, 2009; Smith & Lipsky, 1993), address health disparities (Wilson, et al., 2012), engage immigrant and refugee communities (Vu, et al, 2017), serve veterans and residents of rural areas (Abrams, et al., 2016), and seed movements for social and environmental justice (Bester & Jean, 2012; Hidayat & Stoeker, 2018; Nichols, 2014). With the COVID-19 pandemic and struggle for racial justice, these pressures on community organizations have only escalated (Douglas and Iyer, 2020).

What are the consequences of undervaluing the complex, skilled labor required for descriptive representation? Most community organizations, particularly those led by and for people of color, continue to operate with small budgets and highly restricted funding streams (Le, 2018). In our census study, the organizations with staff with the most relevant sociocultural knowledge and skills consistently had the smallest budgets and employed the least number of staff. This mirrors the well-documented funding gap between white-led organizations and those led by people of color in the sector at large (Dorsey, et al., 2020; Pittz & Sen, 2004). Recent studies have found that early-stage Black-led organizations have on-average 24% lower revenues (Dorsey, et al, 2020) and community foundations in the U.S. designate just 1% for Black communities (Barge, et. al., 2020). Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad (2008) argue, even as community organizations that serve immigrants play an important role in political incorporation, their impact is often compromised by political marginalization and a severe lack of resources.

Effective political mobilization of historically excluded communities will require a "significant amount of organizational capacity and [numerous] resources" (García Bedolla & Michelson, 2012, p. 170). As we argue that public and private funders must dramatically increase funding to community organizations led by and for people of color, we also urge a shift in how that funding is allocated. First,

we recommend expanded measures of organizational capacity. Too often, models of effective nonprofit organizational capacity have been structured on standard and managerialist assumptions embedded in the private sector (Eikenberry, 2009) Community organizations, characterized by their embeddedness in communities, permeable boundaries, reliance on relationships, process, and voluntary action, are less likely to fit the narrow standards identified as ‘high capacity’ and more likely to be viewed as “failed corporate entities” (Cnaan & Milofsky, 2008). We need new models of capacity building that value the work of fostering and sustaining social capital and the relationships based in patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust that are so central to political mobilization (Schneider, 2007). We call on funders to explicit recognize the value of these organizational characteristics, and the sociocultural cognitive and emotional labor required of staff of color, who are working towards greater political engagement and participation among historically excluded communities.

Second, we call for funders to provide unrestricted funding to community organizations led by and for people of color. Racialized political threat can be hyperlocal, varying by region, state, city, and neighborhood (Maginot, 2021). The work of mobilization requires space for the discretion (Lipsky, 1980) and adaptation staff need to assess the shifting landscape and adjust their tactics and strategies to meet the needs and opportunities for the communities they serve in real time. During our census study, staff cited the value of unrestricted funding in allowing them to quickly pivot and adapt their outreach strategies in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, funding awarded to community organization often comes with restrictions, limiting their ability to invest in the staff and infrastructure needed to respond to community needs. Dorsey, et al (2020) found that unrestricted net assets of Black-led organizations are 76% smaller than their white-led counterparts. This “stark disparity in unrestricted assets” is particularly startling as such funding “often represents a proxy for trust” (El-Mekki, 2020). Funders, and those in positional leadership within organizations, must place trust in the ability of staff of color to design and deliver the solutions that their communities most need.

Finally, we call attention to the importance of coalition work. Coalitions played an essential role in census outreach, particularly for community organizations in Washington state. Early investments in both the on-the-groundwork of community organizations and in expanding and sustaining a coalition of public and private partners, including political advocacy organizations and nonprofit capacity building associations, supported community organizations to share ideas, troubleshoot issues and develop and adapt effective strategies for outreach throughout the census count. Other scholars have also argued that networks can play an important role in mediating the negative impact of marginalization and encouraging immigrant political engagement (Carlson, et al., 2020; Cordero-Guzmán, et al., 2008). Fostering coalitions may also provide important venues for community organizations to work collectively, challenge voter suppression and advocate for greater protections for all voters.

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