

# How Community Organizations Facilitate Democracy Post-Shelby County v. Holder

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## Introduction

- When concerning voter behavior, previous studies have shown barriers in place that reinforce systemic voter suppression and political inactivity in marginalized communities.
- Voter ID laws, mistrust of politicians, disenfranchisement, lack of access to information, and the *Shelby v. Holder* decision.
- Mobilization strategies for general, already active voting audiences has also been analyzed in which face-to-face interactions, such as canvassing, stimulated a greater voter turnout.
- A knowledge gap can be identified when investigating the voters' perspective of such mobilization strategies that target them due to their experience with historical oppressive barriers of voting.
- This project consists of performing ethnographic examinations of organizations and campaigns that wish to increase voter turnout in areas of lower political activity and explore the strategies employed to overcome historical barriers.
- This study aims to understand how organizers are breaking down systemic blockage of voting, accessing oppressed voters, and producing civic identity; cultivating an electorate that encompasses all Americans: ex-felons, people of color, and economically marginalized.

## Methods

- Research was undertaken due to the *Shelby v. Holder* decision of 2013 which removed certain voter right protections and marginalized communities' ability to vote.
- Thorough literature analyses were conducted using the citation manager Zotero which filed each piece of literature into corresponding categories such as Mobilization and Engagement, Research Methods, and Road to Enfranchisement.
- From September 2024 until December 2024, this program was used to annotate and highlight the excerpts of previous research that was applicable to the project. From this, effective strategies to receive participants in the study and what demographics should be of primary focus were developed.
- After this analysis of the literature, communities of African American, Black, or immigrant experience or descent appeared to be most heavily influenced by the *Shelby v. Holder* decision. These groups were observed to experience extensive voter suppression with a lack of access to information, trust, clarity of voter rights, and ability to vote.
- The primary researcher then developed business cards requesting interviews in low turnout communities, offering a \$20 gift card incentive after completing an interview. These cards were left in community centers, local venues, local restaurants, and in areas of low voter turnout rates during the 2022 election.
- The primary researcher performed ethnographic participant observation as a volunteer. They also attended organizer/campaign meetings for interview recruitment. (Figure 1)
- A series of structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews were conducted with oppressed voters. These interviews were recorded and transcribed with the Otter computer program.
- The most common themes of the interviews were then identified using the computer program Atlas.Ti. Using grounded theory methodology, the researcher iteratively observed, refined their inquiry, and enhanced their analysis. Researchers used Atlas.Ti to code and group common themes.



Figure 1: Power Up People member recruiting volunteers to canvas and organize at student-oriented event.

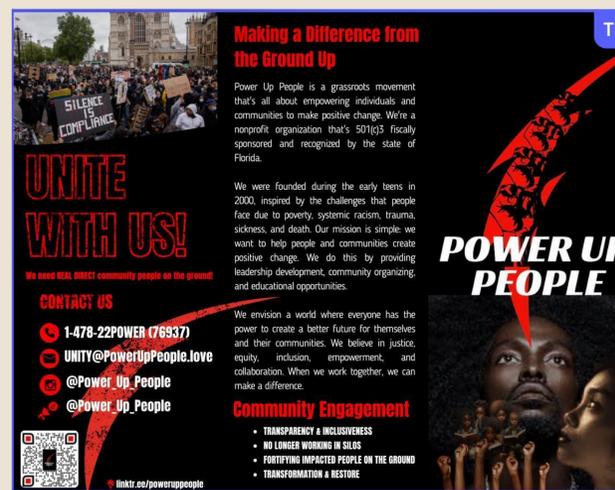


Figure 2: A recruiting poster for Power Up People.

## Preliminary Results and Limitations

- This study aimed to elicit voter perspective on strategies used to increase low engagement in low turnout communities.
- Politicians and organizations that had been urging ballot amendments canvassed in increasingly active precincts. Voting rights organizations (such as Big Bend Voting Rights Project, Melanin Mothers Meet, etc.) canvassed in less active precincts to engage and mobilize less active communities.
- Some voters were very politically engaged and well-informed in unexpected areas such as mobile home communities (precinct 1319) and low-income communities.
- During canvassing, some voters believed they had not been registered to vote but were. Many experiencing felony disenfranchisement were not interested in risking voting, possibly due to symbolic punishment of felons caught voting before rights were restored.
- Language has been a consistent barrier throughout the field work. Certain organizations did use Google Translate to expand their reach and ensure all eligible voters were informed. Other organizations would assume ineligible status and carry on.
- Engagement efforts fell flat at times of high excitement events, like homecoming, home games, and festivals. Some institutions did not carry out promises of encouraging voters (such as Neighborhood F1rst).
- While in Black communities, white male canvassers were questioned of their intentions or accused of being federal informants.

## Conclusions and Implications

- As for voter perspectives on canvassing and mobilization efforts, interviews are ongoing- findings are pending.
- Organizers proposed that distrust and misinformation are key factors leading to non-interest and access was a barrier to mobilizing. Year-round canvassing and events is suggested to build trust, especially for non-presidential elections.
- More effective outreach strategies have been identified such as posting outside supermarkets (e.g., Piggly Wiggly) or laundry mats that serve local black communities. Additionally, organizers have proposed that canvassing must be conducted year-round to build trust within these inactive communities.
- There is widespread mistrust of canvassers who appear to come from outside of these marginalized communities, often being accused of being federal informants. Contracting community members or scripts and prompts for non-community members may be essential to ease concern.
- Voters were much more informed and engaged than expected, indicating that lack of political knowledge is likely not a limiting factor on their engagement. This indicates that either a lack of political will, ability to engage, sense of civic duty, or all three factors are to blame for the low participation rates among these communities.
- The findings of this study could help mobilization organizations develop increasingly effective strategies to better target voters and avoid strategies that are not well received.
- In a broader context, these mobilization strategies will bring more representation within the U.S. democracy; marginalized communities could be reached and hold a substantial voice in both local and national elections.
- As this study is still ongoing, further research can be conducted to determine the efficacy of voter mobilization organizations and clarify which techniques are truly inspiring civic action.

## References

