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# BUILDING CIVIC HOMES

FOSTERING BELONGING, AGENCY,  
AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT IN  
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS



*Photo Credit: Ohio Organizing Collaborative*

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**Sojourn Strategies** conducted this research in collaboration with Voices of the Experienced (VOTE); The Power Coalition; Voces de la Frontera; Inland Congregation United for Change (ICUC), an affiliate of PICO California; Building Freedom Ohio; Poder NC; and the New Georgia Project. We would like to thank the leaders and members of these organizations for their partnership and collaboration.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General wrote a report on the growing loneliness epidemic in the United States (The U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). While the report was largely focused on health impacts, the increased isolation, growing political polarization, and declining trust in the government have serious implications for U.S. democracy. Some scholars suggest that polarization and declining trust are leading to increased levels of disconnection and disillusionment (Lee, 2022). Our research suggests that robust civic homes can potentially serve as an antidote to the growing levels of disengagement, especially for communities that have historically and contemporarily been marginalized and stigmatized.

Over the course of two years, we conducted two phases of research to better understand what brings individuals into organizations and what sustains connection to the organizations. Many grassroots organizations define their missions as creating civic homes for various constituencies. **Civic homes are inclusive spaces where individuals can connect over shared values, build collective power, and work toward common goals.** However, there has been very little research to understand how community members think about the concept of a civic home and, more importantly, what characteristics they most value in a civic home. This project was designed to begin examining these questions from the voice of community members—both those connected and not connected to organizations.

To conduct this research, Sojourn Strategies collaborated with six community-based organizations across six states over two phases. In phase one in 2022, we conducted research in collaboration with Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant rights organization in Wisconsin; Voice of the Experienced (VOTE), which organizes justice-impacted people in Louisiana; and Inland Congregation United for Change (ICUC), an affiliate of PICO California, a youth advocacy organization in California. In phase two, from 2023–2024, we partnered with Poder NC, a Latinx organizing group in North Carolina; New Georgia Project (NGP), which primarily works within the Black community in Georgia; and Building Freedom Ohio (BFO), a partner of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, a group that organizes justice-impacted people in Ohio.

We used qualitative methods for this project, which included participant observation, one-on-one interviews, and listening sessions. We chose a qualitative approach because civic homes, especially from community members' perspective, are

underexplored. We wanted to provide space to hear directly from community members and gather descriptive data with more open parameters.

**Our research suggests that effective and long-lasting civic homes have three key ingredients: (1) They establish belonging through culture, shared values, and inclusive practices; (2) they create leadership development pipelines and opportunities for community members to take action and increase their sense of agency and efficacy; and (3) they demonstrate how, when working in community, individuals are able to effect change and have an impact.**

## Key Takeaways and Recommendations

### CULTIVATE BELONGING

One of the strongest themes that emerged from our listening sessions was the importance of culture and inclusiveness in fostering belonging. Participants emphasized that feeling seen, heard, and understood was central to their connection with civic organizations. To deepen engagement, organizations must develop intentional cultural organizing strategies that align with participants' lived experiences and are rooted in the communities in which they are organizing.

What that looks like for each organization and community will differ—for some, it is about language, and for others, it is about creating spaces to connect with others with similar lived experiences.

Participants also expressed that access to tangible resources was a significant factor in both joining and staying connected to civic organizations. For example, at VOTE, some members initially engaged with the organization because it helped them navigate reentry into society after incarceration. Similarly, Voces de la Frontera participants shared that legal and social services played a crucial role in making them feel that the organization cared about their well-being. It is important to note that it was not just about access to the service but that offering those services demonstrated a sense of care

and commitment, which facilitated trust in the organization. Individuals appreciated organizations that they believed cared about their well-being and the well-being of their community. It was a tangible demonstration that the organization's relationship with them was not transactional and simply to move them toward an action.

### Recommendations:

- Organizations should work to incorporate cultural organizing or other strategies that build a sense of belonging and inclusiveness for the communities in which they work.
- Organizations should consider how they can build trust and demonstrate mutual support and commitment to community members.

## INVEST IN INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leadership development emerged as one of the strongest factors in retaining members. Participants shared that having opportunities to lead within organizations not only kept them engaged but also increased their sense of personal agency and political efficacy. Listening session participants shared that civic education and leadership development were crucial factors in why they remained connected to organizations. The training and opportunities to demonstrate their civic agency helped community members understand their own power and ability to influence the systems and institutions that impact their lives.

Members of VOTE shared that political education gave them the confidence to take civic action, while Poder NC members highlighted how accessible, culturally relevant materials helped them connect with information more meaningfully. One ICUC member shared an example:

*"We went to this public event. It was a public hearing about an expansion project of Amazon fulfillment centers next to the airport. And it was going to be like a million-square-foot warehouse that was going to bring in tons of trucks and planes and pollution, which are very heavy here because of warehouse presence. We went in to give public comments and made sure that the youth were part of the decision. So, I think that's **where we felt very powerful** because you're speaking to these public officials and giving your opinion about what the community thinks ..."*

### Recommendation:

- Organizations should provide structured leadership development programs, training sessions, and leadership roles that allow members to take ownership of initiatives—creating pathways for emerging leaders to step into decision-making spaces.

## DEMONSTRATE THE IMPACT OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Participants expressed that organizations must do more than set ambitious goals—they must take action and demonstrate impact. It is especially important for members to understand how specific wins directly impacted them and their communities but also their role in obtaining those wins. Seeing tangible impacts as a result of their actions in community with other members and the organization reinforces their belief in the organization and deepens their connection. One quote that exemplifies this is from a VOTE member:

*"It just felt like 'Wow, a place where I can really be and where my efforts would count.' And then, when I started seeing them really getting stuff done, like the [ban the] box issue and the nonunanimous jury issue, that just lit my fire, and I'm a VOTE member forever. **I'm going down. I'm gonna ride it until the wheels fall off.**"*

### Recommendation:

- Organizations should regularly share updates on their progress, celebrate large and small victories, and ensure that members understand how their actions contributed to the outcome.

Our core finding is that belonging is foundational to creating an effective civic home that not only brings individuals into the organization but also sustains their connection. However, to shift from an apolitical space to what we define as a civic home, an organization must provide opportunities for individuals to develop agency and an understanding of their individual civic power as well as ways to engage in collective action to impact issues important to them and their communities.



Photo Credit: Ohio Organizing Collaborative



Photo Credit: Ohio Organizing Collaborative

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is experiencing deepening political polarization and eroding trust in government institutions, which poses significant challenges to U.S. democracy (Pew Research Center, 2024; Kleinfeld, 2023; Boxell et al., 2024; Milačić, 2021). Social and political polarization over the last few years has intensified, increasing sentiments of disconnection and disillusionment (Lee, 2022). The 2024 presidential election underscored these trends, revealing a decline in voter participation and a widening gap between those who feel invested in the democratic process and those who feel alienated.

Public trust in the government has steadily declined for decades, reaching near-historic lows. As of April 2024, only 22% of Americans expressed trust in the government to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time” (Pew Research Center, 2024). The decline in trust is not limited to institutions; there is also a decline in interpersonal trust, which only fuels feelings of disconnection (Rainie & Perrin, 2019; Lee, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2023).

This trend is particularly evident among young voters. The 2024 election saw a significant drop in turnout among young adults, reversing gains made in previous election cycles. While youth turnout surged to 50% in 2020, it dropped to 42% in 2024, with even steeper declines among young Black and Latino men (CIRCLE Tufts University, 2025). Increased cynicism; a sense that elections do not meaningfully impact their lives; and a broader disillusionment with democratic institutions’ ability to address urgent issues such as economic inequality, racial justice, and climate change are contributing to declines in youth turnout (Heys, 2024; CIRCLE Tufts University, 2025). Recent research has found that declining levels of trust in social and political institutions correlate with decreased civic participation, leading to a feedback loop of disengagement (Mallory, 2024). The decline in trust and civic engagement is a global phenomenon affecting democracies worldwide, not just the United States (OECD, 2024).

At a time when disillusionment threatens to weaken democratic participation further, we hypothesize that fostering spaces of belonging—what we call “civic homes”—can serve as a potential antidote to growing disillusionment and disengagement. **Civic homes are inclusive spaces where individuals can connect over shared values, build collective power, and work toward common goals.** Unlike transactional electoral engagement strategies that focus only on voter turnout, civic homes provide a more durable foundation for participation by leveraging culture, community, and trust to build connections.

A 2020 Sojourn Strategies survey found that 60% of young Black respondents believed that Black people should have a political home, underscoring the importance of such spaces in sustaining engagement beyond election seasons (Gamble, 2020). While civic homes resonate with individuals, there remains a gap between recognizing the need for them and understanding how they can be used to bring individuals into organizations and toward civic participation. **This report seeks to bridge that gap by examining how civic homes can be cultivated, sustained, and made accessible to those seeking belonging and community.**

Furthermore, through conversations directly with community members, we learn what brings individuals into organizations and what about organizations sustains individuals' participation. The research aims to provide organizations and leaders working to create civic homes with a better understanding of how to build spaces of belonging that create and sustain connection.

Our research suggests that creating belonging within communities can create pathways to bring individuals into organizations and sustain their connection to them. When people feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage in collective action and remain connected to the organization. Recent surveys by the CIRCLE Institute affirm these findings; a 2023 analysis found that "having a political home had the second-largest role in voting" after access to information for young people (Suzuki & Kiesa, 2023, pp. 2-3). Conversely, when individuals experience isolation or marginalization, they are more likely to withdraw from civic life, leading to further fragmentation and distrust. A recent study by the U.S. Surgeon General declared that the United States is in the midst of a loneliness and isolation epidemic. As social isolation increases, social participation declines (The U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2023, 12-14).

Furthermore, a subset of political science research has long argued that a decline in civic associations has resulted in weakened social capital and a decrease in civic engagement that impacts democratic norms (Putnam, 2000). There has been a measurable decline in community engagement, including within "religious groups, clubs, and labor unions" in the United States since the 1970s (The U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2023, 16). We argue that converging trends of declining trust, increased polarization, and growing social isolation underscore the urgent need for intentional strategies to build civic homes that create belonging and strengthen democracy. We begin to unpack the concept of civic homes and community from the perspectives of community members themselves and how those concepts affect organizational engagement and connection. Given how understudied civic homes are, we began this research using qualitative methods that provided space to hear directly from participants.

**A core finding of the research is that belonging and community are foundational to creating effective civic homes; however, civic homes MUST also include opportunities for individuals to develop agency and engage in collective action.** Similar to John A. Powell's foundational research on belonging where he notes, "unless people are afforded the opportunity to share in the governance (broadly defined) of their communities, then they cannot truly experience belonging" (powell et al., 2024, 7), the research aims to offer insights into how organizations can use belonging and community as a strategy for long-term movement building.

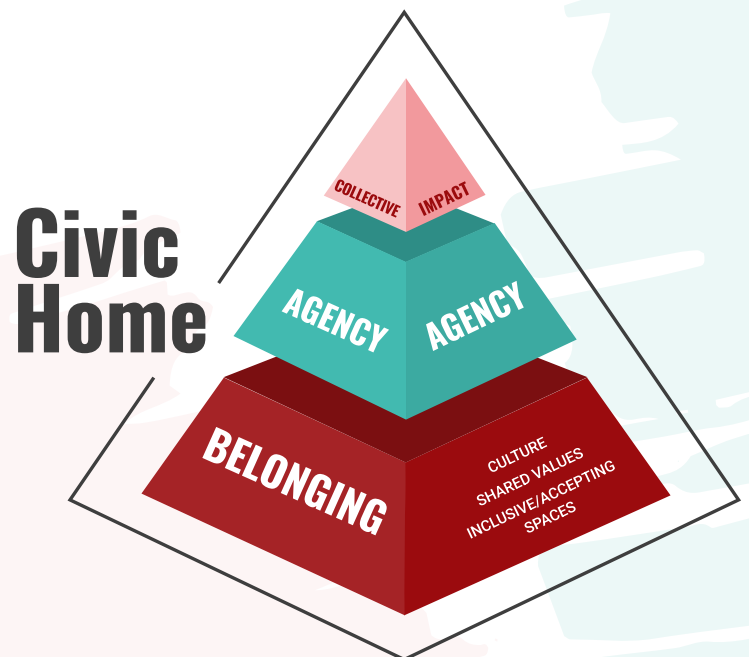


Photo Credit: Ohio Organizing Collaborative, 2023



Photo Credit: Poder NC, 2024

# METHODOLOGY

This project was conducted in partnership with six organizations—three during phase one and three during phase two. In phase one, we conducted research in collaboration with Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant rights organization in Wisconsin; VOTE, which organizes justice-impacted people in Louisiana; and Inland Congregation United for Change, an affiliate of PICO California, a youth advocacy organization in California. In phase two, we partnered with Poder NC, a Latinx organizing group in North Carolina; New Georgia Project, which primarily works within the Black community in Georgia; Building Freedom Ohio, a partner of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, a group that works with justice-impacted people in Ohio.

We used qualitative methods for this project, which included participant observation, one-on-one interviews, and listening sessions. We chose a qualitative approach because civic homes, especially from the perspective of community members, are underexplored. We needed to provide space to hear directly from community members on how they define community, what brings them into organizations, and what keeps them connected to organizations.<sup>1</sup> We sat down with community members and asked them about their work with these organizations, the issues they felt were most pertinent in their lives and the lives of their community members, and how well they understood and engaged in the terminology of a civic home.

Again, we conducted the civic home research in two phases. In the first phase, we sought to understand how individuals define community, what brought them into organizations, and what they value within organizations. In phase one, we found that belonging and culture were things that participants value across organizations; therefore, we sought to understand belonging better in phase two of the project. In phase two, we sought to understand how belonging, as a feature of civic homes, creates strong ties and sustainable organizational memberships. This research sought first to understand why people join civic organizations and then understand what organizational factors keep people connected to organizations.

## Core questions we sought to explore with this research included:

- What entices individuals to join an organization?
- Why do participants stay connected to organizations?
- What does the word “community” mean to members and nonmembers?
- What makes individuals feel connected and gives them a sense of belonging?
- What are the challenges or barriers to participation?
- Is the term “political home”<sup>2</sup> or “civic home” something community members understand?
- What characteristics do they look for or want in a civic home?

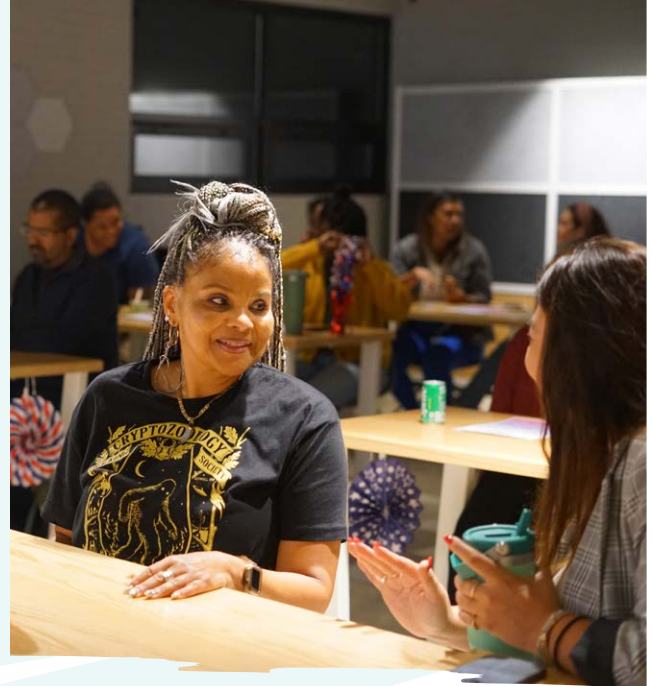


Photo Credit: Poder NC, 2024

<sup>1</sup> Now that we have gathered more descriptive information that has allowed us to better understand the concepts underlying civic homes from community members' perspective, a future phase of research could examine the concepts with quantitative measures to further understand the relationship between belonging, community, agency, and collective action to organizational participation and engagement.

<sup>2</sup> When conducting this research both in 2022 and 2024, we used the term “political home” to describe the concept we’re exploring. However, to provide more expansive application in writing the report and results, we use the term “civic homes” to reflect our findings. To accurately represent the questions asked during the research, there may be places in the report where we use “political homes” and “civic homes” interchangeably.

## Case Selection

In both phases of the research, we sought to partner with organizations that reflected geographic, programmatic, and racial diversity. These organizations include those that organize on a range of issues, from immigration to criminal justice reform. We spoke with participants from urban and rural areas and individuals of different races and ages. Below is a more detailed description of each organization.

### VOICE OF THE EXPERIENCED (VOTE)

VOTE is based in New Orleans, Louisiana, and is focused primarily on supporting people recently returning home after incarceration and their loved ones. VOTE connects community members to services and provides legislative and policy advocacy and electoral organizing. VOTE is also part of The Power Coalition, a community-based organization that empowers voters across Louisiana. The Power Coalition also collaborated on the research.



### VOCES DE LA FRONTERA



Voces de la Frontera has been organizing and empowering immigrant workers and families to advocate for progressive workers' rights and policies for over two decades. Its work ranges from fighting for federal immigration reform to ending collaboration between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and local law enforcement. Voces de la Frontera's vision is to create a community free from poverty and discrimination through access to resources that help people thrive in their communities. Voces also provides community members with critical legal and other citizenship services and classes.

### INLAND CONGREGATION UNITED FOR CHANGE (ICUC), PICO CALIFORNIA AFFILIATE

ICUC is a faith-based organization founded in San Bernardino, California, focusing on youth engagement, criminal justice reform, and policing. It is also part of the PICO California network. ICUC organizes in congregations and has a growing youth program with chapters in local high schools. Research for this project focused exclusively on the youth program, and most participants were connected to the organization through their school rather than a faith institution.



### NEW GEORGIA PROJECT (NGP)

NGP works to build power and increase the civic participation of the New Georgia Majority—Black, Latinx, Asian American Pacific Islanders, and young Georgians—and other historically marginalized communities through nonpartisan voter registration, organizing, and advocacy on the issues important to its communities.



### PODER NC

Poder NC is a nonprofit organization that builds people power in the growing Latinx community in North Carolina. Its work focuses on innovative and creative community organizing, civic education and leadership development for long-term wins and engagement. Poder NC activates Latinxs' civic participation by building community around shared values, increasing self-efficacy, and disrupting historic and inherited mistrust of the government.



### BUILDING FREEDOM OHIO (BFO)

BFO is a statewide organization of people impacted by criminalization and mass incarceration, including individuals directly impacted by felony convictions as well as families, friends, and community members of those impacted by the carceral state. It provides leadership development and organizing to leverage collective power on issues affecting its communities. BFO is a partner of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative.



## Phase One: 2022 Research

In phase one, we conducted seven listening sessions with community members affiliated with grassroots organizations in California, Louisiana, and Wisconsin. We also conducted listening sessions with nonmembers in two states, California and Wisconsin. The three partner organizations in phase one were VOTE (Louisiana), Voces (Wisconsin), and ICUC.

One sub-hypothesis we had was that how people think about community and civic participation may vary in ways that correlate with the strength of their affiliation with the organization. To account for this, we conducted three sessions for each organization, one of which was for what we called “core members,” whom the organization identified as active members who regularly participate with the organizations. We also held listening sessions with “tertiary members” or those members who, while not as present as core members, occasionally participated in and identified with the organization’s work. Finally, we scheduled a session for “nonmembers” without direct connection to the organization. For two of the three organizations, we contracted with a firm to recruit for the nonmember session participants with characteristics similar to those of existing members, such as age, race, income, education, geographic location, and ideology.<sup>3</sup>



Photo Credit: Voces de la Frontera

PHASE ONE – LISTENING SESSIONS		
VOTE (Louisiana)	Voces de la Frontera (Wisconsin)	ICUC (California)
<b>Listening Sessions</b>	<b>Listening Sessions</b>	<b>Listening Sessions</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Core Members: May 23, 2022</li> <li>● Tertiary Members: May 24, 2022</li> <li>● Community Partners: May 24, 2022</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Core Members: June 6, 2022</li> <li>● Tertiary Members: June 6, 2022</li> <li>● Nonmembers: June 7, 2022</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Core Members: July 26, 2022</li> <li>● Tertiary Members: July 26, 2022</li> <li>● Nonmembers: August 11, 2022</li> </ul>

The structure of the listening sessions started with questions about the participants’ civic participation, their past experiences with civic actions, their perceptions of their communities, and the issues facing them. We added a battery of questions asking participants to conceptualize what they think about the term “political home,” what they think of when they hear the term, and how important it is to them. We partnered with each organization to add a supplement for each session that focused on specific issues each organization worked on (i.e., community reentry for VOTE, immigrant rights for Voces, and youth activism for ICUC).

<sup>3</sup> Note that while we recruited for each of the three sessions to address the variability of membership levels, one organization (VOTE) chose to recruit for the nonmember session itself, and the participants had a different level of affiliation to the organization than the nonmembers in the other two organizations. While they were not members, they knew of the organization and were familiar with the organization’s work.

## Phase Two: 2023–2024 Research

In phase two of the project, in addition to conducting listening sessions, we conducted participant observations and one-on-one interviews with individuals connected to the partner organizations. We added the participant observations to better understand how individuals interacted with organizations at community events and to gather data in real time from participants about what information led them to attend an organizational event and what they valued about their experience. In this phase, we conducted seven listening sessions with partner organizations in Ohio, North Carolina, and Georgia. BFO, Poder NC, and NGP were the partner organizations.

In addition to listening sessions, we also did participant observations and one-on-one interviews at organizational events with two organizations—Poder NC and NGP. At Poder, NC, we attended a Youth Summit, which the group organized to provide participants with voter education and leadership training. In Georgia, we observed an event titled “Thank You, Georgia,” where the organization elevated the power of Georgia voters and thanked participants for voting in the previous election.

PHASE TWO – LISTENING SESSIONS AND ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS		
Building Freedom Ohio (Ohio)	Poder NC (North Carolina)	New Georgia Project (Georgia)
<p><b>Listening Sessions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Core Members: December 4, 2023</li> <li>● Tertiary Members: December 4, 2023</li> </ul>	<p><b>One-on-One Interviews</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Youth Summit: November 18, 2023</li> </ul> <p><b>Listening Sessions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tertiary Members: April 3, 2024</li> <li>● Core Members: April 4, 2024</li> </ul>	<p><b>One-on-One Interviews</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Thank You, Georgia: December 7, 2023</li> </ul> <p><b>Listening Sessions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tertiary Members: August 19, 2024</li> <li>● Core Members: August 20, 2024</li> <li>● Canvass Staff: August 20, 2024</li> </ul>

Similar to phase one, we identified core members as active members who regularly participate in the organization and “tertiary members” as those who occasionally participate. In addition to the listening sessions with members, we conducted an additional listening session with NGP and members of its canvass team. The organization was particularly interested in understanding how canvass staff viewed the organization and whether they saw the organization as a civic home. It is also interesting to note that we conducted the tertiary listening session in Georgia in a rural area.

As part of the participant observations, we conducted one-on-one interviews consisting of three short questions to understand why they chose to attend the event, who connected them to the organization, and their thoughts around belonging.

The structure of the listening sessions started with questions about times when participants felt like they belonged, critical issues facing their communities, and how the organizations cultivate belonging. We then asked participants how they became connected to their organization and why they stay engaged. We also added a battery of questions for participants to define a political home and describe its characteristics. Similar to phase one, we included questions specific to each organization’s program.



Photo Credit: Poder NC, 2024

# THE POWER OF BELONGING

Belonging is more than simply being included; it is about having a voice, exercising agency, and co-creating the structures that shape one's community. As Powell shares in his research, belonging means having access to spaces and having the power to influence and shape them. Our research suggests that what transforms an organization from an apolitical gathering place to a civic home is a shift from passive inclusion to active participation and the ability to work collectively with others to impact change.

With that said, it was clear from participants across organizations that belonging and community are necessary to build toward agency and action. It is a foundational step that, we believe, creates a deeper and more sustained connection to organizations.

Core drivers of belonging for participants included the feeling of safety, the ability to show up authentically as oneself without judgement, and where there are shared lived or cultural experiences. These quotes from North Carolina participants capture what it feels like not to belong and what it means to belong.

*"When I feel like I belong somewhere, I feel less like a cat arched for battle. When you don't feel like you belong somewhere, you're constantly in fight or flight mode. I grew up in rural North Carolina, Burke County. So constantly feeling this sense of dull hostility from people [because they didn't know] what we were or where we were from or anything."*

**—Core Member (Poder NC)**

*"When I belong, I almost feel it physically, like almost relaxation ... I feel more comfortable being able to be myself and being able to just have that confidence to speak and talk to others and just be whoever I want to be without being judged ..."*

**—Tertiary Member (Poder NC)**

Across all the organizations and communities where we conducted this research, a sense of belonging and connection emerged as core qualities that individuals sought in civic organizations, even nonmembers from phase one of the research. While the elements that foster belonging vary across different communities and organizations, the underlying need remains the same: People seek spaces where they can be themselves, feel seen, and experience a sense of safety and inclusion.

However, creating an effective civic home requires more than just creating welcoming spaces—it requires actively bringing people into organizations and fostering meaningful connections to take purposeful collective action on their shared interests. This section explores what draws individuals to civic organizations and, more importantly, what sustains their engagement over time. Our research suggests that belonging is not just a byproduct of participation but a key factor in long-term connection. We found that culture, shared values, and intentional demonstrations of care are critical in building strong, lasting connections where individuals feel genuinely at home.

## Why Do Individuals Join Organizations

We found that individuals join organizations for many different reasons. Some join organizations or attend events because someone they trust invites them; others are motivated by an issue they are trying to change; and others are brought in through major actions, such as marches or rallies. However, one of the most consistent themes across our listening sessions was the power of social networks in bringing people into civic organizations. Nearly all participants shared that they first learned about their civic home through a friend, family member, or colleague. Even nonmembers from phase one said they were more likely to join an organization if they were invited by someone they knew or someone they knew was a part of the organization. On the following page is a word cloud reflecting participants' responses on how they became connected to their respective organizations.



Photo Credit: Voces de la Frontera

People are more likely to join and remain engaged in civic organizations when they have relationships with others involved. Relational organizing—the practice of leveraging personal networks to build power—is a cornerstone of successful movements. In many cases, a simple invitation from a trusted friend motivated participants to take their first step into civic engagement. One participant in Wisconsin shared:

***“I think that this feels like the first time you do a reunion. I had never come [into the Voces] space, but my sister-in-law and my niece brought me. I had always heard of Voces, but my sister-in-law always comes. Now that she has joined the meetings some more, obviously, I join more now. I feel like it is important knowing someone involved to bring other people in like relatives to come to spaces like this.” —Tertiary Member (Voces)***

We also saw similar sentiments from nonmembers when asked what would make them join an organization. Many said they were more likely to join if they knew someone at the organization or if someone they knew invited them to join an organization. Whether via friends or family members, a significant way each organization recruited members in the community was by using its existing membership’s social networks. The findings underscore the need for civic organizations to prioritize relationship-building and ensure that their outreach strategies tap into existing community networks.



## What Fosters Belonging

Now that we have discussed what brings individuals into organizations, we want to share what our research found about what fosters belonging. Our findings suggest that belonging is foundational to sustaining long-term connections within organizations. Understanding what makes people feel valued, seen, and supported is critical to building spaces where they not only show up but stay engaged. The following section explores the key elements that create a sense of belonging.

### CULTURAL CONNECTIONS AND INCLUSION

Our research found that culture and inclusion are crucial in fostering belonging within civic organizations. When people see their cultural identities reflected in an organization, they are more likely to feel a deep connection to the space and the people within it. Participants shared that being part of organizations that celebrate their backgrounds, traditions, and shared histories make them feel at home. Whether through language, food, music, or storytelling, cultural affirmation helps create spaces where people feel not only welcome but understood. In their own words, participants share the importance of language and culture in creating belonging.



Photo Credit: Poder NC | Artist: Paula Nicole Rodriguez

*"I think that naturally when somebody in my surrounding, in a city like Madison where it's diverse but not very diverse like a city like Chicago or Milwaukee where I've lived before, if somebody speaks Spanish right away, my ears perk up and naturally I want to get close to them and whoever they are, even if I don't know them, as long as they're around me, in a social setting, for example at school or a gym, whatever it is. I think naturally a like-minded language that is not spoken here really unites us."*

**—Nonmember (Wisconsin)**

*"Everything there was so genius about incorporating our culture into getting us interested and excited about being civically engaged, especially when there's a lot of barriers to that engagement. Doing that to educate our people and get them excited is great. [For example,] the Walter Mercado posters ... I still have that hanging on my wall in my office. As a Puerto Rican person, that was amazing to me, and so like seeing things like that."*

**—Tertiary Member (Poder NC)**

Beyond cultural representation, fostering a sense of inclusion was equally critical. Participants emphasized that they felt a stronger connection to organizations that prioritized creating nonjudgmental spaces where they could be their whole selves. Inclusion was not just about being present—it was about feeling valued, supported, and safe to express personal experiences without fear of dismissal or exclusion. Organizations that intentionally established trust helped participants feel anchored and invested in the organization. As one VOTE member shared:

***“[VOTE] is a community because, like big mom and big dad’s house, we can come in here, and you accept that it doesn’t matter—your culture, income, none of that. You’re not being judged. You’re just being understood, heard, and supported. They don’t turn you around. You don’t have to be healthy—whatever condition you come in this door—or if you meet any one of us in the streets, we’re gonna direct you here, and that’s what the community needs. It reminds me of how we just were accountable for each other, for our community.”***

Feeling accepted was also reflected by this youth participant of ICUC (California):

***“When I first started working here, I felt really welcomed by everybody because I think we kind of all understood our backgrounds, even though we weren’t the same person. We kind of saw pieces of who we were, and we were just welcoming to the idea that we were all going through something different, experiencing different things differently. But we were still able to accept each other. So it was just a very comforting space to know that the issues I saw in my community were valid and that some other people also saw the same issues.”***

We found similar sentiments among individuals connected to NGP:

***“When I’m here, I feel like I’m home. I feel like they want me to be a part of the group. You’re not just sitting by yourself. It’s always somebody’s going to come and talk to you.”*** —NGP Community Member

Ultimately, people seek organizations and spaces where they feel seen and safe. Organizations use culture, language, and inclusive and accepting organizational norms to establish trust and connection with members. When describing these connections, participants used words such as “home” and “family” to describe their connection with organizations. Some might view culture and creating this sense of belonging as secondary to organizing individuals toward action. However, our research suggests it is foundational to how organizations build and sustain connections. Individuals are much more likely to take action and remain connected to an organization if they have a strong sense of belonging. One nonbinary participant described how an organization choosing to add pronouns to the name tags at the first event they attended was an indicator that this was an organization they could be a part of, and it is something they assess each time they come into connection with the organization. The Poder NC member shared:

***“I remember the very first social hour I came here; it was basically to suss out the vibes and see what kind of people were there. I was very nervous, and then I saw that you put your name tag and your pronouns ... every time I’ve gone and talked to them, it’s always reconfirmed my belief that they’re very good, very progressive people. They’re definitely the type of people that I would want to be involved with.”***

By centering culture and inclusion, organizations can go beyond outreach and build spaces where people not only join but remain engaged over time. When individuals feel seen, respected, and supported, they develop a lasting sense of belonging that strengthens their connection to the organization.



Photo Credit: Poder NC, 2024

## SHARED VALUES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

Another key factor in fostering belonging within civic organizations is the presence of shared experiences and values. People are drawn to spaces where they see reflections of their identity and lived reality. Many participants in our research shared that they sought organizations aligned with their values, shared experiences, or community goals.

We found the importance of shared experiences in our sessions with VOTE members in Louisiana. One participant shared:

***“In 2021, one of my friends came home, and he became a member of VOTE ... I’ve been here since. It’s like she said, and a lot of members said around the table, it’s home. It’s people who have been through things like you and going through things that you’re going through that you can relate to and talk about. If it’s just a vent, you can come here and do that too. So that’s why I’m here.”***

It is not only about shared lived experiences but also about finding spaces with shared goals in terms of community impact and public action. For example, one youth participant shared how important it was that the organization focused on issues that impacted students:

***“When we work on issues, especially in our community, they’re usually tailored to student issues, which is why we have a lot of meetings, research meetings, with school district officials. And I think it’s important, especially when more youth are taking charge, or they’re more involved in working together because we have a very similar perspective. Adults like to do what they think is best for us, but we also have to show them we’re the youth. We’ve been in these positions. We’ve experienced things firsthand.”***

Civic organizations must clearly articulate their values, mission, and purpose. When organizations clarify their purpose and ensure that their spaces represent the people they serve, they create environments where members feel genuinely connected and remain connected to organizations.

## DEMONSTRATION OF CARE FOSTERS BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Belonging is built not just through shared values and culture but through tangible demonstrations of care. Our research found that participants were drawn to organizations that prioritized their well-being and the well-being of their communities. We want to emphasize that when we use the term “demonstration of care,” we do not mean caretaking in a paternalistic sense but that the organizations demonstrate that they are invested in individuals and the community beyond transactional actions taken with the organization. When organizations provided resources—such as legal services or connections to critical support systems—it signaled that they saw and valued people beyond their potential to take action. These resources did more than offer short-term help; they built trust, showing that organizations were invested in people’s well-being, not just their participation.

When organizations center care, the relationships they build are deeper and more meaningful. Participants shared that receiving support from an organization made them feel valued, fostering a sense of reciprocity that encouraged long-term engagement. Rather than feeling pressured to take action immediately, they had time to build trust and form connections. By engaging with community members more holistically, civic organizations can establish relationships that are not purely transactional but instead rooted in a shared commitment to community and mutual support. The importance of this was reflected across the organizations and communities we researched. Here are examples of how community resources, information, and support navigating complex systems to address urgent needs strengthened connections to organizations.

*“I would say Voces de la Frontera. It’s like a vehicle of knowledge and a space where we can [receive help] ... Many of us don’t know what benefits we can have even if we don’t have papers. So, if we really feel like people like us are encouraged and trained, it can help the whole community.”*

**—Voces Member**

*"I'm a day-one volunteer member. I have a husband that's incarcerated, [and] other relatives. What VOTE has done and is doing is fundamental, and it's very resourceful. It's home. It's actually home for a lot of us. Even though we've seen a lot of laws changing and policies and all that, you still can come here just for the very bare minimum, just basic stuff, information, support across the board, and, I mean, just to have a conversation, a support system."*

**—VOTE Member**

*"[VOTE] gives you opportunities for like help you with the job [search] and stuff like that. That's the type of resources that I'd be looking for. ..."*

**—VOTE Member**

*"For me, Voces helps me a lot because if Voces didn't exist, and [if] they had not connected me to an attorney, I wouldn't have papers. I really value that they are persistent and that they continue giving us information and community help."*

**—Voces Member**

*"Once [people in our community] see that they got a place like VOTE, once they come to a meeting, you can guarantee they gonna come back. Cause what [VOTE] offers is a big resource center for everything that they need. Especially for reentry."*

**—VOTE Member**



Photo Credit: Poder NC | Artist: Paula Nicole Rodriguez



Photo Credit: Voces de la Frontera

# CULTIVATING AGENCY AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

Belonging, culture, and community create the foundation for sustained connection to civic organizations. However, our research found that another important ingredient that keeps individuals engaged over time is the opportunity to build their own civic agency, develop leadership skills, and contribute to meaningful collective action. People want to feel like their involvement leads to tangible impact—not just for their community but their growth as leaders. As one member of VOTE shared:

*“I learned so much from the guys and girls here. The information that I gather from coming to all the meetings and participating in elections, having laws, signing bills into laws, going to different states—it changed the way, some of the ways that I do things, especially within my neighborhood. Cause most people in my neighborhood were just like me, you know, blind to this organization and what really goes on with the system, and all we know is the system is corrupt. But until you really come and get the full understanding of it, then you will grab onto anything.”*

When individuals can see the tangible results of their efforts and understand their role in a larger movement, they remain deeply connected and committed. Participants shared that having access to civic education and opportunities for leadership development helped them feel empowered within their organizations. It was not enough to simply be part of a group—they wanted to contribute, make decisions, and develop the skills necessary to advocate for change. Other examples that reflect the importance of individual agency and leadership development are captured below.

*“And personally, we went to this public event. It was a public hearing about an expansion project of Amazon fulfillment centers next to the airport. And it was going to be like a million-square-foot warehouse that was going to bring in tons of trucks and planes and pollution, which are very heavy here because of warehouse presence. We went in to give public comments and made sure that the youth were part of the decision. So, I think that’s where we felt very powerful because you’re speaking to these public officials and giving their opinion about what the community thinks ...”*

**—ICUC Member**



*“And that’s what makes this work because people enjoy what they do. Some people never had an opportunity to learn as much as they learn and apply what they learn. And cause you get that opportunity. When you working here, you get that opportunity to stand up and talk to the whole membership about your particular knowledge of some policy.”*

**–VOTE Member**

*“[We had] a weeklong power-building event [that] worked on you as an individual introspectively. And then it allowed you to basically see your purpose in your organization. So, it was all the organizations under that umbrella. We came together and just worked on ourselves and worked on our purpose and why we were in [our specific] organizations.”*

**–BFO Member**

Equally important was the ability to see the impact of their collective action. Individuals remained engaged when they could point to outcomes—whether influencing local policies, improving community resources, or mobilizing voters. Individuals want to be a part of organizations where they have a deep sense of belonging and can have a tangible impact. Participants who could describe the organization’s specific impacts also described a deeper connection to the organization.

This section explores how providing space for leadership, civic education, and meaningful community impact sustains long-term engagement. By investing in individuals’ growth and creating opportunities for action, organizations can foster a sense of purpose and build stronger, more resilient movements.

## Individual Agency and Leadership Development

A significant factor that created a sustained and deep connection with the organizations was how, through civic education and delivering tangible wins, individual members established an increased sense of efficacy and agency. Participating in marches, attending state legislature sessions, and mobilizing voters were important in the direct way they allowed members to effect change in their communities. It was not just that members accessed leadership development but that they had direct ways to use their learning and see the impact of their actions.

Many would describe how the system was rigged or corrupt, but through engagement with an organization, they could find their own sense of agency and leadership. Some quotes from the research capture the importance of individual leadership development and individual agency.



Photo Credit: Building Freedom Ohio

*“I’ll use VOTE, for example ... they’ll meet the person where they are. So [VOTE] is the legit space to where if I know somebody is coming to me looking for like a specific resource or whatever the case is ... VOTE not only support you as a whole but then they also educate to make sure you’re on the up and up with that you need to know about these laws that are changing and the legislatures and that form of education.”*

**–VOTE Member**

*"I'm trying to learn and expand my knowledge on organizational work and different political values and the way that I could help the problems that we have in our community. I feel it's [Poder NC] really helped get me on a path where it's like, 'wow, this feels like it could also be fun and also meet great connections [and] great people' ..."*

**—Poder NC Member**

*"What made me feel like I belonged was the classes. Basically, I felt at that time [they were] speaking to me personally like it was meant for me to be there. Like, you know, the whole situation. I was at a turning point in my life that I needed to be there, and I needed to hear what the speakers were telling me because it changed my life at that moment."*

**—BFO Member**

Our research suggests that as individuals develop civic knowledge and confidence, their connection to organizations grows stronger. The opportunity to take meaningful action—whether advocating for policy change, organizing within their communities, or mobilizing others—reinforced their sense of belonging and purpose. We believe that individual development combined with organizational impact is crucial. Participants described their personal growth, but they were also able to connect that with how—when they worked in community—they could impact issues important to them and their community.

For example, one member of VOTE shared:

***"It just felt like 'Wow, a place where I can really be and where my efforts would count.' And then, when I started seeing them really getting stuff done, like the [ban the] box issue and the nonunanimous jury issue, that just lit my fire, and I'm a VOTE member forever. I'm going down. I'm gonna ride it until the wheels fall off."***

Organizations need to ensure that their members and participants understand the organizations' impact and their role in driving that change as individuals connected to and working within the organizations. Seeing the direct outcomes of their work strengthened their connection to organizations and motivated them to stay involved. Even if the results did not lead to a win, the community members valued the ability to engage, have their voices heard, and push back on a system they saw as problematic.

*"I'm a previously incarcerated person ... And I was totally impressed when the box was removed from the applications about whether you've been incarcerated. That was a stumbling block for me because when I got to that box, I knew the job wasn't happening, but VOTE had that removed and opened doors for me. It never would've happened without [VOTE]."*

**—VOTE Member**



Photo Credit: VOTE, 2024

*"[W]e went over to the state capitol, and we talked to the politicians. But between that day and then the next time we went to Columbus, right. It [BFO] grew [to] so many cities. The first time, it was just really Cleveland and Dayton because [name redacted] was down there. And then the next time we went, it was Cleveland and Akron and Youngstown. It had [grown]. So then, it was just seeing that growth right there from one year to the next was powerful. It grew from 25 people to like 200 people."*

**—BFO Member**

*"I have been in Milwaukee for 17 years. I am undocumented. I have DACA, and I've participated in a lot of rallies for Voces, and I make an effort to always attend rallies, and that's how I met [an elder] who invited us to fight—or, like she says, 'to join the struggle.' I believe that we should struggle for all of us."*

**—Voces Member**

For members, commitment to an organization is not just about shared values—it is about actively participating in the process of creating change. Participants emphasized that it is not enough for organizations to articulate a vision for progress; they need to equip members with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities to be part of that change. When organizations prioritized leadership development, civic education, and hands-on involvement, members felt a deeper sense of ownership over the work and were likelier to stay engaged.

It was imperative for members to understand how specific wins directly impacted them and their communities and the role they played in achieving those wins. Organizations that created pathways for members to lead, take action, and see the tangible outcomes of their efforts helped reinforce a lasting sense of agency and belonging. Working at the intersection of individual agency and collective action, organizations can help sustain deeply rooted connections to organizations and movements.



Photo Credit: Voces de la Frontera



Photo Credit: Building Freedom Ohio

## BARRIERS TO JOINING CIVIC HOMES

While civic organizations play a vital role in fostering belonging, leadership development, and collective action, joining and remaining engaged in these spaces is not always easy. In our listening sessions, we asked participants about the challenges and barriers they faced when considering membership in civic organizations. Their responses highlighted a range of personal, cultural, and environmental factors that made participation difficult.

Despite these barriers, it remains crucial for organizations to actively address these roadblocks because we know civic homes can be an effective intervention in the growing level of disillusionment and isolation in the United States.

### CULTURAL AND IDENTITY DISCONNECTION

One of the primary barriers to joining community spaces was a sense of cultural or identity disconnection. Participants shared that they have experienced environments—whether in school, workplaces, or other social settings—where they have felt unseen or unrepresented. They sometimes encountered similar feelings when engaging with civic organizations. For many, cultural representation was not just a preference but a necessary foundation for engagement. When organizations fail to account for potential members' unique experiences, it creates an additional hurdle to participation. In some instances, it was not that individuals felt like outsiders; it was just unclear what their role was in an organization.

For example, one participant shared that because the organization caters to more young people, they were having a difficult time staying connected to the organization: “[One of the challenges with staying connected is] my age, and I’m also queer. I’m 34 years old, and so sometimes there could be for me it’s what’s my position in all of this. Where do I fit in because I feel am I an auntie yet? Is that [what] you’re graduating me to be—an auntie? If you’re graduating me to be an auntie, give me a role. Because I show up better in a position of, like, who can I mentor? Who can I connect with?”

To overcome this challenge, organizations must not only create spaces of belonging but also provide ways for members and participants to clearly understand their place in the organization and where they can have an impact. As we mentioned previously in this report, individuals are more likely to stay connected to organizations when they can develop their agency and see pathways to have an impact.

### MISALIGNMENT OF VALUES

Another significant barrier that participants identified was the challenge of conflicting values within civic organizations. Some individuals hesitated to join or remain engaged in organizations where they felt ideological misalignment with existing members. While civic organizations often bring together people with shared interests, the differences in approach, priorities, or beliefs can create friction.

For some, resistance to growth within organizations further compounded these challenges. Participants shared that, in some cases, organizations struggled to evolve alongside the communities they served. When an organization was unwilling to adapt to

new perspectives, integrate fresh leadership, or expand its vision, it created an unwelcoming environment for new members. One participant shared:

***"I was going to say that if it didn't align with what I believed in, I definitely don't want to put myself in any type of predicament if I believe in this and they believe in that. I'm definitely not going to come to it. And [if] doing my research [and] dig in, and you're researching [the organization] [and] you're like, 'oh, that's what that means' because they can make it look and sound good. And then you get down to the nitty-gritty, and you're like, 'oh no, I don't want, I don't want to be part of that.'"***

Similarly, another participant described concerns with conflict or an unwillingness to be open to other ideas or to collaborate with other organizations as a significant challenge. Our research suggests that it is important for organizations to be clear about both their values and their approach. Not only will that provide clarity for individuals who are aligned with the organization, but it also provides clarity for individuals who may not be aligned with the organization. In many ways, our research reaffirms that there needs to be diversity in civic homes and spaces for individuals to join. Not everyone will align with a particular civic home, so by being clear about its values, approach, and mission, the organization can ensure that it organizes individuals who are aligned and remain connected to it.

## EXTERNAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS

Beyond personal and organizational challenges, external and environmental factors prevent individuals from joining civic organizations. Some participants reported living in areas with high levels of community violence, making it difficult to attend meetings or participate in events consistently. Others expressed concerns about personal safety when engaging in public activism, especially in communities with histories of political suppression or targeted harassment.

For example, participants from Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant rights organization, shared that fear of being profiled discouraged them from participating in pro-immigration advocacy efforts. In an era of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment and increased surveillance of activists, many feared legal repercussions or negative attention for their involvement. Similarly, participants from ICUC, which is located in San Bernardino, California, cited high crime rates as a significant factor inhibiting their ability to attend meetings consistently. According to recent statistics, San Bernardino has one of the highest crime rates among neighboring counties, second only to Los Angeles County. The risk of violence in members' communities created logistical barriers to joining and participating in community meetings. One member shared:

***"It's just the fact that we're in San Bernardino because it's really unsafe for students our age to be out. My mom is very worried about me going out. Coming here, I had to get a ride with [my friend] or walk with [my other friend]. So, it's tough to get some places where I want to participate and be involved, but I can't do that."***

Addressing these external barriers requires organizations to prioritize safety, accessibility, and support for their members. Providing virtual participation options, ensuring that meeting locations are secure and accessible, or providing resources that help mitigate risks associated with activism might help alleviate external barriers to participation. Additionally, organizations working with vulnerable populations should proactively educate members on their rights and offer legal protections where possible. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, civic organizations can create safer, more inclusive opportunities for individuals to join and participate in organizations.

## CONCLUSION

Now that we better understand what community members look for in a civic home—belonging, agency, and collective impact—we believe the next stage of research is to design quantitative measures of these concepts that the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund can study across organizations and communities. It will allow us to better understand how the underlying factors of civic homes intersect and how various levels of each element inform the strength of civic homes.

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