



**BUILDING BLACK POLITICAL POWER
AT THE INTERSECTION OF MOVEMENT
AND ELECTORAL JUSTICE**

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Black liberation movement often referred to as the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) or Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement first arose in early 2013 in reaction to the murder of Trayvon Martin and took on increasing momentum during the Ferguson uprising in 2014 after the police killing of Michael Brown. While the movement galvanized around these pivotal organizing moments regarding state-sanctioned violence and brutality – it has become a broad movement grounded in a vision for Black liberation. This is reflected in the M4BL platform and policy demands that range from reparations to political power and include policy demands such as ending money in politics and election protection.

Going forward, I'll use M4BL or "black movement organizing" to describe the contemporary Black freedom movement to avoid confusing the broader movement with the BLM Global Network, which is a specific organization. BLM Global network is an organization among many others that is part of the broader M4BL movement.

We can look at the most recent Democratic presidential debates and see the impact of the M4BL on our politics. It is impossible to imagine major party candidates authentically debating the merits of reparations without the work of black movement organizing over the past six years. We see many of the issues raised by primarily young Black organizers being incorporated into the national electoral narrative in 2016, 2018 and again in the current election cycle for 2020.

In 2016, the direct role of movement in elections was less clear and had not been institutionalized in anyway by the M4BL. Individual leaders and organizations took varying positions and had different levels of engagement in the 2016 presidential elections. This is not to suggest the movement was invisible; there were critical moments of disruption that pushed candidates to the left that were led by Black organizers, such as protests of Senator Bernie Sanders at Netroots Nation conference in 2015 to protests of Hillary Clinton at a private fundraiser for her record on driving mass incarceration and criminalizing Black communities.¹ Between 2013 and now, we also saw a movement to engage in important local elections, such as the powerful #ByeAnita campaign that removed long-timer serving Cook County Attorney Anita Alvarez in Illinois and the more recent ousting of Bob McCullough in St. Louis County, Missouri –the prosecutor who oversaw the case on the killing of Michael Brown. However, collective and aligned electoral program across M4BL did not exist prior to 2016.

¹ Fandos, Nicholas. July 18, 2015. "[Protestors Confront Candidates on Race at Netroots Nation Conference.](#)" The New York Times. Last accessed Oct. 30, 2019. Zorthian, Julia. Feb. 26, 2016. "Black Lives Matter Activist Confront Clinton at Fundraiser." Time. Last accessed Oct. 30, 2019.

We saw a dramatic shift when the M4BL created the Electoral Justice Project (EJP) with the leadership of Jessica Byrd, Rukia Lumumba, Kayla Reed and others. In 2017, the EJP was created within the M4BL structure to bring an intentional connection between movement organizing and political power building, specifically to build a political home for Black people. We also see the rise of similar movement-oriented organizations, such as Black Voters Matter (BVM) and Woke Vote, which has primarily focused on Black electoral organizing in the South. While organizations such as EJP and BVM have a clear electoral focus, they both also see voting as one tool in a much broader fight. BVM Executive Director and Co-Founder LaTosha Brown said at a recent event, “Voting is one tool used to transform our country, but voting alone is not going to liberate our people.” In other words, voting is a strategy that should not be left on the table, but for real transformation, it is a strategy that must be combined with other forms of engagement.

While the impact of M4BL on macro-level U.S. politics is quite visible as described above, we know very little about the impact on individual-level civic behavior. When we began this project, we were interested in beginning to unpack the impact of movement organizing – particularly M4BL – has on individual-level civic behavior. Are those engaged in movement organizing more or less likely to see elections and voting as a tool for change? What does this concept of political home mean for Black movement organizers, and how does it or does it not inform their perspective of elections and voting?

What we found is that the questions are much more complicated than we originally framed them. To understand the intersection of movement and elections, we have to analyze it within a broader and more historical political context of how Black people have and continue to relate to political institutions in the United States. We were able to unearth this nuance because we started our research with a qualitative approach. We took a step back to first listen to organizers and activists on the ground – to allow them to share in their own voices what they see as the role of movement in political power building and what intersecting the movement with electoral politics actually means for movement participants.

We found that the historic disenfranchisement, suppression and invisibilization of the Black vote is critical to understanding the connection between movement and elections. The long history of voter suppression, as well as political disillusionment among Blacks, informs how individuals see elections and voting, as well as shapes the role movements.

The underlying takeaway from our research is that the Black leaders we spoke to both within focus groups and one on one are very skeptical of existing political institutions alone as vehicles for change for the Black community. They cite experiences of their voices and votes being taken for granted and their communities only being tapped for outreach in a transactional way around election time and then ignored until the next election. Despite this disillusionment, it was also clear that elections and voting were seen as a power center that could not be ceded – that to create change and build toward liberation, Black movement organizers and leaders had to fight on the electoral field. However, what distinguishes the electoral engagement that EJP is building and nurturing from traditional electoral work is the ways in which movement leaders engage in the work and the importance of their grounding principles and the intention to build an inclusive collective political home for Black people.

It is this sense of connection and community that helps to sustain electoral and political participation of movement leaders. There is a clear understanding that while elections are important, they cannot be the only way folks collectively organize to impact change. In other words, knowing that elections are just one tool and strategy being used to impact change in a much more holistic power-building strategy enables people to weather losses and challenges, as well as tap into other points of collective power when elections and elected officials fail.

In our interviews, several leaders – when asked whether they thought movement organizing was a way to bring individuals into voting and formal political participation – said that we were asking the question the wrong way. For many Black Americans, voting is an easy entry into civic participation,² but connecting that vote to a movement political home helps sustain participation that may otherwise be depressed from disillusionment from nonresponsive government, elected officials and political institution.

²Ray, Rashawn and Mark Whitlock. Sept. 12, 2019. ["Setting the Record Straight on Black Voter Turnout."](#) Brookings. Last accessed Oct. 31, 2019.

As one participant said:

"I think it's helpful to use voting and elections as a vehicle to bring people into movement, and we can also use movement to bring people [to] the elections and voting space as well. But if we're really doing our jobs, we're moving towards social transformation – that requires building people's political consciousness to understand that, yes, certain systems are rigged against us and ultimately we want to see a transformation of those systems. So, we have to figure out how to bring people into taking action in relation to those systems without tempering the critique of those systems. It really requires us to show people unique models of engaging with elections that don't look like you vote and that's the only way you get a say in the system. Because people haven't seen it play out that way, people have experienced voter suppression, people have experienced corruption in elections and people have experienced being told to "shut up and vote" and that is really real – and there is a valuation of what are acceptable forms of resistance and what are not."

There is this balance of organizing people to move to action in a system that they know is flawed and needs to be transformed while not becoming complacent in accepting the system as it is. To fight to transform a system in which you are currently working in, the work has to be grounded in particular values, political education and a sense of political autonomy.



METHODOLOGY

For this project, we interviewed individuals who were leaders in M4BL organizations and/or EJP Fellows. We interviewed eight individuals in seven different cities – Baltimore, Phoenix, Miami, St. Louis, Chicago and Atlanta. The interviews were open-ended, semi-structured interviews. We also conducted focus groups in four cities – Oakland, California; Detroit; Miami; and Birmingham, Alabama.

We chose these geographies to capture regional diversity, and we also wanted to speak to individuals in cities with different levels of movement infrastructure. For example, Oakland is a city with a long history of political movement engagement and is the home of many movement and organizing groups. Detroit is a city that is often viewed through a very transactional electoral lens in national politics because Michigan is frequently deemed a swing state.

The focus group participants were a mix of individuals who were either members or staff of movement and/or community organizing groups, as well as individuals who have engaged in some level of movement activity but did not necessarily have an organizational political home or affiliation. Focus group participants were activists, organizers and advocates who reported being engaged in social movements dedicated to the conditions of Black lives. With the exception of one participant (a Native American from Detroit), all participants self-identified as Black. Organizations to which participants belong include Mothering Justice, Michigan United, Detroit Parent Network, United Auto Workers, Woke Vote, Dream Defenders, New Florida Majority, Black Lives Matter Alliance Broward, Urban Peace Movement and BYP 100.

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA **DETROIT, MICHIGAN**
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA **CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**
PHOENIX, ARIZONA **ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI**
MIAMI, FLORIDA
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND **ATLANTA, GEORGIA**

DEFINING MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL POWER

Social movements, broadly defined, are individuals engaged in some form of collective action to create social and/or political change. For research participants, we found they described three core qualities of movements: radical disruption, shared struggle and collective action.

Radical Disruption:

Movement was described as something that challenges the status quo – it is a disruption to the current political system and institutions. This point is particularly important when thinking about the relationship between movement and voting. Voting is an action taken within the system in which movement organizers are working to disrupt or transform. For example, one organizer when asked to describe what movements mean to him said:

“Movements, right ... are when hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people are actively demonstrating, actively organizing in a visible and very public way around political and social issues that impact them but in a way that shifts or attempts to shift the political dynamics of the status quo.”

For the organizer quoted above, movements are about scale, they are about action, but ultimately they are about shifting the status quo. ***If disruption is an underlying purpose of movements, it must require some push and pull for movement actors to organize and engage in more traditional forms of civic action, such as voting.***



Shared struggle:

When describing social movements, individuals used terms, such as a “culture of solidarity,” “shared struggle” and “community.” Movement actors have a shared goal. Interestingly, at least two participants described movement as connected across time periods – meaning the contemporary Black freedom movement is a continuation of past Black civil rights and liberation movements. They saw themselves as part of movements focused on liberation, freedom, environmental justice, pushing back against state-sanctioned violence and other issues. Across the focus groups and individual interviews, participants described movements as a community in which individuals are working toward a shared transformative goal.

“I think of movement as sort of this group of people – small or large – working on some sort of liberation work. I know we say the movement – it is on the rise, but I look at it from a historical context. I think of what is happening now as an extension of freedom work from decades past. People coming together trying to get closer to freedom.”

– St. Louis participant

The Black movement participants we interviewed saw movement’s purpose as to push on broad transformative change – liberation, freedom, abolition. If you’re focused on major transformative outcomes, it would make sense that traditional transactional approaches to voting would be met with skepticism. However, what we learn is that many of these organizers see elections and voting as a way to set the field, if done in a way that centers community and can be used to uplift and set a radical agenda. It is less about any particular candidate and more about using it as a power-building tool to move transformative platforms. As Charlene Carruthers, former national director of BYP 100, writes, “Elections allow marginalized groups of people to shape the terrain of political struggle by electing candidates who champion our issues and ousting those who act against our collective interests.”³ ***This does not mean elections are seen as unimportant, but it does mean they necessarily must be situated in a much more comprehensive political strategy that does not limit political participation to simply the act of voting.***

³ Carruthers, Charlene. Nov. 5, 2018. [“Before the Midterms, Five Questions for the Political Left.”](#) Truth Out.

Collective Action:

Central to movements is this idea of collective action – individuals taking actions to push for change within existing systems and institutions. That does not mean all movement actors are engaged in the same forms of activity, but those individual actions feed into a collective whole. As one focus group respondent from Oakland stated, “Ideally everybody has a role. I don’t think it’s a movement when everybody gotta shut the highway down ... [we should be] like radical chess players.” Or as a leader in St. Louis described her work: “I think my role is a just getting-things-done kind of role. It’s easier to see work that needs to happen and make it happen.” Collective action is also about the scale and momentum behind movements.

“It has something to do with the amount of energy around a particular struggle – the amount of people who are involved – and it is something that describes a level of engagement that we could never reach through one-on-one conversations or just through door knocking. It is something that has spiraled beyond where actions have become replicable, and there is an amount of energy and momentum that goes beyond what we’re able to cultivate in less-energized moments around the struggles that we work on.”

– Chicago organizer

We saw the importance of building community come up in other parts of the interviews and focus groups. People see themselves as a part of something larger than themselves, and building a broad base and acting collectively are seen as fundamental to shifting power structures and disrupting the status quo. **Voting is an individual act, but when done as part of movement organizing, it is done in the service of a collective strategy.**

Another central concept that runs through this research project is political power. Often when analyzing elections and voting, obtaining political power is seen as the ultimate desired outcome. In the movement-organizing context, political power is about much more than electoral outcomes. We asked organizers and community members what political power means to them. We also asked what would it look like for Blacks to have political power. What we found is that participants viewed political power in two ways, both at the macro and micro level. Political power was described as the ability to impact society, influence and change systems, and effect decisions that affect Black communities, families and lives.

Political power was also described as the ability to have basic human rights met. ***For example, one participant in the Miami focus groups said, "On the ground level, real level, access to food. You can't have political power if you're hungry, if your kids can't go to school, if I'm an immigrant and I'm looking over my back." Or as an organizer in Phoenix said, "It looks like our folks actually thriving and being well. It looks like the Black infant mortality rates significantly decreasing if not being eliminated ... it means our folks have options for work that are honored; It looks like access to health care. it looks like Black joy."***

On the other end, political power was defined as the ability to shape and make decisions that impact how society is structured, the ability to change political institutions and having autonomy over our communities. No one described political power as simply electing more people into office. Some participants mentioned elected officials, but it was described as having people in office "who are accountable to us and prioritize us and our needs."

If one aim of elections and voting is to build political power that fundamentally means having enough power to change the immediate living conditions of Black people, it also means having enough influence to shift and change systems that have a long history of inflicting harm on Black people. That ultimately means that voting is not about electing any one individual but, again, about moving the needle on this broader liberation fight. One organizer described it this way:

"My ancestors didn't die for me to vote; my folks died for my liberation and the continued liberation of our people, and the vote is part of it but also much more. When we're talking about people who don't have their right [to vote], do they get to engage civically? No, they don't. But when we're talking about electoral justice, yes, they do. And actually [their] voice is centered, and it is about what does it look like to move and shape and shift political conversations."



In this context, even those who are not able to vote or choose not to vote still have a role and a voice in building and moving political power. Another concrete example from Chicago worth elevating:

"In Chicago, we won six of the city council seats – socialist, leftist, progressives – but we lost the mayoral race. People were beat up about that – but the fact that we won these seats is an indication of our power. Being able to see the gains for what they are. Us being able to use our might in a way that gets us the things that we want feeds into our power building. If we get a moratorium on rent hikes, that feeds into our ability to stay in one place and continue to build power."

With these two concepts defined, the next section shifts the discussion to discuss how individual participants viewed voting and what their individual level of civic engagement looked like.



ATTITUDES ON VOTING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

What we found when it came to attitudes about voting was that most participants thought voting mattered but that it had its limitations. Also, it was frequently brought up that the electoral system was rigged against Black people and that, historically, elections had not resulted in significant change within the Black community. There were three major themes we pulled from the focus groups with regard to attitudes on voting.

Voting matters but has limitations.

The limitations of voting are often connected to individuals seeing the existing system as unfair or that voting is a tool that needs to be connected to other tactics. Some key sentiments on this point are:

- The power of voting can't compete with money in politics.
- Even if there is alignment on issues, elected officials are often constrained by the system and, therefore, unable to deliver effective change.
- It is an excellent tactic paired with other strategies. One participant noted that they were able to increase turnout by 43% in a recent election, and they ran against a long-time incumbent and took 47% of the vote. They were able to do that because they engaged the community issues important to them, such as criminalization and police violence.
- Participants feel that they are often voting for the "least dangerous" candidate rather than individuals who prioritize their interests. Candidate-centered electoral strategies, with some exceptions, are likely to be met with skepticism.

Social conditions have not significantly improved for Black people, despite their participation in the electoral system.

There is an underlying belief that the material conditions, especially for the most marginalized Black people, have not improved. This is combined with a belief that Blacks are only seen as of value during election time when they can be leveraged as a voting bloc.

- “When you approach people who have never voted, you get asked, “Well, what’s going to change?” Abstractly you can talk about the influence you’ll have on your community, but then there’s this double consciousness right. They know nothing has changed in their community. And they’re right. – Miami focus group participant
- “We have to be real about the fact that most Black people in this country move through life in a way that is fundamentally disempowering ... the only time we ask Black people to really have power is when we want them to vote for somebody.” – Birmingham focus group participant
- “Don’t minimize my people to just a voting bloc” – Phoenix organizer

The electoral system is rigged.

There were lots of discussions about voter suppression, challenges they faced as individuals trying to vote and – for some – a general sentiment that the voting system is rigged.

- “I have 6 words. Stacey. Abrams. Governor’s. Seat. Was. Stolen.” – Oakland focus group participant
- Another participant described how she encountered barriers trying to vote as a student living outside of her home state. She had trouble getting the absentee ballot from her home state but had trouble registering where she went to school because her campus address and identification were not accepted. She wasn’t particularly motivated to vote for Hillary Clinton and eventually thought it wasn’t worth the continued hassle to vote. This same participant also described how she not only voted in 2018 but knocked on doors and engaged in Get Out The Vote (GOTV) because she was excited about the candidate on the ballot and saw it as part of her movement-organizing work.

Individuals thought voting was important but not necessarily an effective strategy on its own. There were real concerns about the inequities in the existing democratic system and how anti-blackness shows up in civic spaces and the transactional way in which Blacks have historically been engaged around elections.

Understanding these are some of the concerns that individuals have with voting, it makes sense that working at the intersection of movement and elections can be a powerful tool. Movements are about building authentic and inclusive community; movements are about transforming systems; movements are about building a political space that is responsive and accountable to the community; and movements are about organizing the Black vote not in a transactional way but around issues that impact folks' day-to-day lives. It is incredibly powerful that programs like EJP are not about asking people to vote and then walking away but about creating a political home where before, during and after the election people can continue to engage and work to build power for their communities.⁴ One organizer from St. Louis described the immediate results of her movement electoral work:

“Political education not only helps us get the win like getting McCullough unseated or getting so, so close to electing the first Black mayor in St. Louis. Or all the criminal justice reform work post-Ferguson that has gotten done. The strategy is always about how can we engage Black people in this movement work and demystify politics. That is what gets a lot of the work done. Engaging the people that have been overlooked for so long. The work we’re doing in St. Louis/North St. Louis County. Going to the communities that never get canvassed or engaged or asked what’s important to them. Our main focal point is to engage Black people – it is mostly younger Black folks. We deliver the Woke Voter Guide, brunches, talking to them about what’s important to them – all of those things work in concert to make sure people feel enough self-worth to participate.”

Despite these challenges and concerns around voting, focus group participants reported high rates of civic participation across a range of activities both traditional and movement.

- 85% of respondents reported voting in the 2016 general elections.
- 88% of respondents reported voting in the 2018 midterm elections.
- 2 participants were unable to vote in both elections due to citizenship status. Both indicated that they would have voted if able.

⁴ See appendix for more details on ways focus group participants suggested addressing some of their concerns around elections and voting.

Respondents identified different reasons why over the last two years they were involved in other forms of civic action beyond voting, but broadly the responses fell into three major categories⁵ :

- They felt a social responsibility or obligation to Black people.
- They did so in response to a national incident or issue, especially as related to injustice impacting Black people.
- They were directly impacted in some way by an issue.

Below are some quotes from the focus groups that describe why individuals are engaged in movement and other forms of civic participation.

- First and foremost, I'm formerly incarcerated. I do the work that I do because I've learned I'm supposed to do this work for people. And I do this work because I need to do this work for me ... I do this work because it needs to be done." – Oakland (directly impacted; social responsibility)
- The Alabama special election race between Doug Jones and Roy Moore was a huge motivation for Black voters to recognize the power of their vote in that race (social responsibility; national attention)
- Anti-Palestine forces and Boycott Divestment and Sanctions controversy motivated one to protest and boycott products (national attention)
- "I grew up in a family that was always fighting, always resisting. This is what we're supposed to do." – Miami (social responsibility)
- The police-involved shooting death of Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford, Jr. in a local mall in Birmingham resulted in one joining community protests and continued activism (national attention).
- Environmental injustice in the greater Detroit area, including the national attention of Flint water and a local campaign to shut down an incinerator in Detroit due to the climate hazards led several respondents to engage in movement work (national attention; social responsibility; directly impacted).

⁵ See appendix for more details on the level of participation among respondents in different forms of civic and movement activity.

THE POWER OF MOVEMENT AND POLITICS

All participants believe the recent wave of Black-led and centered movements have made an impact on politics, in general. When asked why Black movements have increasingly become important in national politics, respondents offered the following as top reasons:

Ferguson and Organized Disruption:

Respondents stated that beyond ongoing marching of mostly poor Black youth in Ferguson, Missouri, it was also the resistance to the National Guard that changed how other cities viewed their power. Respondents mentioned that shutting down highways, walkouts and the disruption by a group of women activists during a presidential stump speech were all examples of how organized disruption changed the status quo.

Black Death:

Respondents cited national racially motivated and police-related victims, including Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Philando Castille, John Crawford. Respondents also cited the increased attention on Black infant mortality and maternal death as a peaked area of interest to politicians.

Social Media:

The ability for influencers and politicians to engage with young people via digital communication and the ability for movements to organize regardless of location were raised as areas of increasing interest to electeds and political leaders. Several examples of the use of Black radio and “The Breakfast Club” as a necessary stop for those running for office.

Black Millennial Economic Power:

Black millennials are driving much of the recent movements, and they are also in the workforce. Respondents offer that this rising electorate possesses a social economic influence that requires them to be addressed by those seeking office. Respondents also raised that the Black movement has become a commercialized concept; Kylie Jenner in a Pepsi commercial modeled after a viral photo of a Black girl encountering armed police was raised as a problematic consequence of movement.

Winning Campaigns:

Florida, Alabama and California participants expressed the power of organizing that led to winning campaigns – from cash bail (California) to Senate special election (Alabama) to returning persons' voting restoration⁶ (Florida).

Anti-Capitalism:

Miami and Oakland participants raised movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Bernie Sanders campaign as partially contributing to criticisms of capitalism and specifically increased discourse on racialized capitalism and the way it shows up in systems.

When participants were asked about the effect of movement participation on their own individual political engagement, most said **that they were more politically engaged** as a result of their participation in movement organizing. Here are other conclusions:

- For those who stated there was no change, follow-up questions revealed they had a high level of civic engagement prior to their involvement in Black-led and centered movements.
- The majority of participants stated that their personal voting is likely to **increase or stay the same** as a result of movement organizing.
- In all cities, movement organizing was seen as an **effective strategy** to engage the community.
- In Miami, Oakland and Detroit, respondents indicated that **more people are likely to vote** as a result of organizing.
- In Birmingham, respondents stated that more knowledge may have **increased distrust** in the system, and the majority predicted **fewer people** would be engaged in upcoming elections.

It is interesting that the one city where participants thought fewer people would engage in the upcoming election is one in which Black voters were organized in a rapid-response-type fashion for a special election. We do not have enough information to determine, but it may be a result of folks feeling disillusionment or that elections are too transactional given how they were brought into the Alabama special election.

⁶ Worth noting that while Michigan experienced major wins in 2018, including a change in political party in the governor's race, none of the participants raised any of the victories during the focus group. The researcher is curious as to the degree of engagement of Black communities during that cycle.

BUILDING A BLACK POLITICAL HOME

Building a Black political home for all Black people is one of EJP's central missions. EJP leaders describe it as a way to disrupt the current system that puts up structural barriers that prevent Black people from engaging in political processes and prevents Black people from building the power needed to transform the system. It is about building a home that pushes back on barriers to voting, voter suppression and electing leaders who value the importance of Black life. The focus is to build electoral justice by building Black civic power led by Black movement organizations and in Black communities across the country. It acknowledges that the current system is problematic and that the way forward is to organize Black people in a way that centers community and is focused on Black liberation.

We wanted to understand what participants thought about this idea of a Black political home and what it looked like and whether it was needed to build Black political power. Both movement leaders who were interviewed and focus group respondents expressed an urgent need for a Black political home. Folks described a need for a Black political home for several reasons. First, several respondents described the need for a space where Black people can show up as their whole selves. "A place where people feel affirmed and where people's ability to sort of just exist isn't questioned," said one organizer. "It is a home where I get to be whole ... a parent, queer, straight, in student debt, working class, whatever it is, I get to bring my whole self."

Second, people described the need to have a space that allowed for healing, rest, self-sustainability and autonomy – a need for a space to dream with other Black people and ask questions that push the conversation forward. One focus group respondent said, "It is hard to dream and heal when you are still in systems of oppression."

Last was a focus on self-determination. "Black people need a space that is particularly invested in us so that we can stop trying to create a home for ourselves elsewhere. Trying to make other spaces be our home hasn't gotten us anywhere." Another organizer in Atlanta said, "It needs to allow for self-determination allow us to bring our whole selves. Invest in our leadership."

What qualities must a Black political home have? Interestingly, a number of participants said love and joy. “There is love and understanding and investment in each other. It should build up the people who are in it,” shared one organizer. Other core qualities of a political home include:

- Rigorous;
- Generous;
- Inclusive of all Black people;
- A base level of shared values and shared understanding of the world – there does not always have to be agreement but a shared rubric;
- Ensures marginalized communities among Black people have equal power, such as Black trans women;
- Abolitionist, anti-capitalist, with a clear left politic.

Given the marginalization that Blacks feel within the existing political system, it is not surprising to see such value being put on building a Black political home. The values of the political home align with how people think about movements. It is a place for disruption; it is a space to build community; it is a space dream and vision beyond the status quo; and it is a space to act collectively to build political power and shift existing structures.

The major thread running through the project is that Black organizers and movement actors are critical of the existing electoral system and disillusioned by how it has historically and contemporary failed Black people. Yet, with that deep critique, they also understand that politics, elections and voting are tools that they must use in a broader strategy to disrupt the system. How they do that is by creating spaces that center community, celebrate and affirm Blackness, and understand and are responsive to the issues plaguing Black communities. These spaces are premised on the idea that collective action taken with shared values create Black political power. The electoral work does not look like traditional transactional electoral engagement – Black people are seen as more than votes. When entering communities that have long experienced structural injustice and harm, the electoral justice strategy must center love, joy and seeing people for their whole selves.

CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES

The views of these activists and organizers are crucial, because these individuals often are the deliverers of civic information to their communities. They've expressed clear distinctions between how power currently operates and how it would operate if Black lives were prioritized. Their views on voting on a personal and community level requires deeper analysis and support.

There is hope in the fact that while organizers reported personal skepticism in the system, there is an acknowledgment that Black communities must be aware of how the system works and that they must engage in the electoral system but with a particular strategy and model. Individuals closer into the movement organizations that were interviewed and focus group participants with a history of movement engagement all had very high levels of civic participation. That included high rates of voting, as well as other forms of civic action. Most thought that their engagement in movement activity either increased their likelihood of participating in elections or kept it the same.

There was a general sentiment that movement organizing was a useful tool to keep Black people engaged in elections in voting. Movement organizing allows individuals to access other tools of engagement beyond voting on a path toward political power. Also, movement spaces acknowledged that the existing systems have not been working and must be disrupted. Rather than skipping over the harm and exclusion that Black voters have historically experienced within the political system, it acknowledges that truth and offers people a space to change it. It does not cede the political and electoral space, but it enables Black voters to create their own field of engagement. Because electoral justice work is not just about the act of voting, it means that there is organizing, mobilization and strategies to push for Black political power before, during and after elections.

The research suggestions that creating a Black political home that works at the intersection and movement builds a space that helps mitigate disillusionment around elections and empowers folks to push for wins that provide immediate relief from harm for Black people while also working to transform the current political structure.

Next steps of this research are to conduct a quantitative survey to test this theory around movement organizing and voter disillusionment. Are those engaged in movement organizing more likely to be long-term voters with an increased sense of political efficacy compared to Black voters who do not participate in movement activity?

Also, the idea of building a Black political home requires further investigation. The research indicates that there should be further investment in strategies and opportunities to build Black political homes not rooted in the two-party, binary system. Working at the intersection of movement and voting are powerful tools for building Black political power.

APPENDIX

Detailed Data and Analysis from the Focus Groups

Table 1: Demographics, Focus Group Respondents

CITY	DETROIT	BIRMINGHAM	MIAMI	OAKLAND
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	8	11	7	7
GENDER BREAKDOWN	6 women, 2 men	7 women, 3 men, 1 unstated	4 women, 2 men, 1 unstated	4 women, 3 men
RACE	7 Black, 1 indigenous	All Black	All Black	All Black
AGE	24-64 [24, 28, 30, 30, 42, 49, 63, 64]	19-33 [19, 20, 21, 21, 23, 23, 25, 25, 27, 30, 33]	25-39 [25, 26, 27, 27, 28, 29, 39]	26-60 [24, 26, 26, 27, 29, 35, 60]
IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND	None	1 [unspecified country of origin]	4 [Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic]	1 [Belize]
INDIVIDUALS WITH CHILDREN	5	0	2	2

Table 2: Forms of Civic Action that Focus Group Respondents Took

Form of Civic Action	% of focus group respondents who took action in the past two years
Signed a paper or online petition	97%
Supported a Black business, bank or product	97%
Boycotted a product, business or organization	94%
Tweeted, texted, posted messages to participate in some form of activist action	94%
Volunteered time, skill or talent to an organization focused on Black political, economic or social liberation or power	94%
Marched or protested	82%
Donated at any point to an organization or cause addressing the state of Black people	76%
Canvassed door to door	72%
Participated in phone banking for a cause or a candidate	61%
Organized a rally	42%
Participated in a sit-in	30%

Table 3: Focus Group Respondents' Suggested Solutions to Voting and Election Challenges Facing Black People

<p>SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES</p>	<p>CIVIC EDUCATION/ EMPOWERMENT</p>	<p>ANTI-BLACKNESS IN VOTING</p>
<p>Address mobiliation, in general, especially where ability, poverty and voter suppression intersect.</p> <p>Explore the role money plays in politics.</p> <p>Bring more Black people to be in the pipeline to be electable and/or in positions of power.</p> <p>Adress the daily struggles and fatigue that everyday people have that may prevent them from participating.</p>	<p>Create new ways to advance information that breaks down the process and the information.</p> <p>Develop more language accessible and culturally relatable materials.</p> <p>Be on the "offense" and education communities beyond voting, with increased attention on how institution's work; draft a bill; and lobby all year round.</p> <p>Focus on hyperlocal wins.</p> <p>Encourage leaders across various movements - not just Black movements - to awaken and build together.</p>	<p>Stop talking down to nonvoters and providing whitewashed or guilt-trip explanations for why Black people should vote (e.g., people died for your right to vote).</p> <p>Address barriers preventing Black people from engaging in the civic process.</p> <p>Focus on the social issues that impact Black people on a daily basis.</p>

Table 4: Focus Group Respondents' Issue Priorities

ALL	DETRIOT	OAKLAND	BIRMINGHAM	MIAMI
Health care	Environmental justice/ clean water	Abolishing police	Reparations	Immigration
Black maternal health	Felon enfranchisement	Knowledge of Black history	Voter Suppression	Abortion
Criminal justice/ legal system	Quality social services	Restorative justice	War on Drugs	
Economic opportunity & development	Emergency manager law impact		Erasure of people and culture	
Education	Undemocratic actions by those in power		Sex education	
Police & community policing	Food insecurity		Luxury taxes on famine products	
Housing gentrification				
Equality				

Table 5: Focus Group Respondents' Movement Inspiration

- Black Lives Matter
- Black Panthers Party for Self-Defense
- Civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s
- Reconstruction & Freedmen's Bureau
- Anti-war/Anti-Vietnam movement
- Resistance of enslaved people on plantations
- Prison abolitionist movement
- Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)/Dreamers
- Anti-Apartheid movement
- Labor movement
- Pride movement
- Motherhood-related movement
- Black Mamas Matter/Black reproductive justive movement
- Woke Vote (Southern relational organizing strategy instrumental in key elections and ballot initiatives in Alabama and Florida)
- Mama Bail Out (campaign by National Bail Out to raise money to support Black mothers and parents in jail)
- Decarceration and prison abolition movements
 - Overpolicing was also raised as a “movement,” especially how the community has responded to its intersection with homeless populations
- “501 Day” (This is an Oakland-specific movement in response to the racist actions of a white woman, dubbed “BBQ Becky,” who called the police on neighbors for barbecuing. The community transformed the incident to be one about gentrification, whiteness and joy.)
- Holistic farming, health and medicine movement
- Say Her Name and Black Trans Women
- Gun violence prevention within Black and Brown communities
- Me Too
- Black Feminist movements, especially globally

Table 6: Focus Group Respondents' Political Home Qualities and Strategies

QUALITIES OF BLACK POLITICAL HOME	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive of all Black identities • Basic survival is guaranteed • Politics important, but social needs and overall well-being also equally prioritized • Collective healing of trauma • Militant • Robust community engagement and participation • Ability to be heard by those in power • All Black people have access to political knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformed political leadership (effective and informed) and institutions • Takes the form of an organization, a political party, land or a separate country • Marginalized communities within Black people possessing equal power, e.g., Black transwomen • Joy • Unity, consistency and transparency
STRATEGIES TOWARD BLACK POLITICAL HOME	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconciling of political ideologies among Black people to determine who is welcome in this political home • Emphasis on historical analysis and making information on policy and politics accessible to all • members of the Black community, outside of the election cycle • Elimination of class structures and respectability politics • Storytelling long-term organizing efforts • Technology as a tool • Procurement of space/land and funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberate “what is the dream?” “what is the vision?” • Community agreements on how to treat each other • Demoratic participatory process to determine what the ideology is, if any • Providing everyone therapy to address deep-rooted and ongoing oppression, including a trauma therapist and a sex therapist • Infiltrating the current system and getting rid of the current people in power
WHY BLACK POLITICAL HOME IS URGENT	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A need for Black people to have spaces where they can “conspire to dream” and ask questions that push forward the conversation • A need for self-sustainability, safety and rest • A literal matter of life and death • Governance that is not dependent upon white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy or misogyny • Currently, no “black space” that focuses on all aspects of repairing impact of oppression • “What does it look like to have Black children in different spaces ... and not programming them for prison?” – Oakland FG respondent • Space to dream with other Black people and push the conversation forward; hard to dream and heal when still in systems of oppression 	