

Building an Inclusive Democracy

Key Insights from the Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative

The James Irvine Foundation | March 2020

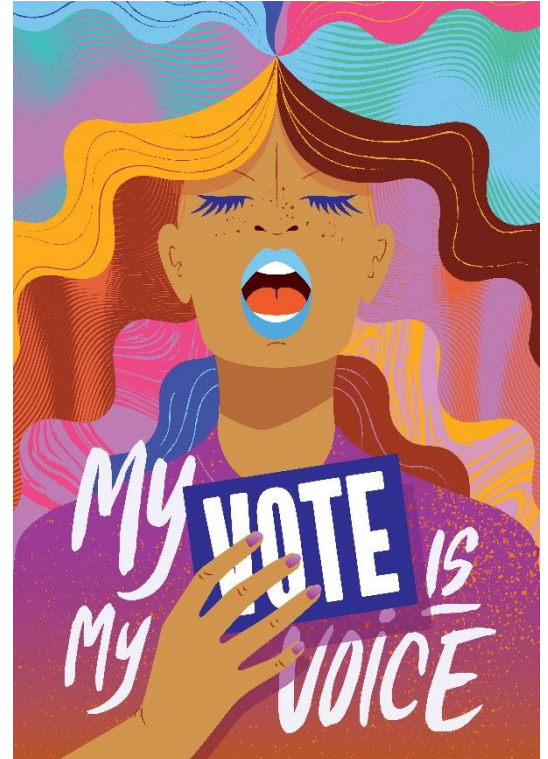
The Changing Face of California

Over the years, California has experienced significant population growth and demographic shifts, making the state one of the most diverse in the nation. Despite this growth, lack of investment in the state's physical and social infrastructure during the 1990s and early 2000s has left a significant number of Californians without access to healthcare, educational opportunities, and housing stability.

When The James Irvine Foundation launched its Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative (VCE) in 2003, California's body of voters was not representative of the state's eligible voting population. Voting rates were particularly low among people of color, those who are low-income, and younger adults. Communities of color in the state were also less likely to communicate with public officials. In an effort to reverse this growing chasm between who lives in California and who makes decisions at the ballot box, The James Irvine Foundation invested approximately \$140 million in grantee organizations over 15 years to foster greater participation in elections and public decision making among underrepresented populations, including communities that are low-income, of color, and immigrant.

Irvine's VCE investments have supported organizations across the state to continuously engage residents, cultivate leadership, and build civic infrastructure in ways that are transforming the state's electorate. Thanks to the collective investments of The Irvine Foundation and other philanthropic partners, California's policy landscape is being transformed and voter participation rates are on the rise. According to a recent article in the Capital Weekly, voter participation rates in California increased dramatically between 2014 and 2018, particularly among voters who have tended to participate at lower rates proportionate to their numbers in the population.¹

With the 2020 Census and electoral cycle on the horizon, these same organizations are poised and ready to ensure everyone is counted and all Californians have influence, voice, and representation at all levels of government. As the Foundation culminates nearly 15 years of VCE grantmaking, this practice brief highlights key learnings to share with the broader field of funders, leaders, and advocates working to tip the scales and ensure a truly inclusive and representative democracy.



Artwork by Kayla Jones for Amplifier.org, a design lab using art to amplify voices of grassroots movements

“The electorate has changed in California. Organizations have reached more people and impacted policy at [the] local level. What was once considered a fancy term, integrated voter engagement (IVE) is [now] common practice. California has a lot to offer the rest of the country in terms of civic engagement and IVE, largely because of Irvine’s investments.”

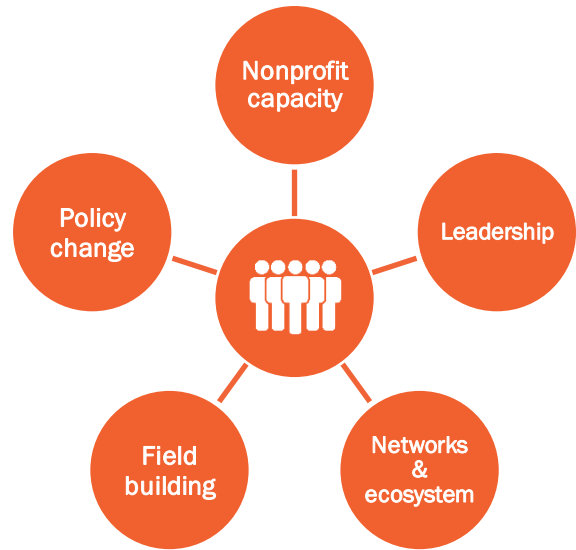
VCE Grantee

¹ Soriano, S. “California’s 2018 midterm election: A dive into the numbers.” May 2, 2019. <https://capitolweekly.net/californias-2018-midterm-election-a-dive-into-the-numbers/>

Key Strategies and Building Blocks for an Inclusive Democracy

An inclusive democracy relies on active engagement of all people in public life. Without trusted institutions, strong community organizations, and engaged residents, the pursuit of an inclusive democracy remains elusive. A recent retrospective study by Change Elemental (formerly the Management Assistance Group) provides compelling evidence that flexible, long-term investments have helped state-wide and community-based organizations transform their cycle-to-cycle efforts into year-round strategies while building sustainable infrastructure at the organizational and field levels.²

This practice brief highlights five key takeaways from this body of work based on interviews with 30 grantees and field partners and a retrospective survey of 124 grantee organizations.³ It is organized around these areas of impact, followed by implications for funders to ensure all Californians have the voice and agency to fully participate in our democracy. Irvine's VCE investments have helped to advance civic engagement in California by: (1) building organizational capacity and infrastructure, (2) engaging community members and cultivating leaders, (3) strengthening networks and regional ecosystems, (4) advancing the field of integrated voter engagement, and (5) shifting policies, representation and power at the local and state levels.



This brief is abridged and adapted from "Building Political Influence and Power: Spotlight on The James Irvine Foundation's Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative," a 2019 report developed and written by Change Elemental and the multi-racial team of Natasha Winegar, Aja Couchois Duncan, and Susan Misra. It was prepared for The James Irvine Foundation.



Building organizational capacity and infrastructure

Flexible funding helped grantees strengthen core capacities, particularly skills and systems to support data use, communications, and day-to-day operations. Grantees reported an explicit focus on developing their capacity to embed racial equity both within their organization and in their external strategies and work.

Flexible multi-year grants have been a critical ingredient for many civic engagement organizations, providing stability over time and the opportunity to strengthen their organizational capacity and infrastructure. The overwhelming majority of Irvine grantees increased their technological acumen and ability to use data to strategically advance civic engagement efforts. Many grantees reported leveraging voter files, texting, and predictive dialing as well as partnerships between local organizations and statewide networks to experiment with new technologies. For example, Faith in the Valley, an affiliate of PICO

"The long-term infrastructure in our organizations that has been created in the last few years has allowed us to scale up and be more adaptable in the moment."

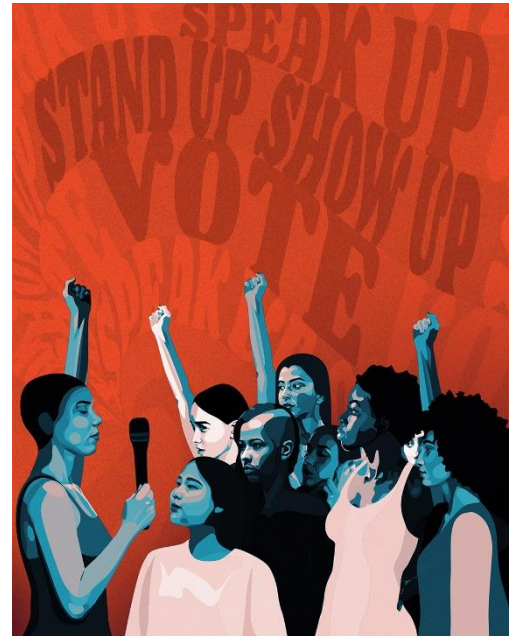
VCE Grantee

² Change Elemental (2019). *Building Political Influence and Power: Spotlight on The James Irvine Foundation's Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative*.

³ Many of the grantees also received simultaneous investment in their voter and civic engagement strategies, other programmatic strategies, and capacity building from other national and state funders such as The California Endowment and the California Wellness Foundation.

California, worked with their partners to create greater access and use of web-based data systems and tracking platforms like Political Data Incorporated (PDI). PDI enables organizations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their outreach and engagement efforts and is even being used for the Census 2020 Get Out the Count campaign.

Numerous grantees also emphasized the importance of building their capacity to more fully engage in racial equity discussions and understanding the root causes of political exclusion and disenfranchisement. This included strengthening their capacity to analyze disparate outcomes by race and developing racial justice agendas. As one grantee noted, this is particularly important in today's polarized environment, where there is a need for dialogue and work "centered in building a movement across race, faith, class, and status anchored in deep, intersectional relationships rather than transactional campaigns." In addition, funding allowed civic engagement organizations to build diverse leadership teams and strengthen staff retention. One grantee noted the importance of having "a cohesive shared leadership structure [and] the same team across three election cycles has helped us strengthen the scale, scope, and quality of our work." Building leadership capacity was critical for grantees, allowing them to strengthen their year-round organizing and IVE capacity. The power of Irvine's investments was in the multi-year and general operating support that accelerated and deepened year-round organizing and civic engagement.



Artwork by Sarah Carolan for Amplifier.org, a design lab using art to amplify voices of grassroots movements.

“Community organizing at the grassroots level entails leadership development. This is one of the key pieces that differentiates mobilizing from power building. Funding from The Irvine Foundation has made it possible for us to invest in formal leadership development opportunities.”

VCE Grantee



Engaging community members and cultivating leaders

Grantees developed the leadership skills of residents in underrepresented communities to engage in the democratic process and assume decision-making roles on public boards, commissions, and elected office.

Civic engagement practitioners have long understood that increasing voter turnout is insufficient to shift power and ensure that political representation reflects the interests and demographics of diverse communities. Grantees reported developing leadership capacities with people of color, youth, and immigrant communities to advocate on key policy issues and prepare them for positions on public boards and in public service.

Eighty-eight percent of grantees noted their Irvine grant helped develop and support leaders of color to engage in electoral and civic engagement efforts. It is also worth noting that The Irvine Foundation intentionally focused on regions of the state (such as the Inland Empire and Central Valley) that are typically under-resourced and often overlooked by other funders. Grantees focused simultaneously on strengthening the capacity of residents to advocate and cultivating leadership skills to effectively participate in public policy decision-making. For example, through its Board and Commissions Leadership Institute, the Center on Policy Initiatives supports emerging grassroots leaders by

developing technical skills (i.e., policymaking and budget oversight) to run for office and serve on boards. Fellows from their leadership institute have since gone on to serve on boards, commissions, and city councils.

88%

of grantees used Irvine funds to develop and support leaders of color to engage in electoral and civic engagement efforts.



Strengthening networks and regional ecosystems

Resourcing a combination of local organizations, intermediaries, and statewide networks helped to reduce competition and strengthen collaboration within ecosystems. Grantees partnered with other organizations on intersectional issues, engaged in peer learning, and fortified movement building infrastructure.

Many VCE grantees described the intersectional nature of economic justice with other issues like housing, gentrification, displacement, access to transportation, environmental justice, health care, immigration, and education. They noted that voter and civic engagement has led to advances on all these critical fronts. By building relationships with partners, grantees were able to create networks that bridge these issues and generate shared vision and strategies. According to several VCE grantees and field leaders, one of the most significant changes over the last 15 years has been the strengthening and expansion of organizing networks and coalitions, paving the way for many of the movement building efforts we see today.

Several grantees said investments from The Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment, and other funders have helped build the infrastructure needed to advance sophisticated and strong voter and civic engagement strategies, transform the electorate, influence decision-makers, and win on various policy issues. As one grantee noted, “supporting organizations and networks has built regional infrastructure that helps mitigate the parachuting in and out of non-community groups at election season.”

“We’ve learned the hard way that an organization can only go so far as its infrastructure will allow. Things like human resources, financial systems, trainings on race and equity [are necessary for scaling programmatic success]. Most funders only support relatively short-term, tactical issue campaigns, so The James Irvine Foundation’s investment has been invaluable towards building powerful and sustainable organizations across California.”

VCE Grantee

For grantees in rural regions, statewide networks and coalitions have been critical to deepening their capacity and expanding their access to results-tested voter and civic engagement technologies and practices. According to one grantee, this has led to a “monumental power shift in California. Lots of policy and ballot initiatives now support or [positively] impact the most economically disadvantaged in California.” Seventy-four percent of grantees reported that funding a combination of regional, state and local organizations helped reduce a sense of competition for funding. Before this investment, one grantee reported that “there was a tension with funding the actual groups on the ground and funding the collaboration. The tendency is to give the money to the collaboration because it is more efficient. But Irvine had the insight to know not to shift from funding local organizations to funding the collaboration only.”

Peer learning and knowledge sharing opportunities were also hailed as critical fuel to promote deeper collaboration and movement building efforts. When surveyed about the most significant value from the Irvine investment, 91% rated support for learning and knowledge sharing at the top of the list alongside the multi-year funding and the foundation’s responsiveness to grantee strategies. The second most highly ranked value (88%) was opportunities to convene, network, and receive technical support.

74%

of grantees reported funding a combination of regional, state and local organizations helped reduce a sense of competition.

A standout feature of Irvine’s approach was the mutually reinforcing and simultaneous investments in grassroots organizations, regional regranteeing intermediaries, and statewide groups. In other words, they supported networks and directly funded the smaller grassroots organizations that participate in them. They did not favor larger statewide organizations or national networks over smaller ones, but rather invested more equitably in various players and partners in the ecosystem. This helped to strengthen local community-based groups directly alongside the networks in which they participate and reduced the competitive tensions that exist when funders favor certain organizations within the ecosystem. This is an important lesson that can help other funders

who seek to strengthen networks and ecosystems as well as support more equitable and sustainable movement building initiatives.



Advancing the field of integrated voter engagement

Flexible philanthropic funding has been a critical ingredient to seed innovation, experimentation, and policy analysis, leading to major advances and sophistication in the field of integrated voter engagement.

Integrated voter engagement (IVE)⁴ has matured as a field and grantees have become more sophisticated in their strategies for continuous engagement during and between election cycles. While conventional electoral campaigns focus on swaying those who are likely to vote, IVE organizers focus on changing who votes.⁵ As one grantee noted, “we see voter engagement [as] working in collaborative ways with other forms of organizing, leadership development, and community engagement.” This work would be difficult if not impossible to sustain without the support of philanthropic partners. Grantees and partners specifically called out the importance of their multi-strategy approach, melding community organizing, policy analysis, and voter engagement strategies in powerful ways due to the sustained support from The Irvine Foundation. At the center of this field advancement was the ability to do ongoing community organizing and the ways in which that strengthens communities and community engagement, thus leading to increased participation during election cycles.

“[In the past,] statewide networks can set up a dynamic where metro areas [are] seen as experts and other areas, especially the Central Valley, [are seen] as ‘not up to speed.’ By supporting both networks and organizations, the James Irvine Foundation has built trust, enabled organizations to be more innovative outside [statewide efforts], facilitated more peer-to-peer learning, and helped organizations [thrive].”

VCE Grantee

The Irvine Foundation has provided critical support for organizations and networks to test new engagement strategies with different populations and has seeded innovative partnerships that are helping to build the field. Several grantees noted Irvine’s investments were critical to seeding innovation and experimentation. For example, the Foundation supported pilot partnerships and emerging organizations, such as Power California and its predecessor organizations YVote and Mobilize the Immigrant Vote. According to Power California, “Irvine has been one of our core funders, actually the anchor funder. With YVote they were the only funder. It began with an idea [and] they funded an experiment in 2016 and [then] doubled down on it and we created a full network. And then in 2017-2018, through the merger of YVote and MIV, [they] once again invested to ensure a smooth transition.”

Power California is developing intergenerational outreach strategies that link local and state work across multiple issues, testing new digital technologies, and continually experimenting with new approaches such as a cultural change strategy that uses arts and culture to shift ideas and attitudes.⁶ All these efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Between 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds in CA more than tripled from 8.2 to 27.5 %.⁷

⁴ IVE is a strategy that evolved out of traditional get-out-the-vote (GOTV) work but strives to engage community participation in advocacy and organizing activities both during and between electoral cycles. Strategies typically include leadership development, community education, and increasing the use of technology to reach communities.

⁵ May Lin, Jennifer Ito, Madeline Wander, and Manuel Pastor (2019). *Vote, Organize, Transform, Engage: New Frontiers in Integrated Voter Engagement*. Los Angeles, CA. USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity

⁶ <https://powercalifornia.org/cultural-strategy>

⁷ Change Elemental (2019). *Building Political Influence and Power: Spotlight on The James Irvine Foundation’s Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative*



In addition to increasing voter turnout among youth and communities of color, VCE organizations contributed to significant shifts in policies that have the potential to improve the quality of life for working-class communities and for those who have been historically excluded in public policy decision-making.

Ongoing voter and civic engagement efforts have helped ensure the Californian electorate better reflects the demographic diversity of the state. It has also translated into increased turnout at the ballot box and policy wins at the local and state level. According to grantees, wins on the policy front have built momentum by demonstrating the results of patient and persistent engagement and organizing of low-income constituents and underrepresented communities. As one grantee explained, “Civic engagement is critical to building [the] power we need for a more inclusive economy. ... [It is] our ability to change the electorate from one overrepresented by elderly, white males to one that is younger, more people of color, more women, more low-income folks. That shift is fundamental to changing the politics and economics of California.”

Grantees strategically focused on youth and communities of color to increase voter participation and to advocate on policies that impact their lives. For example, the African American Civic Engagement Project engaged 98,478 voters leading up to the 2016 primary election and was able to, on average, increase turnout at a rate 15% higher than the statewide average. In target communities, African American voters turned out at a 63% rate compared to only 40% statewide. Grantees also made important strides educating residents and advocating on a range of public policy issues, from a tobacco tax for MediCal funding and smoking prevention to criminal justice resentencing and efforts to tip the scales toward more equitable tax and fiscal policies in California.

The Citizens Redistricting Commission, created in 2008 by California Proposition 11, stands out as a pioneering effort to reduce partisan gerrymandering in California. Previously, lawmakers were responsible for drawing voting districts every ten years which resulted in 99% of incumbents being re-elected each election cycle.⁸ In 2010, California Proposition 20 expanded the Commission's power to include drawing congressional districts. The Irvine Foundation and VCE grantees put considerable energy behind the citizen-based redistricting efforts, leading to significant shifts in the representation of low-income communities and communities of color. One grantee shared: “[The] redistricting effort meant [that] we had a means to participate in that process, and we ended up having significant impact on local maps and districts. ... Then [we were] able to continue to build community engagement and power. We could say [to our constituency] ‘look we helped draw these districts,’ so folks saw the importance of building on this work.”



Artwork by Winter Breen and Shepard Fairey for Amplifier.org

“We changed the landscape for this region. We are not partisan. We are driven by getting representation – representatives who can get elected [and] who will be motivated by [serving] working families and immigrants.”

VCE Grantee

⁸ Common Cause. “Voter’s First Initiative.” <https://www.commoncause.org/california/our-work/ensure-fair-districts-reflective-democracy/california-redistricting-commission/>

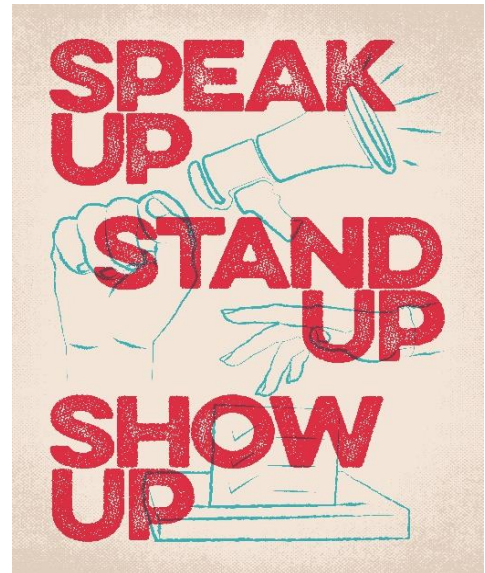
Implications for Supporting Voter and Civic Engagement

The field of voter and civic engagement in California has evolved considerably over the years, thanks to the relentless efforts of community and statewide organizations and the funders that support them. Key learnings from The Irvine Foundation's investments in VCE provide additional evidence that a vibrant and inclusive democracy requires ongoing organizing and engagement during and between election cycles. It also requires new capacities, innovations, and partnerships, particularly given the current political discourse and erosion of trust in public institutions and policy-making processes. There are many lessons and promising strategies to carry forward. We highlight five considerations for funders seeking to deepen and expand civic engagement efforts that support an inclusive democracy.

1 Provide flexible multi-year funding and general operating support: According to grantees, Irvine's early and sustained engagement as a catalytic funder played a critical role in strengthening organizations and building the field. Nearly three-quarters of Irvine's VCE grantees indicated general operating support was the most valuable resource, allowing them to focus on strategic goals rather than short-term campaigns and activities. As a result, grantees were able to be nimble and transform their traditional cycle-to-cycle efforts to year-round programs that engaged residents on a range of issues and campaigns. More groups reported doing advocacy and education work and employing tools such as ballot measures or creating 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 strategies. Funders should consider ways to align grantmaking strategies to collectively support the long-term and continuous nature of voter and civic engagement.

2 Invest in organizational capacity and network building that is responsive to the field and promotes collaboration: Grantees were able to strengthen their leadership and make critical strides in their ability to use technology, data, and critical analysis to deepen and expand their reach. Nonetheless, there is still unmet need for ongoing capacity building investments at the organizational and network level. Building lasting relationships in communities and across organizations requires time, resources, and intentionality. Providing resources for organizational capacity building, network development, and peer learning is another critical way funders can continue to support civic engagement.

3 Strategically support leadership development among youth and communities of color: Grantees see leadership development as a core strategy for building power. More needs to be done to build the leadership pipeline and cultivate the next generation of voters and decision-makers. Collectively, grantees have been working to build an ecosystem of multi-generational leaders of color, but it requires long-term investment from funders who share their vision for vibrant and thriving communities. Various stakeholders have also called upon the philanthropic sector to support movement leaders and ongoing organizing capacity, the prerequisite to effective voter engagement, holding candidates accountable, and ensuring a democracy that is equitable and inclusive.⁹



Artwork by Victoria Garcia for Amplifier.org

“People of color are now the majority of the electorate. [This was] not destiny – we had to organize people to vote.”

VCE Grantee

⁹ May Lin, Jennifer Ito, Madeline Wander, and Manuel Pastor (2019). *Vote, Organize, Transform, Engage: New Frontiers in Integrated Voter Engagement*. Los Angeles, CA. USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity

4 Catalyze innovation, experimentation, and learning in ways that advance the broader field: Thanks to support from funders willing to take risks and invest in experimentation, the VCE field in California has made significant strides. While some tried and true strategies work for some populations, the field must continue to evolve to respond to new developments, opportunities, and trends. By encouraging learning and experimentation, The Irvine Foundation created space for grantees to innovate, test promising strategies, and explore new ways of working together. Trust-based philanthropy and multi-year funding give grantees sufficient runway to experiment and assess different approaches.

5 Articulate an explicit analysis of race, class, power, and privilege: There is growing recognition across the social sector that little will fundamentally change without addressing pervasive, historic, and structural inequities. In the context of voter and civic engagement, grantees and field partners noted the importance of naming how race, class, power, and privilege influence who votes and who makes decisions. Recent examples of voter suppression and efforts to exclude and dissuade participation in our democratic process provide further evidence that voting is not race-neutral. Funders and grantees can work together to advance the field by engaging in critical discussion and analysis about the role of race, gender, and class in public policy and efforts to ensure an inclusive democracy where all have the opportunity to prosper and thrive. Funders—including staff, leadership, and boards—need to develop their own analysis to inform their grantmaking strategy and invest in leaders, organizations, and networks to develop analyses.


“It is really critical to have a racial and gender analysis; otherwise, we can have a negative impact on people, [who we are] trying to improve circumstances [for]. It is impossible to do race neutral investment - or color blind.”

VCE Field Partner

References

May Lin, Jennifer Ito, Madeline Wander, and Manuel Pastor (2019). *Vote, Organize, Transform, Engage: New Frontiers in Integrated Voter Engagement*. Los Angeles, CA. USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity.

Natasha Winegar, Aja Couchois Duncan, and Susan Misra (2019). *"Building Political Influence and Power: Spotlight on The James Irvine Foundation's Voter and Civic Engagement Initiative."* Prepared for The James Irvine Foundation.

 This practice brief was developed by Engage R+D, a social sector organization that helps foundations, nonprofits, and public agencies harness the power of evaluation, strategy and learning to advance their mission. When organizations engage people, data, and ideas, they achieve better results for communities. www.engagerd.com