



# **Streets to Statehouse:**

**Harnessing the Power of  
the New Electorate**

**Streets to Statehouse: Harnessing the Power of the New Electorate** is a companion to our January 2020 report, *Streets to Statehouse: Building Grassroots Power in New York*. For decades, New York Foundation and North Star Fund have supported emerging grassroots organizations led by communities most impacted by injustice in identifying and advocating for solutions designed for systems change. We believe that true equity and justice can only be achieved if we strengthen the ecosystem of grassroots organizing across New York’s diverse communities. Our simple theory of change: smaller organizations building community power are essential to big wins.

*Streets to Statehouse* detailed the critical role of hyper-local grassroots organizing groups in providing leadership, strategy, and mass organizing support in far-reaching statewide reform campaigns that impact the lives of thousands of New Yorkers. The report presented various recommendations for how funders should support organizing in order for us to build long-lasting transformative change.

We always intended *Streets to Statehouse* to include an update reviewing how grassroots organizing is not only essential for building campaigns that demand change from outside City Hall or Albany—but how organizing is also critical for building a more robust multiracial democracy.

**Streets to Statehouse: Harnessing the Power of the New Electorate** reviews the impact that organizing has had on reshaping how local democracy works. New York is in a time of significant political transformation. Entrenched powers are paying close attention to grassroots organizing, investing millions of dollars into hyper-local elections to oppose organizers who are centering people-led agendas for change. This addendum analyzes how recent critical investments in grassroots organizing—and the

This brief builds on **Streets to Statehouse: Building Grassroots Power in New York**, a report released jointly by North Star Fund and New York Foundation in 2020. *Streets to Statehouse* documents the crucial role of grassroots organizing in achieving progressive policy wins in New York and sowing a more inclusive and responsive democracy. The report calls on funders to resource these movements more deeply to ensure we build upon the progress that has been made. This brief serves as a companion to *Streets to Statehouse* and lifts up the ways in which grassroots organizing is building electoral power by engaging new constituencies and seeding a new cadre of progressive elected leaders.

emerging leadership of organizers across New York’s election landscape—can potentially reshape legislative and executive agendas across our state.

In a deeply uneven playing field, we fund grassroots organizing because it is an effective strategy in shifting real power towards communities building a liberatory future. We invite you to join us in making New York a beacon for people-led change.

In solidarity,



Jennifer Ching  
[www.northstarfund.org](http://www.northstarfund.org)



Rickke Mananzala  
[www.nyf.org](http://www.nyf.org)

# Introduction

In June 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a first-time candidate with a background in organizing and an unabashedly progressive platform, stunned the political establishment when she defeated Joe Crowley, chair of the House Democratic Caucus and ten-term member of Congress. In an age where money and media rule politics, her primary campaign was dramatically outspent (\$1.5 million to \$83,000) and received scant media attention.

From the onset, Ocasio-Cortez defined her campaign as one that was about people over money, centering the priorities of the working-class communities in the Bronx and Queens neighborhoods that she was seeking to represent. Following her victory, Ocasio-Cortez reflected on the dynamics that led to her improbable win, “I live in this community. I organized in this community. I felt the absence of the incumbent...The community is ready for a movement of economic and social justice and that is what we tried to deliver.”<sup>1</sup>

Ocasio-Cortez’s election, however, is only one example of how the electoral landscape can shift when candidates reflect the demands and needs of their communities, as well as the values and analysis of grassroots community organizing.

Indeed, in recent years, a critical mass of candidates in New York whose lived experience more closely mirrors the communities they are representing and/or whose professional backgrounds are rooted in grassroots organizing, have run for office—and won.

This sits in stark contrast to decades of elected officials who largely reflected the machine-driven politics of the state, one in which mainstream political

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
How Grassroots Organizing is Building the Power of the Electorate.....	3
Impact of Building Electorate Power .....	6
How Funders Can Support This Work .....	10
Looking Ahead .....	13
Acknowledgements.....	13

clubs and monied interests (particularly the real estate lobby) got people elected. Instead, a new class of elected officials who are unafraid to disrupt the status quo are now at the forefront of enacting progressive policy change.

Importantly, strategic funder investments in grassroots organizing have helped catalyze the growth of this progressive power at the local and state level. At the same time, the impact of these investments extends beyond New York. As a large state that is home to the country’s most populous city, what happens in New York influences policy conversations nationally, augmenting the power of these investments.

1 <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-queens-politics-new-york-joseph-crowley-45eb9af59317402699b23c4826a8192c>

In New York, the growing power and influence of both political organizing on the left (Working Families Party, Justice Democrats, Democratic Socialists of America) and hyper-local community organizing across the state have helped drive the election of a diverse group of progressive leaders, in large part by expanding the electorate to include those who have traditionally been left out of the democratic process. The result of these efforts is a significant transformation of the local and statewide political landscape, including:

- The formation of a Progressive Caucus in the New York City Council in 2009 (at its inception, a quarter of City Council members participated in the Caucus, a number that has steadily grown);

- In 2018, the ouster of the Independent Democratic Conference (IDC), a group of state senators who were elected as Democrats, but who formed a coalition to give the Republicans the majority in the chamber, thus blocking many progressive priorities;
- A Democratic supermajority in the state legislature in 2020, which allows for veto power over the governor, creating new political leverage that has resulted in significant progressive victories

This brief takes a closer look at the strategies and impact of grassroots organizing in propelling these shifts, specifically how organizing has built the power of the electorate in communities most impacted by inequity and changed the face of representation. The brief also highlights the transformative policy changes that have resulted and the ways that funders can sustain and amplify these wins through investments in community organizing.

## Recently elected state and local officials with organizing roots\*

### Zellnor Y. Myrie | Elected to State Senate in 2018

- Defeated IDC member Jesse Hamilton
- Active in tenant rights movement prior to running

### Julia Salazar | Elected to State Senate in 2018

- Defeated an eight-term Democratic Senator in the primary as a first-time candidate
- Former organizer for Jews for Racial & Economic Justice

### Jessica Ramos | Elected to State Senate in 2018

- Defeated IDC member Jose Peralta
- First American-born member of her family; parents were undocumented; background in labor organizing

### Jabari Brisport | Elected to State Senate in 2020

- Former teacher with a history of activism around marriage equality and police accountability
- Strong advocate for housing access, climate justice, and access to health care for all

### Phara Souffrant Forrest |

### Elected to State Assembly in 2020

- Background in nursing, as well as tenant organizing via the Crown Heights Tenant Union

### Marcela Mitaynes |

### Elected to State Assembly in 2020

- Defeated Felix Ortiz, who had been in the Assembly 26 years, as a first-time candidate
- Background in tenant organizing via Neighbors Helping Neighbors; family immigrated from Peru

### India Taylor | Winner, Mayoral Primary in Buffalo

- Defeated four-term incumbent as a first-time candidate
- Background in labor and community organizing

---

*\*This list provides illustrative examples and is not comprehensive.*

# How Grassroots Organizing is Building the Power of the Electorate

Grassroots groups that are organizing low-income communities and communities of color in New York are building the power of the electorate by deepening the work they have been doing for decades— leadership development and political education that helps community members expand their understanding of issues facing their community and sharpen their ability to participate in and lead issue-based campaigns.

These grassroots groups are also becoming more intentional about engaging new bases of voters through get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts. In addition, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organizations are increasingly leveraging 501(c)(4) structures to engage in

## Grassroots Organizing

Grassroots organizing centers the voices and strategy of people who are most directly affected by whatever problem they seek to solve. Organizations that use community organizing as a core strategy build collective community power through relationship-building, leadership development, issue analysis, and direct action.

organizing that is more political in nature to advance their policy goals and build their power.

---

## Building Leaders for a Multi-Racial Democracy

Too often, those who are the most directly impacted by inequities are left out of the decision-making process. Moreover, the process for engaging with government to make changes can feel opaque and intimidating. Leadership development programs rooted in organizing principles help individuals deepen their political analysis, understand the ins and outs of how government operates, and identify new strategies for building community power.

By centering the leadership development of people of color, people living in low-income neighborhoods, and others who are excluded from the mainstream, grassroots organizations play a critical role in seeding new cohorts of community leaders who go on to shape and lead campaigns for racial, economic, and social justice—work that starts to shift the contours of what our democracy looks like.

For example, the Alliance for Quality Education runs an eight-week series called Education Warriors, in which public school parents learn about statewide policies that affect education, receive an overview

of New York’s political landscape, and build skills such as organizing, facilitation, and public speaking so they become better positioned to advocate for quality education with their elected officials. Similarly, in the housing arena, UHAB, a nonprofit organization focused on housing and tenant advocacy, runs a four-week leadership training series called BOLD: Brooklyn Organizing and Leadership Development, a training that helps tenants build their community organizing skills.

Such deep leadership development efforts not only help to build a more informed and powerful electorate at the forefront of advancing reform-minded policy agendas, but can also inspire community leaders to run for elected office. Phara Souffrant Forrest, elected to the General Assembly in 2020, for example, is an alum of BOLD and credits her work on tenant organizing in her decision to run.

## Tapping into New Bases of Voters

In 2020, New York ranked 30<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states in voter turnout, suggesting that there are large bases of untapped voters in the state.<sup>2</sup> There are a slew of contributing factors—some community members feel frustration at seeing candidates who do not reflect their communities or priorities; others feel there is little that can be done to change the status quo; still others are ignored by more mainstream GOTV outreach efforts, dismissed as too young, too poor, or too uneducated.

Jaslin Kaur, an organizer who ran for City Council in Queens, believes that candidates such as herself, who represent the needs of the community play a crucial role in tapping into new bases of voters and addressing what has been at times misinterpreted as apathy. “We have a little over fifty thousand registered Democrats in [my district], but only about seven to eight thousand actually show up for Democratic primaries. People will show up if you give them something to show up for.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, India Walton, an organizer who won the Democratic primary for mayor in Buffalo, states, “I communicated with the people that I thought were going to be the more difficult votes to get.”<sup>4</sup>

Grassroots groups organizing in the state are increasingly engaging in GOTV campaigns, efforts that have deepened due in part to the collective, statewide push for get-out-the-count efforts for the 2020 Census. Through census outreach efforts, grassroots groups built greater organizational capacity for GOTV work, strengthening their relationships with communities, and catalyzing new conversations about community needs and priorities. In doing this work, groups were able to convey that voting and getting counted in the census are two sides of the same coin. Both help ensure representation and build power.

Importantly, while traditional GOTV activities can be transactional, grassroots groups that center relational organizing as a strategy are less focused on bringing in new voters for a single electoral cycle and more focused on longer-term civic engagement, often engaging community members in political education that focuses on learning more about issues of common concern and what to expect from elected officials.

Pablo Estupiñan, director of Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), notes that in his Bronx city council district, an election can be decided based on as little as six to seven thousand votes. With this analysis, CASA has started to double down on voter registration efforts while combining that with political education.

Estupiñan shares, “Creating those political education spaces has been critical. We’ve been able to grow our members’ analysis and [help them] realize that... you have to be there to push [elected officials] and pressure them into doing these things and that’s necessary.”

Likewise, Fahd Ahmed, executive director of Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) in Queens, says DRUM’s organizers work with their membership to ask critical questions of candidates and elected officials, such as: “What is their past record? What is their political practice? Do they consult with people? Do they share decision making? Do they own up to mistakes?”

---

2 <https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/new-yorks-voter-registration-and-turnout-continue-lag.html>

3 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/03/jaslin-kaur-city-council-nyc-cuomo-dsa>

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/24/opinion/india-walton-progressive.html>

## Combining (c)(4) Efforts with (c)(3) Work with Increasing Sophistication

Though many grassroots groups that center organizing operate primarily as 501(c)(3) organizations, they are launching and building out 501(c)(4) organizations as well. Entities with a (c)(4) designation are able to engage in partisan electoral work, such as issuing candidate endorsements and unlimited lobbying. They can also make independent expenditures to influence election outcomes, although they cannot coordinate with candidates and their campaigns directly. With wider latitude to engage in electoral politics, the (c)(4) structure is becoming a tool to amplify power, working in complement to nonpartisan activities that focus on leadership development, issue analysis, and advocacy.

Many groups recognize that by engaging in (c)(4) activities they can influence issue agendas through their nonpartisan work and be more effective in moving their policy agendas and holding elected officials accountable by more directly influencing votes, particularly given their connection and access to new bases of voters. Moreover, their (c)(4) activities help level the playing field, counteracting real estate and other corporate interests that have long used (c)(4) organizations to influence local and state elections.

Jonathan Bix, executive director of Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson, puts it succinctly, “Ultimately what influences a politician is votes, so if we want to be able to have power over them, we need to be able to have the power to put people in office or get them out of office.” In the Hudson Valley, a region that has historically elected more moderate and conservative candidates compared to more urban parts of the state, the group found that its (c)(4) work was an especially effective lever for change.

As an example, Bix describes the organization’s unsuccessful attempt to encourage a state senator serving the area to support the Green Light legislation, allowing undocumented immigrants to



Photo by Neha Gautam

apply for a driver’s license. However, once the group created its (c)(4) affiliate and flexed its muscle by calling more than 300,000 voters and sending 1.2 million texts, the senator saw the group’s ability to move votes. Though he voted against the legislation, he has now been an ally on the issue, helping Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson ensure the law is implemented fairly. In the 2020 election, Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson also played an instrumental role in the only successful flip of a rural Republican-held seat in the state, endorsing and working actively to elect Michelle Hinchey who has since helped advance many of Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson’s policy priorities.

Similarly, New American Leaders, an organization that trains first- and second-generation Americans to run for office, operated solely as a (c)(3) for many years, focusing on providing nonpartisan training and resources to *prospective* candidates. Realizing that its (c)(3) work still left their program participants without support during a critical period, in 2018, it created a (c)(4) arm, the New American Leaders Action Fund. The (c)(4) affiliate allows the organization to connect candidates with one another for support, organize volunteers, and put out communications on their behalf, thus supporting the organization’s ability to more directly get first- and second-generation Americans elected to office.

# Impact of Building Electorate Power

As grassroots groups build a more diverse and deeply engaged electorate through their leadership development and political education efforts, some members ultimately choose to run for office. There is often an inherent tension for organizers and others who come from diverse backgrounds in seeking elected office, given the myriad reasons to be skeptical of the political system. In the words of one organizer who has been asked to run for office multiple times, there is a belief that “I don’t want to be part of this corrupt system.”

At the same time, organizers are the people who are best positioned to challenge the status quo and help change a system perceived to be corrupt.

Organizers know how to build relationships, analyze policy, navigate power dynamics, and bring people together—skills that are endemic to holding elected office. Likewise, those with lived experience have a nuanced understanding of their communities and can identify solutions that will work in practice, not just theory.

As a new wave of organizers and people from diverse backgrounds have been elected to office in New York, the results have been clear and tangible. They have been able not only to move the needle on critical policy issues, but also to shift how government engages with the electorate.



*I think of...organizing and running for office, as parallel. An organizer is somebody who knows how to build community, somebody who knows how to do direct action and bring direct services to their community and knows how to bring a coalition of diverse people together.”*

**- Jaslin Kaur, Organizer and NYC City Council Candidate (Jacobin magazine, March 2021)**

---

## Transformative Policy Changes

There is broad consensus that recent progressive wins would not have happened with the past composition of the state legislature—a shift that happened due in large part to organizing.

Many of these campaigns for social and economic justice have been taking place for decades, with only incremental movement. However, the election of people with lived experience who have experience

organizing and hold deep, authentic ties to community, has literally changed who is the room and demonstrated what it means to center the voices of communities that have been historically marginalized in democratic decision-making

Perhaps most significantly, the Invest in Our New York campaign brought together organizers working across a diverse set of issue areas statewide to

advocate for progressive revenue. The coalition advocated for a set of legislative bills that would raise revenue from the wealthiest New Yorkers to invest in essential services such as education and housing to support the most vulnerable New Yorkers. Although the coalition continues to push, there have already been two major policy wins including a higher tax rate for those earning over \$1 million and new tax brackets for those earning over \$5 million.

These wins represented not only organizers working collectively across issue-area silos, but also the importance of strong allies in Albany who were able to work in tandem with community to fight for these shifts, one that came with a clear mandate from New Yorkers across rural, suburban, and urban areas and across party lines. In the words of one organizer, the progressive revenue win, along with other victories in

recent years, is an example of what is possible when “movement energy gets translated into electoral energy that turns into a governing agenda.”

As more leaders from organizing backgrounds take office, grassroots groups are able to partner in a deeper way to help advance policy shifts. Samantha Kattan, organizing and policy director at UHAB, explains, “It’s a relief to work with elected officials who will not respond to our ideas for legislation with a ton of skepticism...[but to have] folks that are equally excited about pushing the boundaries. It means that more progress can happen more quickly.” Kattan has observed elected officials such as Zellnor Myrie or Julia Salazar serve as strong champions for housing justice legislation in Albany, with a willingness to be vocal, organize their colleagues in the legislature, and drum up more support.

## Recent Progressive Policy Wins

### Progressive Revenue

- Income tax increase on the wealthiest New Yorkers to fund public services

### Rent Regulation

- A package of laws protecting tenant rights
- Rent relief and eviction protections for low-income New Yorkers affected by COVID-19

### Immigrant Justice

- \$2.1 billion for an Excluded Workers Fund to provide assistance to undocumented immigrants who lost work during the pandemic
- Green Light legislation allowing all New Yorkers to apply for a driver’s license regardless of immigration status

### Criminal Justice Reform

- Cash bail abolished in most cases
- De-criminalization of marijuana

### Reproductive Justice

- Codified Roe v. Wade into state law
- Electoral and Campaign Finance Reforms

### Establishment of early voting throughout the state

- Banning LLC loophole in election financing

---

### Sources:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/nyregion/rent-regulation-laws-new-york.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/nyregion/albany-wrapup-legislature-ny.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/nyregion/covid-relief-undocumented-workers-nyc.html>

Progressive elected officials make up a relatively small minority of the legislature, yet they have been able to advocate effectively for policy shifts by working collectively to move an agenda, rather than working in a transactional *quid pro quo* manner that has characterized much of traditional politics. Working collectively is not only a survival strategy, but a governing strategy, one in which policies and decisions are guided by shared values.

Jabari Brisport, a state senator from Brooklyn, notes the power of working collectively as well as the value of an inside-outside approach, “It’s one thing to have advocates pushing an agenda. It’s another thing to have an actual elected official advocating for the agenda. And then it’s a whole other thing to have multiple elected officials advocating for it.”<sup>5</sup>

---

## Mutual Accountability

When organizers and others from diverse backgrounds are propelled into office not by corporate money, but by the hopes and dreams of the communities they represent, they tend to see themselves as change agents who can use government as a platform to translate the organizing they have done on the ground into policy. They measure their success by their ability to deliver on the commitments they made to the people who elected them to office, rather than wealthy donors or the political machine. As a result, the nature of engagement *with* community and the nature of accountability *to* community shifts.

Sochie Nnaemeka, New York State Director of the Working Families Party, explains, “We want to shift the focus from...setting up [elected officials] to assimilate...to the Democratic party machine to really understanding themselves as being accountable to and in relationship with the community. Accountability is not about ‘let’s come and check back every quarter,’ but how do [elected officials] see themselves as members of a movement.” Nnaemeka says elected officials need to recognize that they’re not protagonists in the political landscape, but rather a “vehicle” to move forward a collective governing agenda based on shared values in relationship with the broader progressive movement.

For grassroots community groups, this relationship of mutual accountability can manifest in a range of ways—from co-designing solutions to community issues to setting up regular town halls with constituents to models of co-governance, in which elected officials and organizing groups partner on a shared governing agenda.

But mutual accountability does not mean that organizers stop agitating. Rather, progressive elected officials can work inside the system to push for change, while grassroots groups who organize community members can add pressure from the outside, engaging in direct action and building people power to advocate for change.

Karen Meija, a city council representative in Newburgh, came to her role from a background in labor organizing and encourages exactly this. She shares, “I say, especially to my immigrant brothers and sisters, I am there, I bring in one perspective, but there is so much more of an impact when a room is filled with your voices, with your stories. One person cannot be the representation. I am there to push it through, but the pressure for the other votes comes when you show up at City Hall.”

---

5 <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/state-senate-dsa-jabari-brisport>

By broadening the electorate, wielding the power of the vote, and building greater power both inside and outside the system, organizers can yield greater leverage with elected officials who represent the political establishment as well. They are pushed to become more accountable or face the consequences. In the past, incumbents were rarely “primaried” and if they did face a primary challenge, their win was still virtually guaranteed.

As Jamaal Bowman and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s wins against powerful, long-time members of Congress and the 2018 State Senate victories against members of the IDC illustrate, that is no longer the case. The willingness to challenge the status quo creates additional levers for accountability. As one organizer put it, “People don’t feel so comfortable anymore, which is really good.”

---

## Transparency and Inclusion

As more progressive candidates have won office, they are starting to change how government operates, bringing more transparency to the political process. Organizers who have been elected to office bring with them an organizer’s approach to government, often making government feel more inclusive and accessible.

When Phara Souffrant Forrest won her election, she drew upon her roots in tenant organizing, constantly considering the ways in which she could bring organizing energy to her work as an elected official. She sought to do as many public events as possible, not only giving people information about resources, such as the hardship declaration form for rent relief, but also encouraging community members to “be out in the streets” and plug into tenant movements in their neighborhoods to demand more protections from government.

Others have taken to TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter to engage constituents in new and accessible ways, often demystifying the minutiae of government and explaining why things work a certain way. By bringing light to an often-opaque system, they help regular

people understand how government functions and how they can become active participants in the democratic process. This form of outreach not only reaches constituents who may not have been previously engaged but can also have the consequence of holding other elected officials to account because there is more attention focused on how they are showing up to represent community concerns (or not).

New voices have also brought changes to the archaic inside rules of the game that are critical to getting things done but may not be known to the average person. In 2013, members of the progressive caucus in the New York City Council helped to usher in rule changes meant to increase equity inside the body, a step toward changing the overall culture of the Council. Likewise, in the state legislature, there are agreements among progressive members to not do one-on-one deals with leadership that privilege individual power and interests, and rather, work collectively to negotiate committee assignments and policy priorities.

# How Funders Can Support This Work

Even as spirited debates about the state of democracy take place at the national level, what happens at the local level is often more revealing of how vibrant, representative, and powerful our democracy is. At the local level, we see our values in action. We also see where unchecked power has the potential to do the most harm.

New York is home to a formidable network of groups engaged in grassroots organizing, one that has demonstrated the power of widening the electorate to be inclusive of people of color and working-class communities and has seeded a new cadre of elected leaders pushing for progressive policy change.

And though progressive victories are beginning to change the distribution of resources and power in the state, the progressive cohort in the state legislature remains a small minority. By working collectively, they punch above their weight, but there is still much work to be done to both engage the electorate and ensure that the state's elected officials represent community, rather than corporate, interests.

Here's how funders can ensure that grassroots organizing has the support and resources needed to sustain and build upon the gains that have been made.

---

## Increase investments in groups that build deep leadership skills and use community organizing as a core approach

While professional organizers and “grasstops” advocacy organizations play a critical role in social justice movements, ultimately community-led movements that bring in the power of their leaders' lived experience hold the greatest potential for impact. By engaging those most directly impacted by racism and inequity, particularly at the hyper-local level, grassroots groups' leadership development programs are building skills and knowledge among those who are most often left out of the democratic process. This not only helps build a more informed electorate, in some cases, it can be the catalyst for running for office.

Organizations investing in grassroots leadership development are often the same ones that are using relational organizing strategies, ones that build community power through base-building, advocacy, issue analysis, and direct action. By investing in groups that are centering organizing strategies, funders can ensure they are helping to generate

the political will required to advance progressive policy change rooted in the needs and priorities of communities most directly impacted by inequity.

Relatedly, investments in organizations that are pushing for systems change, rather than incremental reforms, are best situated to make the most lasting and impactful changes to our social fabric, ones that can help shift the distribution of resources and power to create a more equitable society.

As the backbone of a sustainable progressive movement, grassroots groups that center organizing need deeper investment by funders, including resources for stipends, benefits, and decent salaries. By awarding generous, multi-year general operating support grants to these groups, funders can provide the longer-term support required to recruit and retain grassroots community leaders and engage them in organizing campaigns that result in systemic change.

## Invest in infrastructure for organizing and civic engagement statewide

Building the power of the electorate is a dynamic process that entails engaging diverse constituencies who have the knowledge, skills, and power to advocate for their needs along with having elected representatives who are working authentically and strategically to advance those interests. To ensure that grassroots groups have the resources to engage community members effectively, funders can invest in the infrastructure for organizing.

This includes supporting organizations such as the Advocacy Institute, the New York Civic Engagement Table, the Center for Community Leadership, and others that provide the data, training, and tools that organizing groups need to build their organizational capacity.

In addition, funders can provide resources for groups to connect with one another so there is greater alignment and information-sharing statewide on how

to advance progressive priorities across geographic divides. This is already happening through coalitions such as Invest in Our New York and Housing Justice for All, but there are opportunities to deepen and expand these relationships beyond shorter-term coalitions

### Learn more about 501(C)(4)

#### **501(c)(4) Strategy and Discussion Guide**

This guide explores considerations for both funders and nonprofits in launching a 501(c)(4).

#### **Now is the Time for Donors to Support Maximum Advocacy:**

The article provides guidance to funders on how to support 501 (C)(4)s

---

## Learn about and invest in 501(c)(4) work

Large, politically active organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Rifle Association have long operated with (c)(4) dollars, giving them the flexibility to engage in nonpartisan educational activities and policy advocacy, as well as more direct political engagement by supporting candidates for office.<sup>6</sup> In addition, some also have Political Action Committees (PACs) to engage even more directly in political activity.

For grassroots community organizing to have maximum impact, it is becoming increasingly clear that a combination of tools and approaches are needed. Some funders balk at investing in 501(c)(4) work, but by specifying that funds should not be used for lobbying, funders can resource organizing more fully by investing in the nonpartisan portion of the (c)(4). Organizers say this gives them more flexibility in running their (c)(4) arm.

Funders can educate themselves more deeply by tapping into resources produced by the Tides Foundation, Alliance for Justice, Atlas Learning Project and others to ensure they understand how to make their investments within legal bounds. Whether or not a foundation ultimately supports (c)(4) work, they can fund other activities, such as education and training for groups around (c)(4) work to ensure their work is structured so that it follows the law

As more funders understand the intricacies of (c)(4) funding and its value in supporting the policy priorities of groups engaged in grassroots community organizing, they can also educate, engage, and encourage their peer funders, as this is still uncharted territory for many foundations.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncrp.org/publication/501c4-organizations-maximizing-nonprofit-voices-mobilizing-public>



## Support organizations that are committed to training, developing and supporting new leaders to run for office

While political organizations on the left, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, Working Families Party, Justice Democrats, and others recruit and run candidates, there is also a place for nonpartisan efforts to expand the bench of progressive candidates.

Running for office requires understanding a dizzying set of rules and regulations, coupled with an understanding of the political process, which makes running for office intimidating for many, but especially those who come from non-traditional backgrounds. Organizations like New American Leaders encourage people from diverse backgrounds, many of whom have roots in organizing, to run for office, helping them understand how the system works and demystify the process of running for office.

But running for office is just the first step. What happens if and when they are elected? As Sarah Johnson of Local Progress notes, “Each year, more and more candidates are running and winning on the promise of advancing bold policies for racial,

economic and gender equity, and truly transforming and reimagining how the government can work for and with people. They often end up holding power in systems that range from completely toxic to simply held captive by the status quo, where patriarchy and white supremacy are pervasive forces. Advancing systemic change inside of government is deeply challenging, and once people are elected, there is very little support.”

Giving newly elected officials the tools to govern, as well as networks with other like-minded elected officials to provide support, also requires investments. Local Progress, for example, has started a governance academy to ensure such a space exists. Their governance academy is designed to develop a deeper understanding of what governance entails, build a values-based community of elected officials, and connect leaders to one another for support. Funders can make critical investments in such efforts to ensure there is a place for leaders to coalesce and support one another once in office.

# Looking Ahead

At the time of this writing, the stakes are particularly high as New York seeks to rebuild and recover from a pandemic that exacerbated economic and social inequalities for communities that were already the most vulnerable. With the state set to see new tax revenue, coupled with billions in federal aid, the choices we make today about how these dollars are invested will have long-lasting implications.

As longtime organizer Zakiyah Ansari states, “We’ve got billions and billions of dollars in federal money. Racism and white supremacy history tell us that if we’re not paying attention, if we’re not at the table, [the State] will take this money and use it how they see fit. We cannot allow that to happen.”

At this critical moment, funders have an opportunity to invest in the hyper-local community organizing and the leadership that has already notched significant

victories and, with the right investments, is poised to do more. As an example of what is possible, the June 2021 primary in New York City resulted in a majority female City Council class, as well as the most diverse and most progressive City Council in history. A critical mass of the new members come from working class and immigrant backgrounds and have roots in organizing.

While the final outcome of the City Council race won’t be decided until November 2021, the cohort is already preparing to bring their lived experience and their experience as organizers to governance. In the words of Crystal Hudson, a Black gay woman who won her Brooklyn race, “For those of us who live on the margins, we can fully understand and appreciate the value of policy changes that actually impact our day-to-day lives.”<sup>7</sup>

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Seema Shah, Ph.D.

Maria Mottola of New York Foundation and Jennifer Ching of North Star Fund provided critical framing and guidance.

We thank the following individuals who were interviewed for this report and generously contributed their insights to this project:

<b>Fahd Ahmed</b>	Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM)
<b>Zakiyah Ansari</b>	Alliance for Quality Education
<b>Jonathan Bix</b>	For the Many, formerly Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson
<b>Pablo Estupiñan</b>	Community Action for Safe Apartments, New Settlement Apartments
<b>Sarah Johnson</b>	Local Progress

<b>Samantha Kattan</b>	UHAB
<b>Sara Le Bruq</b>	New American Leaders
<b>Karen Meija</b>	City of Newburgh, Council Member
<b>Sochie Nnaemeka</b>	New York Working Families Party
<b>Jonathan Westin</b>	New York Communities for Change

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/nyregion/new-york-city-council-diversity.html>



520 Eighth Avenue  
Suite 1800  
New York, NY 10018  
212 620-9110  
[www.northstarfund.org](http://www.northstarfund.org)



150 West 30 Street  
New York City 10001  
212-594-8009  
[www.nyf.org](http://www.nyf.org)

Report designed by Shanthony Art & Design