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How One Community Funder's In-House Campaign Is Moving the Needle on Voter Engagement

Dawn Wolfe | January 08, 2024



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At the start of what promises to be another fraught, high-stakes election year, funders seeking to make a

truly “upstream” difference on a wide range of issues facing Americans may want to take a page from the playbook of Fairfield County’s Community Foundation (FCCF) in Connecticut. In 2023, the community funder launched a bilingual, Spanish/English voter engagement campaign called **Your Vote = Your Power**, and it has already made a splash. The effort not only exceeded national benchmarks for online engagement; it also moved the needle on voting rates during the off-year election – including by an impressive 10% in the town of Bridgeport.

According to one of the campaign’s organizers, funder investment in civic engagement is essential in a country where so much work that used to be carried out by the government is being placed on the nonprofit sector’s shoulders. “Philanthropy has been dealing with this conversation about things that we believe the government should be taking care of, but the burden has fallen on us,” said FCCF Director of Community Strategies Chinedum Nnodum. “That’s not going to change unless more of the populace understands that they can make distinct changes in how policy is decided by understanding their rights,” starting with how to exercise their right to vote.

FCCF’s 2023 campaign was its first dive into doing the work of voter education and motivation in house. But the community foundation is no newcomer to backing civic engagement. Prior to **Your Vote = Your Power**, from 2019 through 2022, the funder moved \$140,000 to 24 organizations to increase voter registration, knowledge and participation throughout a county that has long played host to stark racial and economic disparities. That followed an initial foray into get-out-



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the-vote funding [dating back to 2018](#). Though the amounts involved may be relatively modest, such efforts are particularly important in Connecticut, since the state restricts absentee voting, doesn't offer voting by mail, and will only be rolling out early voting in the 2024 cycle — a change that FCCF itself backed.

For 2023, though, the foundation created a multimedia campaign that used a combination of print and digital ads, GIFs and videos to drive viewers to a page on FCCF's website with information about everything from how to register to vote to polling place locations. Elaine Mintz, the foundation's vice president of external relations, estimated that 98% of viewers finished the ads, which enjoyed click-through rates of six times the national average. Engagement numbers for the campaign's social media efforts were equally impressive, at three and a half times the national average.

That success was due to thoughtful planning, particularly in terms of researching the kinds of media, images and messaging most likely to catch and keep the attention of populations that have historically been less likely to vote in the places where the campaign focused. Making the campaign bilingual was also likely a key to its success, given that [more than a quarter](#) of the county's population is Hispanic or Latino and nearly 30% of Fairfield County residents speak a language other than English in their homes.

Fresh on the heels of its 2023 success, the Your Vote = Your Power website [is also already updated and ready to go](#) for the 2024 election. Additionally, FCCF plans to move \$25,000 in funding to nonprofits to catalyze civic

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engagement and help implement the first year of early voting in the state.

The ultimate point of these and the foundation's [other civic engagement](#) and nonpartisan advocacy efforts, said Mintz, is to create a government at all levels that is responsive to the desires of its constituents. "In this country, we see a lot of policies that don't reflect what the community wants," she said.

This certainly seems true in Fairfield County. In a [2021 survey](#) cited on FCCF's website, only 30% of adults in Bridgeport believed that the government was responsive to their needs. By empowering more people to be involved — beginning with getting them to the polls, but also by educating and inspiring them to serve on local boards and commissions or even to run for local offices — she said, "we're going to see better alignment between policies and what the people want."

Across the country, it's certainly true that stepped-up voter engagement has been key to reforms like ending gerrymandering in Michigan, preserving abortion access in multiple states, and ending the tenure of book-banning, Moms for Liberty-backed school board members. It's also worth noting that, [as nonprofit funders step up to compensate for](#) the long-term die-off of local news organizations throughout the country, foundation and nonprofit efforts to educate voters may well become even more essential (FCCF also supports the Connecticut Public Broadcasting Network and nonprofit news outlet *The Connecticut Mirror*).

But, as Nnodum said, driving voter engagement is something that funders with a range of missions well beyond those issues may want to strongly consider. “If philanthropy doesn't step up into this space, no one else will, because philanthropy has already been taking the space of many former governmental programs and social net supports,” he said.

At the same time, public policy remains a far vaster arena than philanthropy in terms of the sheer dollars involved. And that means funders who are already heavily invested in combating issues like food and housing scarcity, health care inequities and other social problems — particularly on the local level — risk letting progress on those issues backslide if they don’t address the elephant in the room that is governmental representation. It’s not a stretch to believe that increasing voter turnout among the people being served by such programs may well lead to changes in priorities at all levels of government — and, in turn, that might just lead to changes in policy that will ultimately make funders’ own work easier.

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