

BOLDER TOGETHER

A report from
CALIFORNIA CIVIC PARTICIPATION FUNDERS

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TEN DIVERSE FOUNDATIONS ARE COLLABORATING IN NEW WAYS
to increase civic participation in California



*How can foundations help **BUILD MOVEMENTS** for opportunity and social change... **AND WIN?***

INTRODUCTION

This is the question at the heart of a funder collaborative launched in California in early 2010. The goal of the participating foundations is to support nonprofits to strengthen civic participation in communities of color and among other underrepresented populations. One of the unique features of the group is that participants represent funders working on a wide range of progressive policy issues, from community health and immigration to economic justice, LGBT equality, criminal justice and women's rights.

The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund brought these funders together, according to Cathy Cha, senior program officer with the Fund, because they all recognized that it's going to take more than the same old, siloed approach to achieve true progress on the issues they care about. "We asked if we could be bolder

together and work collaboratively on increasing voter participation and citizen engagement, which is so crucial to achieving real and lasting change on all of these issues," Cha said.

In this paper, we share a few lessons learned from this ongoing effort for other funders who might be interested in the collaborative's approach. The work of California Civic Participation Funders is far from over; the funders continue to learn from their work as they go along. Therefore, the ideas and suggestions in these pages are presented not as a model for others to emulate or copy, but as food for thought as funders and their nonprofit partners weigh how best to build or strengthen collaborative efforts aimed at bringing new resources and new ideas to bear on a variety of problems.



ABOUT THE COLLABORATIVE

California Civic Participation Funders had its origins in a series of conversations among several California foundations in late 2009. The conversations began after some of the funders had worked together on a successful initiative led by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) aimed at increasing participation in the 2010 census.

As the funders in the new collaborative came together, they realized they shared a common sense of frustration about the lack of sustainable policy wins among the social movements they support. Based on their interest in achieving real and lasting progress on issues from immigration reform to economic justice, the funders weighed what makes social movements succeed. Their answer, no matter the issue, was civic engagement that doesn't come and go with elections.

"So much of what movements do is focused on individual elections and winning this or that campaign," said Judy Patrick, president and CEO of the Women's Foundation of California. "But even if you win, it doesn't always solve the longer-term problems that face the communities we're working in."

The members of California Civic Participation Funders, in Patrick's words, were united in "wanting to leave something behind" in between and after elections.

They wanted to support nonprofits around the state as they worked to build and strengthen the capacity of people and communities to get involved in local and statewide issues — and to stay engaged over the long haul in working for social change.

At the same time, the feeling among the funders was that building civic engagement and leadership in the communities and the populations they were targeting was, in the words of one participant, "an exceedingly tough nut to crack." Rather than working in silos, the funders saw potential in collaborating with community-based organizations to develop strategies and best practices that could work across populations and geographies to engage more immigrants, African Americans, women, young people, and other groups as active participants in community and civic affairs.

The funders also wanted to walk the talk of collaboration at a time when philanthropy routinely asks grantees to work together. "There was a shared feeling among us that funders are always asking community organizations to collaborate, so we need to do it as well," said Cedric Brown, CEO of the Mitchell Kapor Foundation.

Following their initial talks, the group formed a "funders' table" and got to work developing shared strategies and goals. "The idea was to come together and create a table so we were more coordinated and aligned in

*"The engagement of these funders has proven to be **A CATALYST FOR NEW DISCUSSIONS, PARTNERSHIP AND ALIGNMENT** of resources to increase civic and voter participation in San Diego's communities of color."*

*Steve Eldred,
The California Endowment*

what we were doing, and so we could develop a shared understanding of how to do this work more effectively,” explained Latonya Slack, senior program officer with the James Irvine Foundation.

One focus of the group’s early discussions was what it takes to build movements and win. In their conversations among themselves and with others, the funders began to identify the critical capacities that nonprofits need (either on their own or as part of broader networks) in order to achieve their goals for social change. A framework developed by the group identified several of these cross-cutting capacities, such as: community organizing; strategic communications; voter mobilization; leadership development; policy development and research; and fundraising. This list of capacities, in turn, helped the group identify its priorities for funding.

A Focus on Four Areas of the State

As they came together in early 2010 to discuss where the collaboration might take them, the participants in California Civic Participation Funders settled on a shared goal: strengthening local organizations and networks in targeted regions of the state so they can mobilize and engage underrepresented voters more

effectively. The group identified four areas that would be the focus of the participants’ investments: San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties. As of January 2012, the members of California Civic Participation Funders had invested a total of \$1.5 million in the four counties.

The funders’ selection of the four counties was based in large part on demographic and political trends. As political power in California has been shifting from Los Angeles and San Francisco to other fast-growing areas, the funders identified these counties as bellwethers of the state’s political future. The funders’ belief was that underrepresented groups in these communities needed more of a voice in local and statewide decision making, both to protect and advance their own interests and to build support for progressive policy changes on an array of issues.

For example, despite its history and reputation as a relatively conservative community, San Diego County is home to large numbers of Latinos, Asians and refugees who the funders’ research showed were not participating actively in civic and political affairs. Latinos, for example, make up almost one-third of

PARTICIPATING FOUNDATIONS *California Civic Participation Funders*

California Endowment
Color of Democracy Fund
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
James Irvine Foundation
McKay Foundation

Mitchell Kapor Foundation
PowerPAC Foundation
Rosenberg Foundation
Tides
Women’s Foundation of California

the county's population but are vastly underrepresented in local political leadership and in the nonprofit and advocacy communities. Similarly, Orange County's political and community leadership remains overwhelmingly conservative and white despite dramatic increases in the local population of people of color.

The Inland Empire counties of Riverside and San Bernardino, for their part, are two of the fastest-growing counties in the nation, surging by 42 percent and 25 percent, respectively, between the 2000 and 2010 census counts. In Riverside County, two-thirds of the growth over the last decade was due to a surge in the Latino population, and the number of Asian Americans doubled over the same period.

Upon reviewing these numbers, the participants in California Civic Participation Funders decided that the changing demographics of the four counties made them promising laboratories for exploring how best to promote higher levels of civic engagement

among the populations that are the focus of the collaborative's work.

As funders interested in social justice, members of the group saw a clear connection between higher engagement among these populations and sustainable progress on priority issues from education to civil rights. Among the reasons: many of the newer immigrant populations that comprise the target population for this work tend to be more open to government efforts to reduce discrimination and advance equality, and to boost investments in education, health and social services for people in need.

"The demographics flow in our favor. These populations and their communities tend to care about moving in the same direction that we do," said Cha. "We began to see this as an opportunity to change the political and policy trajectory in these regions for years to come and to positively impact the future direction of the state."



MAKING IT WORK: KEY ELEMENTS OF THE COLLABORATIVE'S DESIGN

From the start, participants in California Civic Participation Funders were committed to taking a fresh look at how to build and sustain a successful funder collaborative. The following are some of the key elements of the collaborative's approach:

A Commitment to "Broadening the Table"

California Civic Participation Funders includes 10 participants that range from large foundations to smaller family foundations and private donors (see funder list, page 3). The funders bring a variety of perspectives and interests to the work of increasing civic participation. For some, the spark is an interest in advancing immigrant rights and integration, while for others it is promoting racial justice or getting a broader cross section of the public involved in healthcare advocacy.

By focusing on a common denominator that strengthens all of their work, the California funders are stepping out of their issue silos to invest in a core strategy that will contribute to the success of the movements they support. "The goal here is to build capacity in these communities so nonprofit organizations and move-

ments can be more effective in generating good outcomes, no matter the issue," said Mary Manuel, managing director of the McKay Foundation.

Not only do the participating funders bring different issue interests to the work of the collaborative, but they also have been working on these issues at different levels and in different regions of the state. Some fund at the national level, while others restrict their support to statewide and local organizations. In addition, some of the funders are 501(c)3 private foundations that are restricted in their participation in political campaigns and elections, while others are 501(c)4 entities that do not have to meet the same restrictions. One goal of the collaborative is to try and integrate the funders' investments to the extent allowable by law.¹

By broadening the table in this way, the collaborative bridges a divide that often shows up among funders involved in high-stakes policy issues. A common knock on traditional, 501(c)3 foundations is that they rarely think about Election Day and politics despite their ambitious policy goals. The reason: they don't want to get anywhere close to the line where they could be viewed as lobbying. Meanwhile, 501(c)4 funders often

*"All too often, there is a disconnect between funders and practitioners in their perception of what's needed to move the work forward. Having funders roll up their sleeves, meet with groups, determine where there are needs, and develop plans accordingly is **A GREAT ADVANCE.**"*

*Anthony Thigpenn,
California Calls*

¹ 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) funders are not allowed to coordinate their efforts to elect candidates or influence ballot measures, but can coordinate on public education and voter engagement.

are criticized for parachuting in with large sums of money weeks before an election without thinking about what's needed to sustain and broaden the movements they support on a year-round basis.

Working with their 501(c)3 colleagues has provided the 501(c)4 funders in the collaborative with a fresh understanding of how to build nonprofit and movement capacity over time, while the 501(c)3s have gained fresh insights into what it takes to build effective (and winning) grassroots policy campaigns. Thanks to its broader mandate and the involvement of funders with election-related expertise, for example, California Civic Participation Funders has made a point of sitting down with labor, political and faith leaders, and others who can help the group figure out the best pathways to engaging diverse populations in the work of social change.

Ludovic Blain, director of the Color of Democracy Fund, said, "By participating in this collaborative, political donors are able to work side-by-side with traditional foundations to support our common goal of long-term movement building in a complementary way."

"A big part of the strength of this collaborative is that we span a lot of different issue areas, a lot of types of different funding, and a lot of different geographic areas," added Slack.

A Commitment to Community Engagement

The members of California Civic Participation Funders began their work with an effort to convene community leaders, learn about the unique conditions in each county, and explore local priorities and perspectives. In San Diego, for example, the funders reached out to a range of community and civic leaders. When the collaborative identified the county's growing immigrant communities as important new constituents, it met with local Filipino, African and Latino leaders to learn more about their communities and to discuss how best to reach their populations.

In addition, the funders convened 20 local leaders from the labor and faith communities, representatives of local foundations, and political leaders such as the presidents of the San Diego Education Association and the San Diego Unified School District's Board of Education. Over the course of seven months, these local leaders co-developed the plan of action for increasing civic participation in San Diego County.

"The collaborative's efforts provided the space and support for a core group of San Diego's progressive advocacy leaders to come together to identify and prioritize strategies and opportunities to increase civic

"THE INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL THAT EVERYONE BRINGS TO THE TABLE IS AS VALUABLE *as the actual funding they bring."*

*Cathy Cha,
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund*

participation — all within the context of the region’s political climate,” said Steve Eldred, program manager with The California Endowment. “The engagement of these funders has proven to be a catalyst for new discussions, partnership and alignment of resources to increase civic and voter participation in San Diego’s communities of color.”

In the Inland Empire counties, the funders joined with community partners to explore how to identify and support strong anchor organizations that could lead the way in boosting civic participation. In cooperation with three statewide groups that had been working in the region for some time,² the funder collaborative developed a strategy that ensured that it was engaging with the right people and organizations to advance the work.

One of the three statewide organizations working with the collaborative is California Calls, an alliance of non-

profits dedicated to engaging the state’s residents in advancing progressive tax and budget reforms. Anthony Thigpenn, president of California Calls, said the funders’ commitment to working at the community level has been crucial to the collaborative’s success. “All too often, there is a disconnect between funders and practitioners in their perceptions of what’s needed to move the work forward. Having funders roll up their sleeves, meet with groups, determine where there are needs, and develop plans accordingly is a great advance,” Thigpenn said.

In addition to the local meetings, the funders commissioned researchers to conduct their own independent interviews with community representatives in San Diego. The researchers’ work, combined with the insights the funders gained through their own due diligence, formed the basis of the group’s strategy and investments going forward.

² The three organizations were California Calls, Mobilize the Immigrant Vote and The California Partnership.



“We didn’t want to develop strategy in a closed room. The idea was to co-conceive this work with others from the get-go as we began to focus on these four counties,” said Manuel.

A High Level of Autonomy for Participants

Many funders have experience with collaboratives in which they pool their grant dollars and make collective decisions about what nonprofits to support. While these types of collaboratives often succeed in drawing added attention and resources to specific issues or communities, a common complaint is that participants sometimes can find themselves bogged down in cumbersome and protracted joint decision-making processes.

Many funders also have found it difficult to balance the larger purpose of these types of collaboratives against their own institutional interests. Tensions over which organizations or communities should receive

support from the group are common. In addition, to the extent that the group’s funding decisions do not mirror the priorities of everyone involved, participants can become frustrated if they perceive that their foundation is not getting an adequate, mission-related return on its investment.

Rather than creating a pooled fund and adopting the necessary policies and procedures for making joint grant decisions, the members of California Civic Participation Funders settled on an approach that preserves autonomy for all of the participating organizations. In essence, every organization still makes its own grant decisions, but they are doing so in a highly coordinated way – i.e., with an understanding of the group’s broader goals and objectives, and of how their organizations’ investments fit into a bigger puzzle. In other words, once everyone agrees on what the finished puzzle should look like, each member then contributes its respective pieces to complete it.



In conversations with San Diego leaders, for example, the partners in California Civic Participation Funders identified a lack of legal capacity as an important gap in that area's systems for supporting broader civic participation among the targeted populations. The problem in a nutshell: disenfranchised voters often do not have equal access to voting, and the rules aren't fair. While other funders targeted their investments to other priorities, the Rosenberg Foundation decided to make legal work the focus of its investments in the county. As a result, Rosenberg now is providing support to the local American Civil Liberties Union for a voting rights attorney on staff.

"We have a long history of supporting legal work and civil rights, so this was a natural fit for us," said Tim Silard, president of the Rosenberg Foundation. Silard said the added support from the foundation already has yielded a major victory. After the ACLU threatened legal action, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors agreed, for the first time ever, to create a supervisorial district where the majority of the population is made up of ethnic minorities.

Other foundations, meanwhile, stepped up to provide support for community organizing and other activities in San Diego, while some participants such as the Irvine Foundation reserved their support for the other

counties that are the focus of the collaborative's work. Irvine has a particular interest in the Inland Empire and is focusing its investments on the collaborative's priorities for Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

This flexible structure has made it easier for participants to get their boards and senior staffs to buy into the collaborative's work, and to support their organizations' involvement. "It is always a lot harder to get funders to agree to put funds into a pot that they don't have control over, so the approach here is to allow everyone to approve their own grants in service of the bigger goals," noted Silard.

Shared Assumption of Risk

Participants suggested that investing in the four counties' civic participation infrastructure might be risky if they were doing this work on their own. "If not for the collaborative, the only way we could have done this as a solo funder would be to pick a few groups we believed in and hope they produce miracles," said Cha of the Haas, Jr. Fund. "In many cases, this wouldn't even be an option because of the uncertainty and the risks involved."

The participants in California Civic Participation Funders are able to reduce risk because of the thoroughness of their approach and the sheer volume of

THE BOTTOM LINE: *the collaborative can do its work at a scale that would be impossible for most individual funders to achieve.*

activities they support. By working collectively to identify and support the full range of investments needed to boost nonprofit capacity across the four counties — from training and technical assistance to leadership development, peer learning and base-building — the funders can accomplish far more as a group, when compared to a single foundation making grants on its own.

The bottom line: the collaborative can do its work at a scale that would be impossible for most individual funders to achieve.

The risks in this work are different in different places. In San Diego, for example, the funders saw that there were organizations already in place that could be supported to engage in the work of boosting civic participation among underrepresented groups. The challenge was to bring people together around shared strategies and goals, and to introduce innovations and new ways of working collaboratively to reach greater numbers of voters. The unknown at the start of this work was

whether such a collaborative approach would take hold among the organizations and movements involved.

Riverside and San Bernardino counties, on the other hand, do not have a high level of civic participation infrastructure. The challenge in those counties is therefore to identify — or even create, as needed — the anchor partners that will serve as go-to organizations for organizing community members, winning advocacy campaigns and engaging voters.

In both of these cases, program officers would likely have a difficult time convincing their colleagues and their boards that investing to address these challenges would be worth the risk. Operating as a collaborative, however, the funders can spread out the risk, while reducing the amount of resources and time they would otherwise have to devote to the preparatory work of exploring the best approaches and finding the right partners in these counties. In addition, by working together and with local partners to develop more comprehensive solutions to community challenges, the funders can increase their chances of success in achieving their goals.

“THIS IS ALL VERY STRATEGIC, *and the learning we’re doing directly shapes the strategies we pursue in these communities.”*

*Tim Silard,
Rosenberg Foundation*

A Focus on Learning Together

In conversations about their work together, participants in California Civic Participation Funders return again and again to the value of the collaborative as a “learning community.” Through joint site visits, periodic get-togethers and shared sponsorship of research, participants are working together to develop a more fine-tuned understanding of problems and possible solutions so they can work with nonprofits to achieve better results on the ground. In its regular meetings, the group invites community leaders and civic participation experts to engage in discussions with the funder representatives about issues and challenges in their work, and how the funders can best support local action.

When asked what they had learned as a result of this work, representatives of the participating funders offered a wide range of answers. They said they had learned about cutting-edge practices in voter engagement; legislative redistricting in California and its impact

on the funders’ priority issues; California’s new online voter registration system and its potential for broadening the pool of active voters in the state; the importance of leadership development support in enhancing the chances of success for nonprofits and the communities they serve; and much more.

“The most rewarding aspect of this is the opportunity to do a deeper dive with some very smart colleagues into the strategic issues around what it takes to increase civic participation among the groups we care about,” said Patrick. She added: “Honestly, I don’t have a lot of time in my job designated as time for learning, and this creates an open space where that is possible.”

Patrick and others said the diversity of the collaborative — and, more specifically, the varying interests and priorities of the participating funders — creates especially fertile ground for learning. Participants are sharing their expertise and their understanding of different issues and geographic areas, with each funder



contributing to the knowledge of the group as a whole. As Cha said of the group, “The intellectual capital that everyone brings to the table is as valuable as the actual funding they bring.”

Silard added that a funder collaborative needs to be about more than just learning, and that the participants in California Civic Participation Funders are able to move from learning to action. “This is all very strategic, and the learning we’re doing directly shapes the strategies we pursue in these communities,” he said.

Looking ahead, Cha said that she and her partners in the collaborative are interested in applying a learning lens to what’s happening across the four counties. The goal would be to further understanding about innovative strategies to boosting civic participation that might be working in one place and could potentially be applied in others.

Diligent Management With a “Light Touch”

California Civic Participation Funders does not have a formal management structure. However, Cha has become the de facto lead when it comes to organizing

meetings, documenting the group’s collective investments, and keeping things on track.

Participants say the structure of the collaborative is sufficiently loose that they can determine how to take part in the work in ways that make the most sense for their organizations. In addition, no one dominates the group (which is an important achievement given that it includes larger funders alongside smaller ones). The key to successful management of the collaborative, participants say, has been good communication so that everyone knows and understands what everyone else is doing and can tailor their work accordingly.

“Philanthropy as a culture tends to want to do things very formally all the time,” said Manuel. “But the informality of this collaborative has allowed us to be much more flexible in what we do, while still being very diligent about communications and learning and overall strategy.” Manuel quipped that the collaborative has succeeded in putting the “fun” back in “funder” and that participants genuinely enjoy the time they spend together.

*“Philanthropy as a culture tends to want to do things very formally all the time. But the informality of this collaborative has **ALLOWED US TO BE MUCH MORE FLEXIBLE IN WHAT WE DO, WHILE STILL BEING VERY DILIGENT** about communications and learning and overall strategy.”*

*Mary Manuel,
McKay Foundation*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Looking ahead, the participants in California Civic Participation Funders hope they can use their experiences in San Diego and the other three counties as the basis for working in other places to achieve similar goals. For more information about the collaborative, please contact Cathy Cha at cathy@haasjr.org.

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CALIFORNIA FUNDERS
join forces to boost
CIVIC PARTICIPATION

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