

Civic Engagement & Government

In the United States, a history of systemic inequities has led to a democracy that does not accurately represent modern America. Many communities—people of color, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, youth, and the LGBTQ+ community—have been denied equal voice and access to fully participate in democracy at all levels. As a result, their voices are too often silenced in conversations about government, from its spending to policymaking. We work to ensure all people have the opportunity to shape and influence the systems and policies that affect their lives.

The Challenge

America has long struggled to fully live up to the promise of democracy. Trust in the government's value and impact has eroded with the reversal of protections including the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, ongoing partisan gerrymandering, and eroding the ability of government to conduct a fair, accurate, and complete census.

Today's situation is dire: new forms of voter suppression such as strict voter ID laws, roll purging, and polling site closures have emerged in dozens of states to deter civic engagement. As a result, only 53 percent of eligible voters were able to cast a ballot in 2018, with communities of color disproportionately silenced. Across race, class, generation, and geography, everyday people lack access and opportunities to engage with government in a way that translates into political influence and a role in shaping a more just future.

The Opportunity

America's political systems were originally designed to exclude, but today it is impossible to ignore historically marginalized communities. Shifting demographics coupled with revived energy from movements such as the Dreamers, Black Lives Matter, and the disability community have brought these injustices to the forefront. We're witnessing a new political awakening, fueled by digital organizing and a rise of intersectional, multi-issue coalitions, and compounded by unprecedented health and economic crises. But many of our current structures for civic engagement don't encourage robust, diverse participation—in fact, they prevent specific communities from engaging with government.

The country's institutions and policies need reimagining. By centering historically marginalized people in reform efforts, we can realize a truly inclusive civic culture that represents the will of all people. By increasing opportunities for diverse communities to lead and participate in civic affairs, we have an opportunity to achieve a more just society.

Our work is designed to build strong institutions and networks that serve those on the margins and elevate the next generation of advocates and leaders across civil society and within government to champion a fairer, more inclusive civic life.

Portfolio Snapshot

Budget
\$23 million

Grantees
174

BUILD Budget
\$90 million

BUILD Grantees
30

Our Aim and Approach

Our work puts the people systematically excluded from government participation at the center of efforts to reform and protect democratic processes. We support a mix of grassroots, policy, and advocacy organizations led by people of color, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, youth, and the LGBTQ+ community. By targeting communities that have been traditionally silenced, we can ensure every voice is heard.

We work with these communities to create more opportunities for civic leadership and participation. We focus on both the formal ways in which people are seen and heard—specifically a fair, accurate census and the right to vote—and the informal ways people can exercise civic leadership and collective power every day in pursuit of social justice.

We concentrate on four integrated areas:

- **Building bridges between grassroots organizations and policy and legal advocates.** By creating a united front, these key players will become more effective in tackling critical issues such as protecting voter rights and ensuring a fair, accurate census with transparent, community-driven redistricting processes.
- **Strengthening the power of grassroots organizations and organizing networks.** We work to ensure these important players are elevated as leaders and issue advocates, to drive policy change at the state and national levels while remaining accountable to the diverse communities they serve.

- **Developing the next generation of civic leaders.** We support the growth of historically marginalized people, in particular young people and emerging leaders, to develop their capacities and help them build the networks to sustain their development.
- **Fostering coordination.** We improve collaboration between philanthropy and organizations focused on civic engagement, so they have the support and opportunities they need to secure equal participation for all voices for a more effective democracy.

Our Impact

Our goal is to increase the representation, both formally and informally, of historically marginalized and disenfranchised communities in the democratic process to build a better America. We work toward three outcomes:

- **Essential reforms that lead to a more effective democracy.** Historically excluded communities will have stronger voter protections, be more accurately represented in the census and at the polls, and wield more political power because of fairer redistricting.
- **Increased participation and leadership.** Grassroots organizations will have a stronger, engaged membership base, and more civil society and government leaders will come from historically excluded communities.
- **A government reflective of America.** Government, at all levels, will include members of historically excluded populations in leadership roles and embrace more community involvement in decision-making.

Grantee Snapshot

Protecting the polls in Texas

We fund the Texas Civil Rights Project to provide legal guidance and representation to a network of grassroots and civic engagement organizations. For 2020, it developed a robust voter protection program, recruiting and training attorneys and poll monitors from across the state to identify and respond to problems at the polls. When COVID-19 hit, TCRP was poised to respond quickly, outlining key steps Texas must take and launching a new coalition to demand action. When the state hesitated, TCRP sued and advocated for expanded vote-by-mail in the state. TCRP has also taken their efforts local and has worked with dozens of counties to pass policies that make it easier and safer to cast a ballot ahead of the November election.

Photo: Casey Chapman Ross

