



Narrative

Power:

Accelerating Narrative Change
From the Ground Up





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Executive Summary



The Million Voters Project (MVP) is a multiracial, multigenerational alliance of nine community-driven state and regional networks engaging millions of voters across the state to advance a government that cares for all of us. In January of 2023, MVP launched an effort to better understand how to grow narrative power to advance racial justice with communities of color across California. MVP conducted a first-of-its-kind research project with powerbuilders and other experts to assess the current state of narrative infrastructure within California's powerbuilding ecosystem and to identify a set of key priorities and recommendations for transforming narrative power for progressive change.

Winning access to healthcare for thousands of undocumented Californians by expanding notions of who is deserving of care and inclusion in our public health system. Securing renter protections for working-class and immigrant communities by seeding a belief in housing as a fundamental human right and striking a blow at the free market ideology. Building a compelling vision of a government of care and fully funded schools and communities through demanding that corporations pay what they owe.

These are just some recent examples of how powerbuilding and organizing groups in California are showing up on the frontlines of narrative change—challenging dominant narratives that fuel individualism, inequality and racial division and advancing audacious narratives that center multiracial democracy, interdependence, and fairness for all. The work of powerbuilding groups to win hearts and minds; to advance new policies that foster a more inclusive California; and to organize people into collective action by seeing their stories as connected IS essential narrative change work.

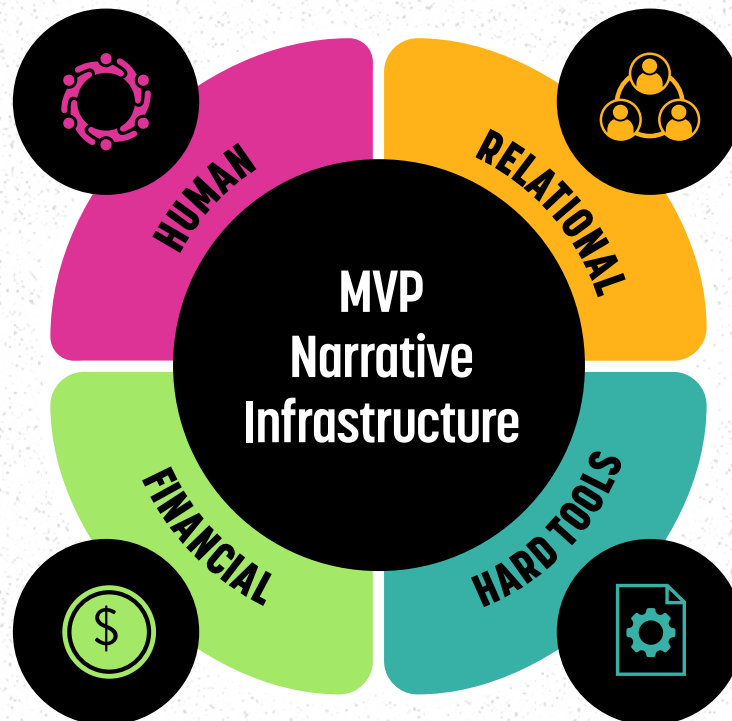
However, social justice organizers face an uneven playing field and are coming to the fight with far too few people and vastly inadequate resources and tools. It's difficult to change

dominant narratives that are decades or more in the making, often deeply embedded in our systems, culture and institutions. The opposition has vast resources, an army of strategists and communicators, and a long head start in building infrastructure to spread their stories and beliefs widely. To meet this offensive, powerbuilding groups need to build their own narrative infrastructure—one that is robust and expansive enough to take on the opposition and win.



In response to this challenge, the Million Voters Project conducted an expansive research project with powerbuilders and other experts to better understand what is needed to support and grow narrative power. This report contains key recommendations for building a robust, vibrant, and effective narrative infrastructure and concrete ideas for investment from organizers and narrative practitioners. Through our research grounded in participants' deep experience in California's powerbuilding ecosystem, we identified four priority infrastructure areas to grow our narrative power.

MVP NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE FRAMEWORK



Human infrastructure:

A robust ecosystem of grassroots leaders, strategists, communicators, organizers, creators, and community influencers, grounded in communities most impacted, who are primed to share and cultivate our narratives in multiple spaces

Financial infrastructure:

The sustained funding needed to support narrative work at scale

Relational infrastructure:

Structures that allow individuals and organizations to build greater trust and move in strategic narrative alignment together across issues and campaigns

Hard tools:

A comprehensive suite of tools for designing, distributing, and evaluating narrative strategies and content, as well as the knowledge and capacity to use them

Thanks to years of groundwork, California's powerbuilding ecosystem is uniquely primed to make a huge leap forward in expanding its narrative power. Here's how we get there.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE.

1 Build the Bench of Narrative Strategists

We believe people are the main drivers of narrative change. Powerbuilding groups need to grow the number of people and capacity to develop and deploy narrative strategies at the scale necessary to win as well as expand the pipeline for hiring, training and networking individuals across the ecosystem. Significantly scaling up the pipeline of skilled grassroots leaders, campaigners, organizers, and communicators working for our movements will be foundational to all efforts to expand our narrative powerbuilding infrastructure.

2 Strengthen Local Powerbuilding Organizations

There is no route to winning narrative power without local organizations: Local work is fundamental to our ability to move our agenda at the state level. But local organizations tend to face greater constraints than organizations working at the state level when it comes to critical skills, capacities, and funding for narrative powerbuilding. Because these organizations must do deep local organizing as well as broader coalitional work, this often means they are trying to do the most with the least. We need to build infrastructure from the ground up. This means exponentially growing the resources flowing to local organizations, which are the critical foundation of our narrative powerbuilding ecosystem, to ensure that they are well equipped to work at both the local and state levels.

3 Support Centralized Narrative, Decentralized Amplification

The key to building narrative power is a shared centralized narrative with decentralized amplification across organizations and sectors, which also means strengthening infrastructure for coordination, collaboration, and alignment at the state level. There are also critical needs around data collation and management, shared access to dissemination tools and channels, and space for high-level strategic conversations across sectors. We need to invest substantially and strategically in strengthening narrative alignment across organizations, coalitions, and sectors, building tables and platforms with a focus on shifting foundational cross-issue narratives, such as those about government.

4 Explore Shared Infrastructure Opportunities

Hard tools for research, dissemination, and evaluation are critical to narrative change efforts, particularly given the need to build more inclusive narratives that reach and resonate with diverse constituencies. However, current capacity to use research is limited, and current distribution channels feel too narrow in their reach. Finally,



understanding what is changing and why is critical to an aligned and effective strategy, but few groups are well equipped to do this. We need to invest in more tailored and actionable narrative research, expand access to more and new channels for amplification and distribution, and build stronger infrastructure for sharing learning, data, and access to measurement and tracking tools across the network.

5 Commit New Level of Funding

Securing adequate resources for narrative powerbuilding is a huge challenge within the powerbuilding ecosystem. Few powerbuilding and organizing groups have the amount or type of funding (i.e., multiyear and flexible) that they need for success. This is especially pressing in the context of the vast, sustained investments the opposition is making in their own narrative infrastructure. Strengthening narrative infrastructure will take significant investment over the long term and financial resources at a scale beyond anything we've seen so far. We are calling on funders to rethink their commitments to narrative powerbuilding, greatly expanding the size, scope, and duration of funding being put toward this work.



We believe these recommendations will allow us to make huge leaps forward in advancing narratives that center—and build toward—our visions for justice, equity, and inclusion for all. As we find ourselves at a critical juncture for safeguarding and advancing decades of progressive struggle in California, the time for bold investments in building narrative power is now.



Introduction



In 2020, the Million Voters Project helped anchor an unprecedented coalition of community and labor groups attempting to pass Schools and Communities First (SCF), a ballot initiative that would have closed a commercial property tax loophole that has been in effect for over four decades in California. In doing so, it would have provided an annual \$12 billion in funding for local schools and communities. In addition, the measure would have overturned a key piece of Proposition 13, a policy that caps property taxes in the state. Installed in 1978 by anti-tax, anti-immigrant, and pro-business interest groups, Prop 13 has long been deemed “untouchable” in California politics, despite its detrimental impacts on schools and communities. The Schools and Communities First measure lost by a narrow margin of 48% to 52% but received the support of over 8.2 million voters, the most yes votes of any 2020 state ballot measure. Building off previous stepping-stone battles to chip away at the right-wing, anti-government, pro-corporate agenda, the campaign succeeded in seeding new narratives about corporate accountability and what’s possible when corporations pay what they owe.

The following year, MVP—an alliance of seven (now nine) regional and statewide electoral organizing and racial justice networks—played a critical role in defeating the recall of Democratic governor Gavin Newsom, an effort fueled by right-wing conservatives angered over pandemic school closures, public health mandates, and the expansion of benefits to immigrants. MVP’s GOTV campaign (the largest in the state), along with a robust strategic communications strategy, advanced core values and beliefs that California’s multiracial democracy is strengthened by its commitment to greater inclusion, equality, and justice for working people, people of color, and women.

In 2022, Central Coast United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE), a local anchor of California Calls, organized and won their city’s first rent control ordinance in Oxnard, a predominantly working class, farm-working, and immigrant community in the Central Coast. Their victory, along with other renter protections in various regions, struck a blow at the free market ideology that has driven the spiraling housing affordability crisis while seeding a belief that housing is a fundamental human right. That same year, immigrant rights organizing groups won a ten-year fight to provide healthcare to thousands of undocumented Californians, expanding the notion of who is deserving of care and inclusion in our public health system. Both of these fights promoted a narrative of a government of care and inclusion.



Powerbuilding groups are on the frontlines of challenging harmful, dominant narratives that fuel individualism, inequality, and racial division and advancing audacious narratives that center multiracial democracy, interdependence, and fairness for all.



All of these examples point to the ways that powerbuilding groups are on the frontlines of challenging harmful, dominant narratives that fuel individualism, inequality, and racial division and advancing audacious narratives that center multiracial democracy, interdependence, and fairness for all. The work of powerbuilding groups to win hearts and minds; to advance new policies that foster a more inclusive California; and to organize people for collective action through seeing their stories as connected is essential narrative change work.

But it's not easy work. It's difficult to change dominant narratives that are decades or more in the making and often deeply embedded in our systems and culture and reinforced by our institutions. The opposition has vast resources, an army of strategists and communicators, and a long head start in building infrastructure to spread their stories and beliefs widely. Social justice organizers face an uneven playing field and are coming to the fight with too few people and vastly inadequate resources and tools. To remedy this, we need robust investment in narrative infrastructure: the people and skills, tools and technology, mechanisms for alignment and collaboration, and sustained financial resources that are needed for narrative powerbuilding.

In response to this challenge, in early 2023 MVP launched a first-of-its-kind research project to assess the narrative infrastructure of California's powerbuilding ecosystem, aimed at better understanding the capacities, needs, and priorities of MVP partners and local affiliates. As a statewide, multiracial, and multigenerational alliance of nine community-driven networks, MVP engages millions of voters throughout the state. Our network spans over 30 counties across California and includes over 100 local affiliates that are on the frontlines of organizing BIPOC, working-class communities in rural, suburban, and urban regions. Given this, we feel uniquely positioned to shed light on the needs, opportunities, and path forward for building narrative infrastructure across the state. In this report, we lay out priority recommendations for building a robust, vibrant, and effective narrative infrastructure for California's powerbuilding ecosystem. The insights we share draw on data from a survey of 58 community-based powerbuilding organizations working across California and focus groups with over 30 local, statewide, and national leaders in the narrative change field. While our recommendations are focused on California, we hope that they contribute to the broader discussion happening within philanthropy and change-making communities about how to strengthen narrative infrastructure and build progressive power across the United States and beyond.





Narrative Power From the Ground Up



WHY POWERBUILDING?

We recognize that a lot of important work and research has been done about narrative change over the last several years. An increased interest among funders in narrative change has helped fuel more research, thinking, and discussion, and a growing literature has assisted in generating a greater shared understanding and language around what we mean by narrative change. For some, the use of the term *narrative* may feel fairly new, but narrative change has always been at the heart of social justice movements.¹ For example, the civil rights movement was as much about transforming beliefs and asserting the human dignity of Black people as it was about changing laws and ending legal segregation. The same can also be said about the struggle for LGBTQ equality and other movements.

As a result of this growing interest, there are a number of different narrative change approaches often vying for funders' attention and investments. Powerbuilding—the effort by grassroots organizing groups to build a base within communities most impacted by injustice and to collectivize their power through alliances and coalitions to transform oppressive systems—is absent from many people's view of the narrative change ecosystem. In the philanthropic lexicon, the term *narrative change* has tended to evoke pop culture, big media, PR campaigns, and celebrities and influencers. While these can certainly be a part of the narrative ecosystem, driving amplification and storytelling, we believe that the narratives and strategies that can truly drive systemic change come from the ground up, rising from people's lived experiences.



NARRATIVES are the underlying beliefs, values, or ideas that are advanced through collections of related stories. Because narratives convey a particular interpretation of the world and the way it works, they can be harmful or beneficial to advancing the kinds of changes we hope to see.

NARRATIVE POWERBUILDING is the long-term effort by organizing groups to advance racial and social justice by building the alignment, power, and collective infrastructure needed to advance, reinforce, and defend our desired narratives at scale.

¹ Sobrato Philanthropies. (2023). *Changing the narrative for multilingual learners*. <https://www.sobrato.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SP-ChangingtheNarrativeforMultilingualLearners-PolicyBrief.pdf>

Recognizing the fundamental role that grassroots organizing groups play in building the power needed to create systemic change is essential to understanding their role in narrative change: “Power building relies on an ecosystem of diverse organizations that each contribute a range of important strategic capacities. Grassroots organizing groups sit at the center of the ecosystem because they play a critical role in building a base within the communities most impacted by inequities and they directly engage those communities in addressing those inequities. Power is built *with and by* communities, not for communities.”²

Just as power does not trickle down, narratives that advance freedom, justice, and inclusion rise from the ground up and from those whose lived experiences with oppression demand a new reality. The demands that come from communities—whether they are advocating for fair and equitable treatment, clean air and water, affordable housing, and new forms of community safety—are the foundation for not only concrete policy change but also for new narratives about what our communities and society should look like. As explained in ReFrame’s article *Creating a Narrative Ecosystem*, “When narrative strategy is integrated into organizing, impacted communities can expand the public notion of what is possible, inspire collective action and build consensus and power toward social change.”³

At the frontlines in the fight for justice led by those directly impacted, powerbuilding and organizing groups are uniquely positioned to draw deeply from the expertise and innovations of their constituents, mobilize people around common ideas, and create strong alignment across organizations and movements. These are all essential ingredients for making our narratives widespread, durable, and powerful.

Just as power does not trickle down, narratives that advance freedom, justice, and inclusion rise from the ground up and from those whose lived experiences with oppression demand a new reality.



2 Barsoum, G. (2023). *A new framework for understanding power building*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_new_framework_for_understanding_power_building

3 ReFrame. (2019). *Creating an ecosystem for narrative power*. <https://medium.com/@ThisisReFrame/part-1-creating-an-ecosystem-for-narrative-power-188083df5751>



WHY NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE?

Narrative change is a long-term project that requires a long-term strategy. Much has already been written, particularly for philanthropic audiences, about the need to shift thinking about time horizons and the fact that narrative change can't be accomplished in one campaign, election, or grant cycle.⁴ In addition to this, we also need to shift our understanding of what it takes to *sustain* a long-term narrative change strategy and what we are up against.

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For example, in the fight for Schools and Communities First, organizers confronted dominant narratives that have been decades in the making. For years, the political right and corporate interests have worked hand-in-hand to cement dominant narratives about taxation and the role of government. These narratives that painted the government as a bad actor—untrustworthy and intent on taking money from “hardworking (white) taxpayers” and giving it to “undeserving, lazy” (BIPOC) people—played a significant role in entrenching support for Prop 13. To be successful, SCF organizers needed to tackle these narratives head-on, shifting people's perceptions and providing a new, compelling vision of the potential for our government to improve their lives.

That kind of deep change doesn't happen overnight or by magic. As noted in a case study of this campaign, *Losing Forward: Lessons from Organizing for Narrative Change*, “Building narrative power for our movements requires a healthy ecosystem that combines leadership development, relevant tools and technology, substantial and sustained financial resources, and containers for collaboration and coordination. Our opposition has had decades to build their organizing and narrative infrastructure; our strategy needs to be similarly long-term and similarly wide-ranging.”⁵

Leaders like Rashad Robinson have offered important reflections on narrative power that we believe bear repeating here. Our movements need strong narrative infrastructure—the people, knowledge, skills, and tools, and the networks and mechanisms for individuals and groups to align, which are necessary to disperse narratives at a scale and depth that fundamentally changes the “norms and rules our society lives by.”⁶ Based on our research and experience, we know that this infrastructure is severely lacking in the powerbuilding ecosystem.



4 For example, Sobrato Philanthropies. (2023). *Changing the narrative for multilingual learners*. <https://www.sobrato.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SP-ChangingtheNarrativeforMultilingualLearners-PolicyBrief.pdf>; Convergence Partnership. (2022). *Funding narrative change*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>; ORS Impact. (2021). *Measuring narrative change*. https://www.orsimpact.com/DirectoryAttachments/3102021_103034_594_ORIS_Impact_Measuring_Narrative_Change_2.0.pdf

5 Choi, J. H., & Phelan, J. (2022, May 24). *Losing forward*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/losing-forward-lessons-from-organizing-for-narrative-change/>

6 Robinson, R. (2018). *Changing our narrative about narrative*. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/changing-our-narrative-about-narrative>

This reflects chronic underinvestment in narrative powerbuilding and in powerbuilding more broadly. Too often, we find ourselves in crisis mode, forced to think in the short term, pouring energy into finding the “right” words or messages for single-issue fights, and piecing together funding and resources tied to specific campaigns. If we are truly going to win narrative power, then we need to build the infrastructure that moves us beyond this status quo, allowing us to develop and advance a long-term, coordinated, and cumulative agenda for narrative change that can unleash the full potential of our movements.

READY TO LEAP FORWARD

We believe our ecosystem is positioned to make a huge leap forward when it comes to harnessing and deploying narrative power. Investments in narrative infrastructure will leverage years of groundwork that MVP partners and other organizing groups have done to build regional and state-level coalitions and networks that aggregate the power of the many movements for racial and social justice happening across California. These networks enable diverse partners working on critical issues at the local, regional, and state levels to align their efforts to advance a shared, long-term agenda for economic and racial justice and have wide reach across geography, constituencies, and issue areas.

Alongside this collaborative infrastructure, there is also significant buy-in for narrative as a lever for building power. Ninety-three percent of the organizations we surveyed agree that narrative powerbuilding is a high priority for their organization. There was also near-unanimous recognition of and support for the urgency of changing narratives about the government: 98% of survey respondents agreed that, to achieve structural change, we need new narratives about the role and potential of government, and 95% agreed that changing narratives about government should be a central part of narrative powerbuilding efforts.

% AGREEING THAT THERE IS A HIGH LEVEL OF BUY-IN AMONG:



With this groundwork, California's powerbuilding ecosystem provides uniquely fertile ground for strengthening narrative infrastructure and, with the right investment, is primed for impact at an unprecedented scale.

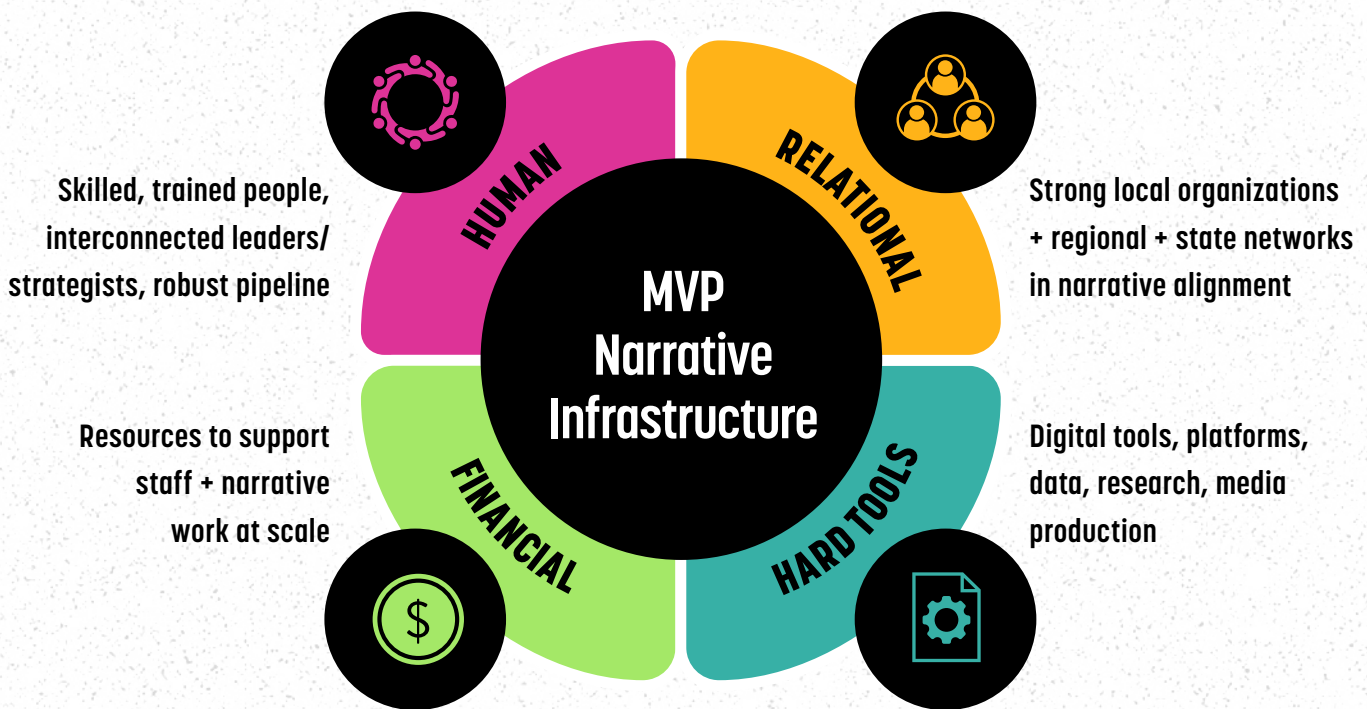


A Narrative Infrastructure Framework for Powerbuilding



In order to fully realize the promise of our collective power and build the narrative strength we need to win and sustain our victories, we will require a robust infrastructure that can support long-term planning and sustained strategic alignment across issues, organizations, and networks. Through our research grounded in participants' deep experience in California's powerbuilding ecosystem, we identified four priority infrastructure areas to grow our narrative power.

MVP NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE FRAMEWORK





Human Infrastructure

We believe that people are the main drivers of narrative change—

not viral pieces of content. Too often, current approaches to narrative change prioritize a limited set of “professionals” as narrative experts. But as Rashad Robinson states, “A few big clouds do not water the earth below them—millions of rain drops do the watering.”⁷ Marginalized peoples—Black, Indigenous, young people, immigrants, Latinx, AAPI, LGBTQ, working class, and rural people—form the heart of California’s powerbuilding ecosystem. Their demands for a new reality are the foundations of stories and narratives about what the world should and can be. We believe a robust human infrastructure includes communicators, organizers, faith leaders, service providers, small business owners, barbers, teachers, artists, creators, and others who are primed to share and cultivate our narratives in a range of communities and cultural and public spaces. Critical to the infrastructure is a pipeline that continuously trains and networks people across organizations, in a variety of roles, and across a diverse range of communities who are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources to spread compelling stories and move our values into dominance.

“A few big clouds do not water the earth below them—millions of rain drops do the watering.”

-Rashad Robinson



Relational Infrastructure

Aligned narrative strategy isn’t about following a single, top-down message. Instead, it’s about cultivating an ecosystem in which individuals and organizations can play to their strengths.

No one individual, organization, or campaign drives narrative change.

In order to win the battle of ideas, our people and organizations need to aggregate their power and work in aligned and complementary ways to advance shared narratives, ensuring that every story we tell and message we send are building toward our vision for the future. This means collaborating and strategizing around bedrock narratives, such as the role and potential of government, that cut across single issues and campaigns and are most critical to major structural reform. Aligned narrative strategy isn’t about following a single, top-down message. Instead, it’s about cultivating an ecosystem in which individuals and organizations can play to their strengths; adapt narratives to context and audiences; quickly and efficiently share ideas, data, skills, capacities, and resources throughout their networks; and respond in diverse but mutually reinforcing ways to moments of opportunity and threat. To achieve this, we need substantial investment in mechanisms that allow people to move in strategic narrative alignment together. One key piece of this relational infrastructure is building thriving and resilient local organizations that draw in masses of people most impacted by our movements. These organizations need capacity and resources to do this at a greater scale. They also need resources and time to join with other groups


⁷ Robinson, R. (2018). *Changing our narrative about narrative*. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/changing-our-narrative-about-narrative>

at the regional and statewide levels moving in strategic alignment together. Alignment across organizations does not occur through wishful thinking or good intentions. It happens through the hard and painstaking work of building deep trust and relationships, developing shared assessments of power and opportunities, identifying the right north stars together, and each group putting skin in the game and reputations on the line. This work is often invisible but is the critical glue to fostering robust collaboration and partnership.

Hard Tools

There is an array of tools needed to advance narrative powerbuilding:

data and research that help to analyze the landscape, shape messaging, and ensure that narratives reach and resonate with broad audiences and constituencies; digital and production tools for crafting narrative content; distribution platforms that allow us to disseminate and amplify our narratives at scale; and tracking and monitoring tools that help us evaluate our reach and impact. Achieving narrative saturation will require a comprehensive suite of tools and the skills and training to use them effectively—from ensuring that organizations across our network can access and use research and data on how to develop inclusive messaging for a range of different audiences, to providing access to and training on the kinds of innovative dissemination tools that will allow us to reach them. We also need the analytical capacity to track whether our joint efforts are working so that we know where to adjust, course correct, and double down.




Achieving narrative saturation will require a comprehensive suite of tools and the skills and training to use them effectively.

Financial Infrastructure

We need big shifts in the way narrative powerbuilding is resourced. To date, efforts to integrate narrative strategy into grassroots powerbuilding and organizing have been vastly underfunded. We need financial resources on a scale we simply haven't seen before, particularly in the context of the vast reach and resources of our opposition. Funding narrative powerbuilding also means committing to the long term, not just pursuing short-term campaign and policy wins (although those are an important part of the picture). It requires placing trust in organizations and the communities they serve and capitalizing on and scaling up what has already been built while also putting new funding into building spaces for experimentation, failing fast, and trying something new.





Five Recommendations for Transforming Powerbuilding's Narrative Infrastructure

Through this comprehensive research effort with powerbuilding groups and based on long and deep experience in the field, we have identified a set of five key priorities for building narrative infrastructure. These recommendations point to where funders interested in narrative change can scale up their investments and where leaders and practitioners within California's powerbuilding ecosystem can focus strategy and resources.

In the section that follows, we share the following:

- » **Top-line field recommendations** that we believe will be transformational when it comes to building narrative power in California
- » **A summary of why these are critical and necessary**, grounded in our assessment of current infrastructure and capacity within the ecosystem
- » **Ideas from the field for operationalizing these recommendations**, based on insights from focus groups and other discussions with local, state, and national leaders

Thanks to years of groundwork, California's powerbuilding ecosystem is uniquely primed to make a huge leap forward in transforming its narrative power. Here's how we get there.



1 BUILD THE BENCH OF NARRATIVE STRATEGISTS

Field Recommendation:

Build the Bench of Skilled Grassroots Leaders, Campaigners, Organizers, Artists, and Communicators Working on Narrative at the Frontlines of Our Movements

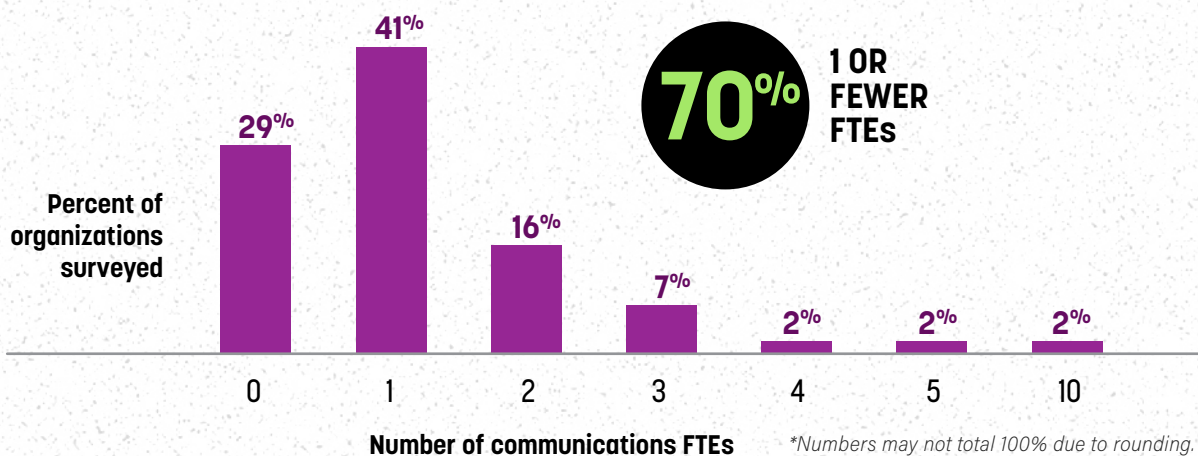
“When you think about all of the skills that are needed to build narrative power—everything from media relations and strategy to content creation, digital strategy, the planning itself . . . I just feel like the bench is very thin.”

— Powerbuilding network leader

Although there is a high degree of buy-in for narrative among organizing groups, there are simply not enough people within organizations or a pipeline of people to develop and deploy narrative strategies at the scale necessary to win. For example, only around one third of organizations working at the local level (the vast majority of the powerbuilding ecosystem) felt that they had sufficient staff to do narrative powerbuilding work. As one respondent put it, “There’s a great commitment to advance narrative, but a great need to grow staffing in order to scale our reach.”

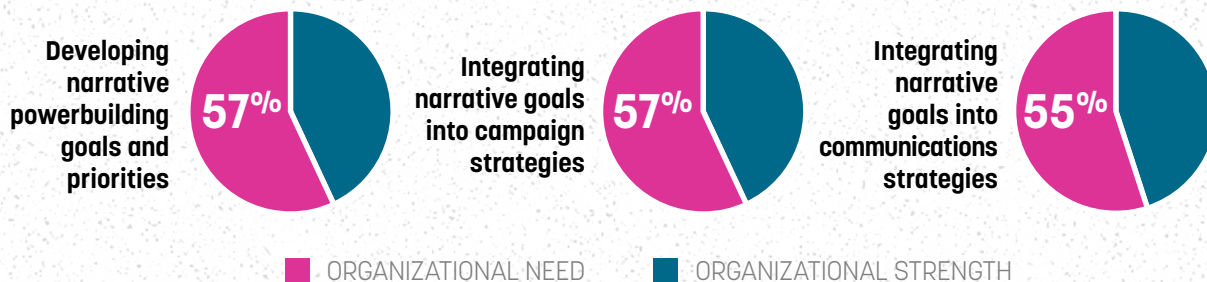
One particular capacity that warrants highlighting is in strategic communications. Seventy percent of organizations reported having one or fewer communications FTE (40% reported one, and 30% none at all). Moreover, as many respondents pointed out, if organizations *do* have dedicated communications staff, they often have to wear multiple hats.

AVERAGE COMMUNICATIONS FTEs WITHIN POWERBUILDING ORGANIZATIONS



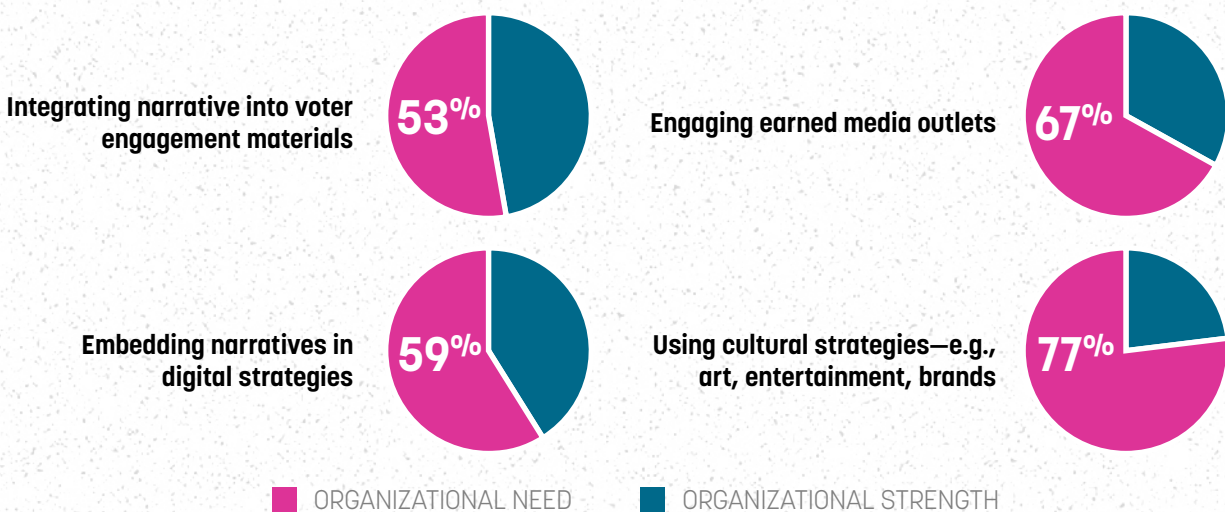
The number of staff is only part of the picture: skills, knowledge, and training matter too. Our findings showed substantial capacity-strengthening opportunities when it comes to narrative strategy and implementation. This is a multifaceted challenge, as one respondent explained: “We need a level of fluency in narrative strategy [as a whole], but also the different strategies that are needed to achieve narrative change, like media, cultural work, and digital organizing . . . and how to budget for it, how to prioritize that in an organization.”

ORGANIZATIONS REPORTING A NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR NARRATIVE STRATEGY



Over half of organizations surveyed reported needing to strengthen their ability to integrate narrative goals and priorities into strategy, including into campaigns and communications strategies. And distributing and amplifying narrative content at scale—from embedding it into direct voter engagement to using digital strategies and arts and culture work, as well as attracting earned media—is also challenging for many organizations.

ORGANIZATIONS REPORTING A NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR AMPLIFYING NARRATIVES



A key part of the issue lies in content creation: As one respondent noted, “I think content creation is a huge gap—we have a lot of people who have ideas, but we need more people who can *do*.” While powerbuilding groups are often generating a lot of powerful stories—stories that could be used to build and advance desired narratives—most organizations lack the capacity to quickly and systematically turn them into widely distributable content.

Finally, we can’t achieve the kind of cultural saturation we need without reaching people in multiple languages, but 71% of organizations reported challenges around translating narrative content into different languages and/or in culturally resonant ways. Most message testing is still done in English, and respondents noted that translating these insights for different linguistic constituencies isn’t simply a technical issue of translating words from one language to another. To reach diverse audiences in an impactful way, narrative content must make use of values, concepts, imagery, and framings that are culturally resonant and relevant—but the ecosystem currently lacks the people, tools, and capacity to do this well.

Significantly scaling up the pipeline of skilled grassroots leaders, campaigners, organizers, and communicators working for our movements will be foundational to all our efforts to expand and grow our ecosystem’s infrastructure for narrative powerbuilding. This will require providing powerbuilding organizations with increased funding, access to networks, and other support that will enable them to hire, train, and retain staff with narrative-relevant knowledge and skills.

Ideas From the Field: Building the Bench

- » Greatly expand the number of BIPOC and multilingual strategic communicators working within powerbuilding organizations to strengthen reach with linguistically and culturally diverse audiences.
- » Support the development of narrative training programs like the Power California Gen Now Fellowship program that skill up narrative capacities among organizational leaders, field organizers, and communications staff and that grow the pipeline.
- » Strengthen powerbuilding organizations’ capacities and strategies to engage community influencers and grassroots leaders with existing narrative platforms—faith leaders, small business owners, service providers, barbers, and so forth.
- » Cultivate a shared pool of movement-aligned artists, content creators, artists, and celebrities who are able to quickly develop and distribute compelling narrative content at scale, both as part of a long-term strategy and as a cadre of rapid responders.



2 STRENGTHEN LOCAL POWERBUILDING ORGANIZATIONS

Field Recommendation:

Vastly Expand the Resources Flowing to Local Powerbuilding Organizations to Strengthen Infrastructure From the Ground Up

“One of the single most important things that could happen is if we could strengthen and grow local organizational capacity [for narrative work]. That would help all of us. Because we need organizations that can do the local work, on local campaigns, and also do the coalitional work . . . but that requires resourcing.”

— MVP network leader

There is no route to winning narrative power without local organizations: Local work is fundamental to our ability to move our agenda at the state level. Nearly 80% of survey respondents were local organizations, and they play a unique and important role in the narrative powerbuilding ecosystem. With deep connections to local communities, they are vital to determining structural demands and solutions and the narratives and stories that will best serve them. They are also a significant part of the apparatus in disseminating these narratives on the ground.

“[We are working in] areas where elected officials don’t have staff or an office . . . or where there’s really no infrastructure for earned media for us to even start the conversation, get people thinking about an issue with a certain framing.”

— CA powerbuilding practitioner

Respondents from local organizations reflected on the fact that big-picture narrative and policy-relevant research is being carried out at the national and state levels, and this messaging can fall flat when trying to engage local constituencies. Moreover, much of the typical guidance around narrative change interventions assumes the existence of structures that aren’t present at the hyper-local level.

Compounding this, despite their centrality to the ecosystem, our findings also show that local organizations tended to have higher-capacity needs than organizations working at the state level.



DIFFERENCES IN NARRATIVE POWERBUILDING CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL AND STATE LEVEL



Local organizations also face tight financial constraints, with 88% reporting that they don't have sufficient funding to allocate to narrative change work. All this means that local organizations are trying to do the most with the least—they need to be able to engage effectively at both the local and state levels but face the biggest constraints when it comes to having the infrastructure, capacity, and resources to do so.

We need to build infrastructure from the ground up. This means exponentially growing the resources flowing to local organizations, which are the critical foundation of our narrative powerbuilding ecosystem, to ensure that they are well equipped to work at both the local and state levels.

Ideas From the Field: Strengthening Local Organizations

- » Increase general operating support for local organizations to increase staff capacity for more communicators, strategists, campaigners, and organizers engaged in narrative work. This would allow them to engage in strategic alignment around a centralized narrative powerbuilding strategy at the state level, as well as drive decentralized adoption and distribution of narratives at the local level.
- » Develop tailored capacity-strengthening efforts (e.g., trainings and access to tools) geared toward the specific role that local organizations play within the powerbuilding ecosystem, supporting their ability to work in alignment with others to advance shared narratives.



3 SUPPORT CENTRALIZED NARRATIVE, DECENTRALIZED AMPLIFICATION

Field Recommendation:

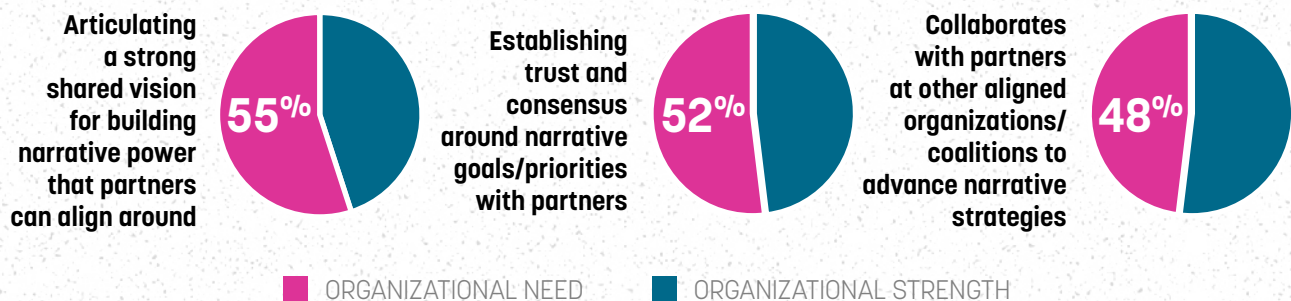
Strengthen Critical Mechanisms for Alignment Around Centralized Narratives and Decentralized Amplification to Accelerate Widespread Saturation

“We have to strengthen our internal alignment, and there’s a lot more layers of work that need to happen to do that. But I think that, in and of itself, will be insufficient. We really have to expand how we do alignment. If we’re going to win, if we’re going to shift narratives at scale, we have to . . . build our internal alignment and expand alignment with other forces, across sectors.”

— MVP network leader

If we need to increase resources flowing to the local organizations in our ecosystem, we also have to strengthen infrastructure for coordination, collaboration, and alignment at the state level. Respondents highlighted that the key to building narrative power is developing shared “bedrock” narratives that cut across single issues and campaigns, which can then be adopted and adapted by organizations across the ecosystem for different contexts, audiences, and purposes. MVP has identified this approach as a centralized narrative with decentralized amplification and has found it results in stronger long-term alignment and more nimble, robust, and authentic storytelling by community-based organizations. To do this effectively, many organizations need more support and resources.

ORGANIZATIONS REPORTING A NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR NARRATIVE ALIGNMENT



In reflecting on existing mechanisms for alignment within the ecosystem, respondents highlighted a number of needs, including larger-scale infrastructure for data collation and management (for example, linked CRM databases and reporting dashboards) and securing shared access to narrative development and dissemination tools (for example, resource libraries and distribution channels). They also noted the need for more protected time and space for high-level strategic conversations, though cautioned against leaning too heavily into centralization: As one respondent noted, “Forcing a central hub . . . can often devolve into a space where people share ideas and not a lot gets done.” Instead, they expressed a need for multiple, cross-campaign, highly networked spaces for strategic alignment to happen.

“We don’t have shared narrative and communications tables where people are actively working to figure out how we can align with labor, with [other] advocates, around our shared narratives . . . There’s no set of strategists sitting together [and] thinking across tables, across sectors.”

— MVP network leader

To achieve widespread saturation of our ideas and values, we need to invest substantially and strategically in strengthening narrative alignment across organizations, coalitions, and sectors, building tables and platforms with a focus on shifting foundational cross-issue narratives, such as those about government.

Ideas From the Field: Building Alignment

- » Develop a multitude of coalitional tables across the state, funded for long-term work—not just single campaign cycles or single issues. These collaborative spaces should focus on connecting different sectors of the ecosystem, deepening trust and relationships, ensuring narrative alignment across issues, and identifying how bedrock narratives should be modified and/or adapted in mutually reinforcing ways across different contexts and audiences.
- » Strengthen shared infrastructure in areas most critical to alignment: building platforms for analyzing and sharing data that can inform narrative efforts, enabling shared access to digital tools and channels, and providing joint political education across networks and coalitions.



4 EXPLORE SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Field Recommendation:

Expand Shared Infrastructure and Access to Shared Tools for Research, Dissemination, and Evaluation Across Organizations

“With regards to infrastructure, the need for research is really important . . . and the content creation that can bring that research to life. For a lot of our partners, it’s [having] the research and the content creation . . . and the tools and skill sets that help amplify [that content] that’s one of the biggest barriers.”

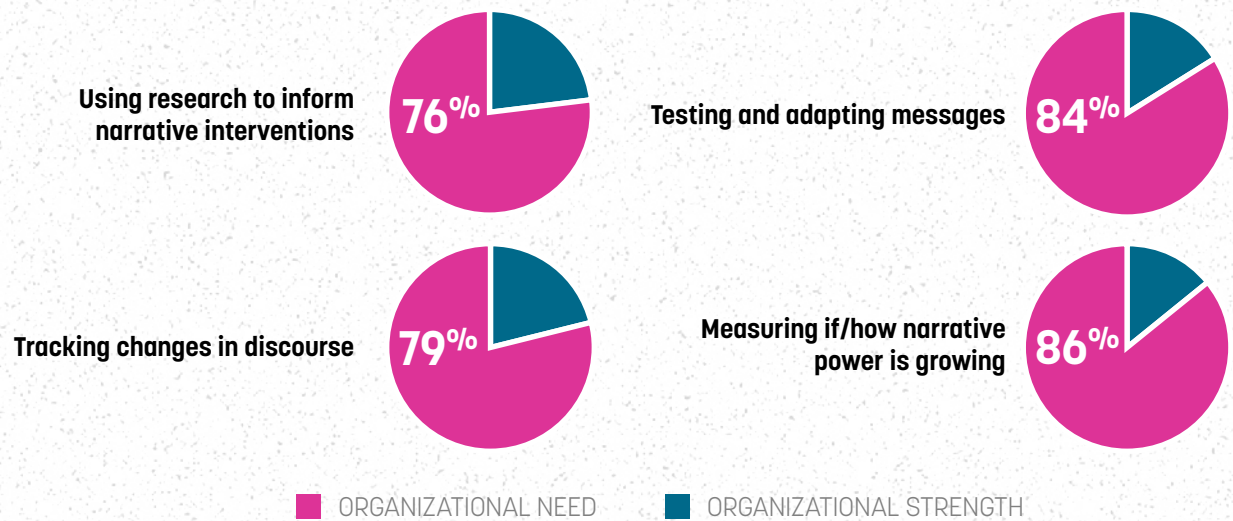
— CA powerbuilding practitioner

Hard tools for research, dissemination, and evaluation are a critical part of any narrative effort. Research can provide insights into the current narrative landscape. It can identify audiences and the beliefs and values that they hold (particularly those beyond our current base), and it can help shape the language, stories, and messages they’re most likely to find persuasive. Respondents highlighted that, currently, our messaging often assumes that people are already part of the conversation that we want them to be in and that we need to build more inclusive narratives that reach and resonate with diverse constituencies.



However, the current capacity to use research to develop compelling messages and reach new audiences is limited by the fact that “there’s a lot of research [out there], but there’s a gap in digesting said research and making it applicable to large-scale field operations . . . and helping us inform our strategy.” Eighty-four percent of organizations reported needs around testing and adapting messages for different audiences, and 76% reported needs around using research to inform their narrative interventions. But respondents also highlighted the need for a practical division of labor, suggesting that while applying research insights is something all organizations should be able to do, conducting narrative research—and making it easily accessible and actionable—could be done by go-to partners with specialist capacities.

ORGANIZATIONS REPORTING A NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR NARRATIVE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION



Another vital piece of the puzzle when it comes to reaching new and broad audiences is dissemination channels and tools. Practitioners and network leaders reflected on the fact that current content distribution platforms feel too narrow in their reach and tend to target the same audiences, and there are mixed levels of confidence when it comes to using them effectively.

Finally, understanding what’s changing and why is critical to aligned and effective strategy, but most organizations reported struggling to measure progress around narrative powerbuilding and tracking changes in public discourse that might indicate that narratives are changing.

When it comes to hard tools, we need to invest in more tailored and highly actionable narrative research, expand access to more and new channels for amplification and distribution, and build stronger infrastructure for sharing learning and data and measuring impact.



Ideas From the Field: Expanding Research, Dissemination, and Evaluation Tools

- » Create a research entity that is housed within the powerbuilding ecosystem and that is directed by organizing groups. This would include a centralized repository of tested messages, audience insights, stories, and so forth supported by staff providing customized interpretation and dissemination in response to real-time needs.
- » Expand the repertoire of popular mass-based dissemination channels that powerbuilding groups have access to, including providing access to technology and building capacity to use channels such as local cable shows, streaming, podcasts, and other innovative ways of reaching wider audiences at scale.
- » Develop a set of ecosystem-wide measures and methods to evaluate narrative power. This includes measures that will provide insights about ongoing infrastructure and capacity development, as well as metrics for tracking whether and how narratives are changing.

5 COMMIT NEW LEVEL OF FUNDING

Field Recommendation:

Commit a New Level of Funding to Strengthening Narrative Infrastructure Within the Powerbuilding Ecosystem

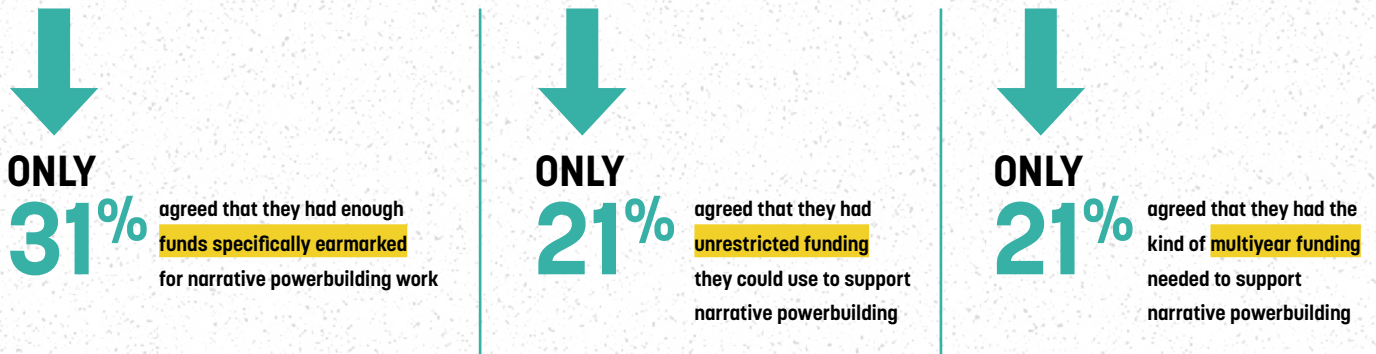
“If we’re talking about organizational capacity and infrastructure, we need general support, multiyear funding. That is absolutely necessary. What it does is free up headspace for people to begin to imagine what type of world we want to live in, and then plant the seeds to create the world we have imagined.”

— CA powerbuilding practitioner

We’ve already highlighted chronic underinvestment in narrative powerbuilding, so it will come as little surprise that few organizations have the level or type of funding they need to do this work successfully: funding that allows them to “be prepared for [rapid response] when those instances come up . . . but also being able to



have that long-term vision of change so we can actually compete with the [political] right." Less than a third of organizations (31%) felt that they had access to dedicated resources to put toward narrative powerbuilding work, 26% felt they had the kind of multiyear funding that's needed to properly support narrative work, and just 21% felt that they had the unrestricted funding they could use for narrative powerbuilding.



"[Narrative] is an area we've identified as being very important to advancing our work and integral to our powerbuilding, but our organization does not receive dedicated funding to engage in effective narrative work or to hire for narrative positions."

— CA powerbuilding practitioner

But this is not about making tweaks around the edges, like adding some extra dollars for narrative work to an existing campaign or making another two- to three-year investment. Unanimously, respondents called for a reimagining of what it takes to fund narrative powerbuilding, emphasizing the scale of the fight and the need for a new level of sustained and flexible funding.

We believe that all of our recommendations will be vital to building narrative power at scale and that strengthening narrative infrastructure will take significant investment over the long term and financial resources at a scale beyond anything we've seen so far. This is especially true in the context of the vast, sustained investments the opposition is making in their own narrative infrastructure. **We are calling on funders to rethink their commitments to narrative powerbuilding, greatly expanding the size, scope, and duration of the funding they are putting toward this work.**



Conclusion: Time for Action

Powerbuilding and organizing groups in California are uniquely positioned to build the kind of narrative power we need to transform society. Realizing this potential will require a robust narrative infrastructure—one that ensures that all organizations within our ecosystem have the people, capacities, relationships, tools, and resources needed to advance a long-term agenda, reach broad audiences, and saturate the airwaves with shared stories and messages. Through our research, we've identified a set of key recommendations that we believe will allow us to make significant leaps forward in advancing narratives that build toward our visions for justice, equity, and inclusion for all. They illustrate the creativity, bold thinking, and readiness of powerbuilding groups to build, scale, and win the battle for hearts and minds.

This work is critical and urgent. California is at a turning point. Less than 30 years ago, California led the country in producing right-wing leaders and racist policies. Thanks to progressive organizing by racial justice groups, we helped turn the tide. Now there is a lore about California as a progressive haven, but with some of the nation's highest rates of homelessness, incarceration, and wealth inequality, we have a long way to go to restructure our economy and social systems so that they work for the majority. At the same time, we face a conservative backlash and a concerted effort to turn back the clock, dismantle the gains we have made, and divide our communities even further. In their narrative, progressive gains are to blame for our shortcomings as a state. Which narrative becomes dominant and wins the hearts and minds of millions of Californians depends on who has the power. We find ourselves at a critical juncture for safeguarding and building on decades of progressive struggle in California and realizing our state's true promise and potential as a thriving multiracial democracy. **The time to take bold steps toward narrative power is now.**



Acknowledgments

This report was produced by Million Voters Project and Power California, with support from ORS Impact. ORS Impact is a consulting firm that helps foundations and nonprofits clarify, measure, and align around their social impact outcomes, stay accountable to success, and learn along the way. Power California—a member of the Million Voters Project—incubated and leads the MVP Narrative Infrastructure Project.

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The Lead Think Committee is composed of leaders and strategists from the MVP network. We thank them for providing invaluable thought leadership and outreach support, and for ground truthing the research, data collection, and analysis process.

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We are grateful for the time and invaluable data that numerous organizations and individuals contributed through the surveys and focus groups.



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- » San Francisco Rising/San Francisco Rising Action Fund
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We thank the readers below for their insightful comments and thoughtful feedback on an early draft of this report.

- » Alex Desautels
- » Joseph Phelan
- » Daniel Zingale

Finally, we thank The California Endowment, the California Wellness Foundation, and the California Community Foundation for the generous support that made this report possible.



APPENDIX 1

Methodology

The "MVP Narrative Infrastructure" survey was fielded in July 2023 and was completed by representatives of MVP member organizations who were well positioned to provide an assessment of their organization as a whole (each organization provided one response). The survey was intended to capture the current state of narrative infrastructure within the network. It contained questions related to each area of the Narrative Infrastructure Framework, including levels of buy-in for and understanding of narrative work across the organization, assessment of skills and capacities needed for narrative powerbuilding, availability of staff and resources, and access to tools. Five organizations provided complete responses to the survey, a response rate of over 70%. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with additional analysis through cross-tabulation to allow for group comparisons.

Focus groups were conducted in August 2023 and supplemented the survey by providing a broader ecosystem-level perspective on infrastructural needs, opportunities, and recommendations. They were carried out with five groups who provided distinct insights and vantage points we felt were critical to this study: CA-based powerbuilding network leaders at the state and regional levels; CA-based powerbuilding practitioners, including organizing and communications staff; allies and partners from CA's broader progressive ecosystem; national thought leaders; and funders. In total, 32 people participated in these focus groups. Discussions were recorded and transcribed, and data was analyzed using standard qualitative thematic coding with checks for intercoder reliability.



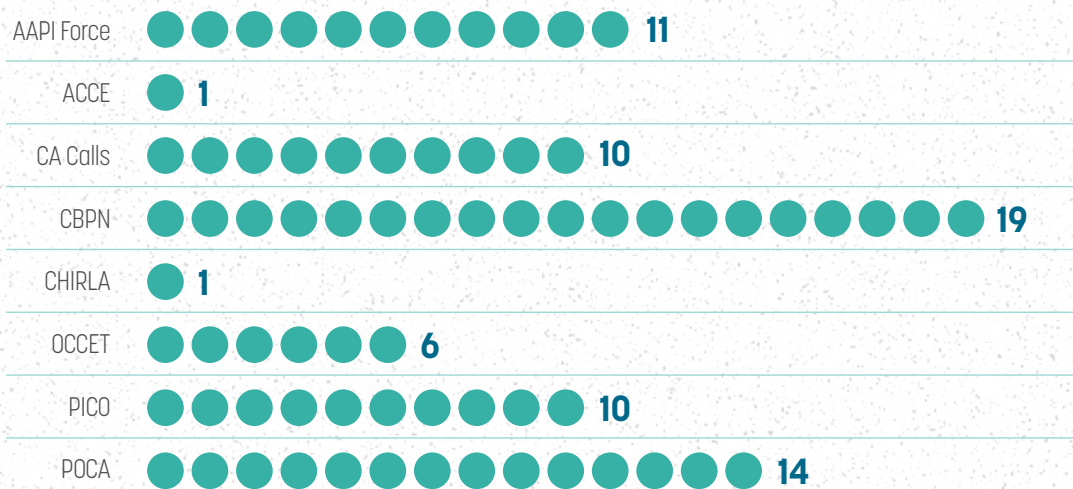
APPENDIX 2

Who Participated in This Research?

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

ORGANIZATIONS BY NETWORK

Survey data include responses from 70% of MVP partners and local and allied organizations from across all of our constituent networks.



NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS CA REGIONS

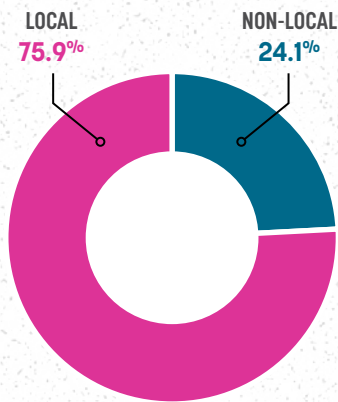
We also had representation across California's regions.

Central Valley	Coastal	Inland Empire	LA County	Orange County	San Diego-Imperial	SF Bay	Superior	Statewide
6	3	4	7	5	6	12	1	14



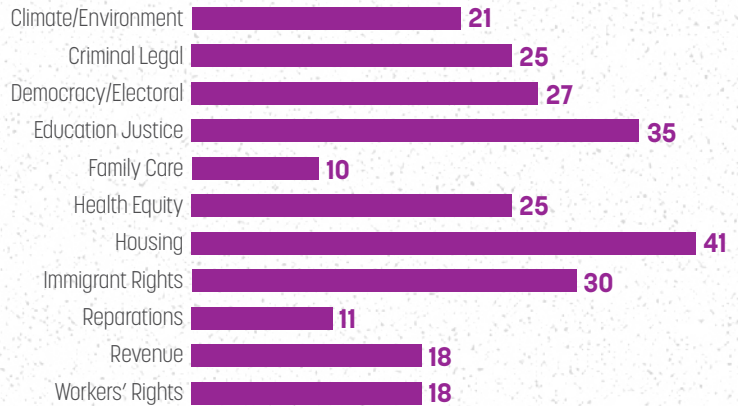
LOCAL AND NON-LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

The majority of organizations operate at the local level.



ORGANIZATIONS BY ISSUE AREA

Respondents worked across a wide range of issues, including housing, education justice, immigrant rights, and democracy reform.

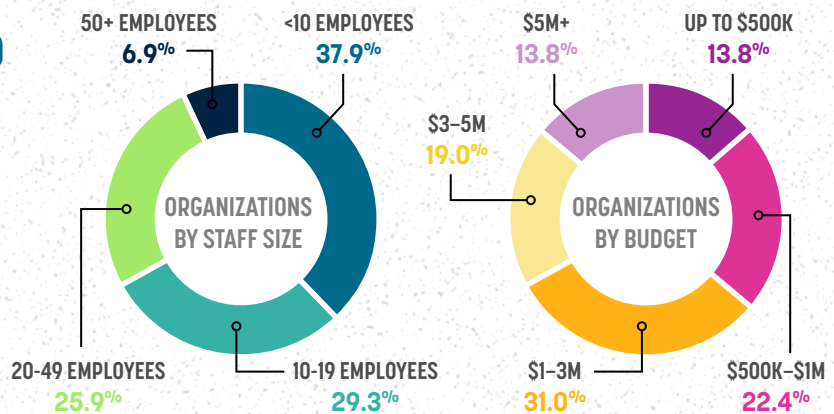


LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

For most organizations, the primary languages spoken by communities they work with are English and Spanish. However, our network includes huge linguistic diversity, with respondents organizing in over 25 languages.

ORGANIZATION SIZES AND BUDGETS

Most of our sample was made up of smaller organizations, reflecting the makeup of our network. Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported an organizational staff of less than 20 employees. Nearly 70% are operating from a budget of under \$3 million.



FOCUS GROUP SAMPLE

The 32 focus group participants included representation from the following:

MVP network leaders	5
CA powerbuilding practitioners	9
MVP allies and partners	4
National thought leaders	5
Funders	9



