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Slow and Steady Wins the Race:

Ten Years of the State Infrastructure Fund

Written by
Cynthia M. Gibson



STATE
INFRASTRUCTURE
FUND

Acknowledgements

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About NEO Philanthropy

Founded in 1983, **NEO Philanthropy** (formerly Public Interest Projects) is a national leader in innovative philanthropic solutions. As a philanthropic intermediary, NEO bridges the gap that often exists between funders and organizations doing a range of social justice work. NEO has extensive experience supporting different types of foundations (community, private, corporate, national, and international) as well as individual donors. Through its funder collaboratives—including State Infrastructure Fund, Four Freedoms Fund, and Anti-Trafficking Fund—fiscal sponsorships, donor services, special initiatives, and capacity building programs, NEO develops sustainable partnerships among philanthropic donors and social justice advocates at the local, regional, and national levels. Deeply committed to social justice, racial equity, and human rights, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusivity in its own organization, NEO Philanthropy has more than 35 years of experience helping nonprofit organizations and funders build movements for justice, equity, and dignity.



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Introduction

In November 2020, 159 million people turned out to vote—turnout not seen in more than a century. And they did so in the face of a deadly pandemic, economic recession, and racial conflict.

Many of those voters were the same people who were hit the hardest by these events—Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); young people; and other marginalized groups—yet were determined to exercise their hard-fought right to vote. That participation was a game changer, transforming the electoral map in ways the pundits and polls never saw coming:

- The number of African Americans eligible to vote in a presidential election hit a record 30 million in 2020. These voters played a major role in determining election results in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.¹
- Compared to the last nine presidential elections in which the Latinx turnout rate averaged about 46 percent, in 2020, 53 percent of all eligible Latinx voters cast a ballot—roughly 25 percentage points higher than the rate of increase for all votes in the 2016 cycle.²
- Turnout among Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) voters shot up by more than 30 percent in 2020 compared with 2016.³
- Nearly 55% of youth voted in 2020, a major increase from 2016. In states like Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Arizona, young Black and Latinx voters were instrumental in determining election results.⁴



Increasing civic engagement isn't just an 'election-year thing' with SIF. They understand that this requires funding and other resources for organizing and infrastructure over a consistent period of time and targeted to key states and communities that otherwise wouldn't have them. By looking systematically and strategically and seeing where funders can have the most impact over time, SIF is getting the kind of outcomes we all like to see."

—Hildy Simmons, *Philanthropic/Donor Advised Fund Consultant*

As analysts scrambled to parse the “whys” behind the results, others weren’t as surprised, pointing to thousands of grassroots organizers in cities and states who for years had been tirelessly registering and engaging voters and doing issue-focused outreach.⁵ Many of those organizers were people of color determined to “identify and turn out communities that had been traditionally overlooked—just as they had been themselves,” says Helen Butler, executive director of the Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda, which engages disenfranchised communities in issue organizing, voting, and voting rights.*

These leaders weren’t focused only on campaigns. They cared about issues, rather than candidates, and communities, rather than political parties “because people need to see the connections between what’s going on in their communities and how elections and policies influence those issues,” says Malika Redmond, board chair of ProGeorgia, a state voter engagement coalition, and CEO of Women Engaged.⁶

* Note: All quotes that are not cited from a published source are from interviews conducted by the author.

Davis and Butler are just two of the hundreds of people who spend most of their waking hours cultivating those connections because they understand that a strong democracy rests on continuous voter engagement at the state and local levels—long after elections are over. That includes educating voters about state legislative agendas, advocating for policies that help struggling communities, and fighting against voter suppression tactics at the national, state, and county levels. People will only do those things, Butler cautions, “if they have good relationships with the messengers asking them to do them, and that trust doesn’t happen overnight.”

This critically important work is painstaking and process-oriented, which once made getting financial support for it exceedingly difficult. Traditionally, funders interested in supporting civic engagement “tended to fly in right before high-profile presidential elections, provide funds for voter registration and turnout efforts primarily in selected states and then leave,” says Geri Mannion, head of Carnegie Corporation of New York’s democracy program. “It’s a ‘boom or bust’ model of philanthropy that some of us saw as short-sighted and ineffective in ensuring a strong democracy in which everyone has the opportunity to participate.”

State Infrastructure Fund: A New Approach to Civic and Voter Engagement

In 2010, Lisa Versaci, who was then at Committee on States, Geri Mannion and a group of foundation colleagues⁷ decided it was time to upend that tradition by pooling philanthropic funds to support the kind of grassroots groups Felicia Davis and Helen Butler were running, usually on shoestring budgets. Importantly, this funding would extend over the entire year, not just immediately before the election. The goal: Building a permanent infrastructure of organizations that would support continuous year-round civic engagement, voting, and voting rights in key states across the country.

From these seeds sprouted the State Infrastructure Fund (SIF) at NEO Philanthropy. Today, a decade later, SIF has become the nation’s most established donor collaborative that sees voting, voting rights, and civic engagement as inextricably linked. This interrelationship is reflected in SIF’s integrated strategic goal: increasing civic participation among people of color and other historically underrepresented communities and protecting their right to vote.

“

Looking back, it’s remarkable what SIF has accomplished in ten years. The growth of state-based civic engagement networks and organizations that weren’t there or were much smaller before SIF came along. There’s more understanding that increasing civic engagement is a year-round effort, more acceptance of an integrated voter engagement model, and more focus on racial equity from the start, which is essential to field building and positive change. We’re now seeing a cohort of leaders who’ve come up from the states and an ever-growing community of donors who get to know the people on the ground doing the work. SIF isn’t just a pass through. It’s really a strategic instrument.”

—Allison Barlow,
Co-founder, State Infrastructure Fund

To achieve this goal, the State Infrastructure Fund supports state-based/focused organizations in key regions and states that are:

- conducting year-round civic and voter engagement programs that build relationships and sow trust in historically underrepresented communities and establish these organizations as trusted messengers regarding civic action and voting;
- removing barriers to voting and promoting changes to voting laws and election administration through public education, organizing, voter protection, and litigation in these communities;
- strengthening the capacity, skills, and coordination of networks representing and engaging these communities; and
- deepening alignment, coordination, and planning across national and state litigation, voting rights, and civic engagement organizations and funders.

“For funders committed to building independent political power but don’t have the capacity to do the due diligence to make those decisions on their own, you couldn’t arrive at a better collective of funders to come up with an effective strategy. If a funder had to create this for themselves, they’d be spending a lot of time and money.”

—*trellis stepter,*
Mertz Gilmore Foundation

Since 2010, the State Infrastructure Fund has raised more than \$141M to support 140-plus state-based and national nonpartisan organizations in 17 states doing this work; \$56M of this total was received during the 2020 election run up. The number of funders contributing to the fund also has increased substantially—from five institutional and individual funders in 2010 to 13 in 2017 to 41 currently.

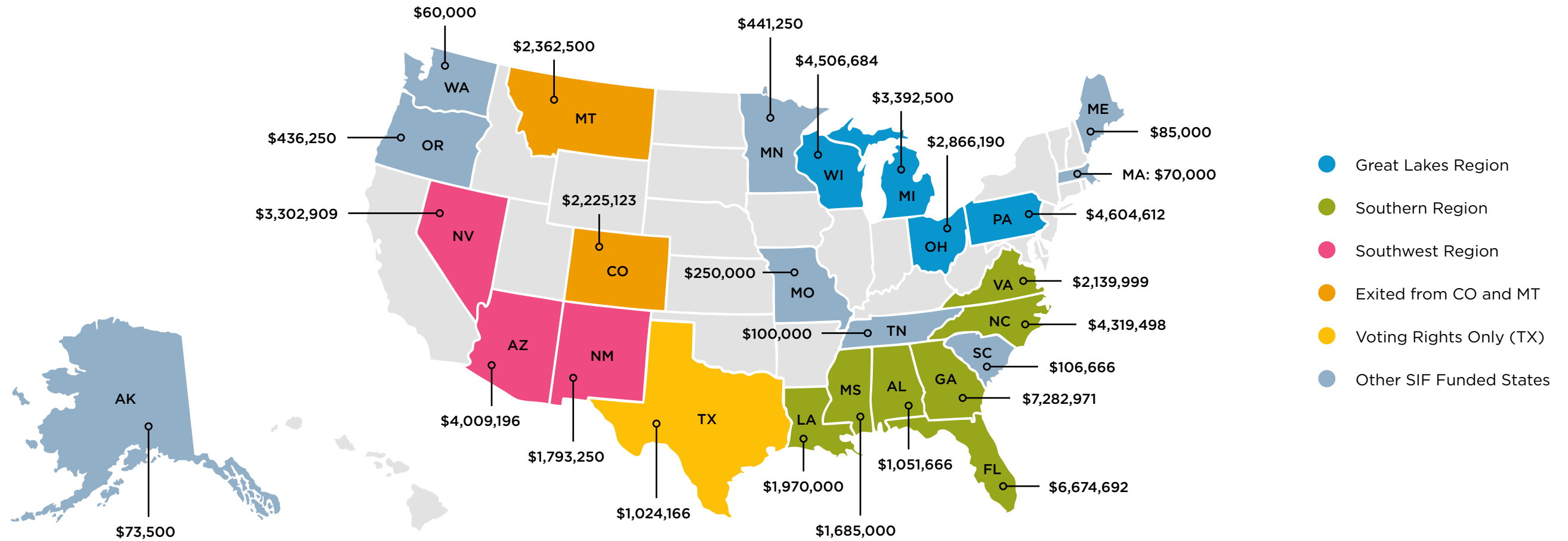
These funders understand that to ensure a flourishing democracy—especially for people who have been systematically marginalized from participating fully in it—“boom or bust” funding isn’t the answer. What’s needed is an efficient, effective, and strategic vehicle through which funders can leverage their assets to provide year-round consistent capital for state-based work that has longer-term impact.

In short: State Infrastructure

What is State Infrastructure?

SIF defines state infrastructure as the network of well-resourced organizations with strong leaders who collaborate in planning and carrying out right-sized civic engagement, voting, and voting rights efforts in communities across a state. These infrastructures can be at different stages of development so SIF develops tailored strategies for support that reflect each state’s unique capacities, challenges, and opportunities. Key indicators of a strong infrastructure are: multiple organizations working together to coordinate their efforts; financial sustainability among organizations working in marginalized communities; capacity to plan, develop, and execute complex and consistent programs; the ability to use data to show positive results; and the ability to pivot quickly responding to timely issues.

TOTAL SIF FUNDING 2010 – 2020: \$100,081,661



| Cycle | National VR/EP | National CE | National Funding Totals | State Funding Totals | All Funding Totals |
|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 2010/12 | \$1,637,438 | \$4,473,325 | \$6,110,763 | \$3,912,238 | \$10,023,001 |
| 2013/14 | \$871,215 | \$407,465 | \$1,278,680 | \$3,988,496 | \$5,267,176 |
| 2015/16 | \$3,733,017 | \$645,517 | \$4,378,534 | \$6,434,996 | \$10,813,530 |
| 2017/18 | \$4,987,531 | \$3,327,531 | \$8,315,062 | \$9,192,892 | \$17,507,954 |
| 2019/20 | \$17,100,000 | \$6,065,000 | \$23,165,000 | \$33,305,000 | \$56,470,000 |
| 10-YR. TOTALS: | \$28,329,201 | \$14,918,838 | \$43,248,039 | \$56,833,622 | \$100,081,661 |

The State Infrastructure Fund Provides...



Consistent, long-term general operating grants to state and national organizations that work to increase voter participation in states

The State Infrastructure Fund provides **consistent, long-term general operating grants** to state organizations and national groups operating in states to support their year-round voter engagement, voter education, and voting rights work and to build a permanent infrastructure for it.

Today, 83% of SIF's grantees are BIPOC-led.

An important part of this strategy is providing this **funding early**, which assures organizations have the resources they need to strengthen their voter engagement, voter turnout, and voting rights programs from one year to the next—something that is particularly important to small groups.

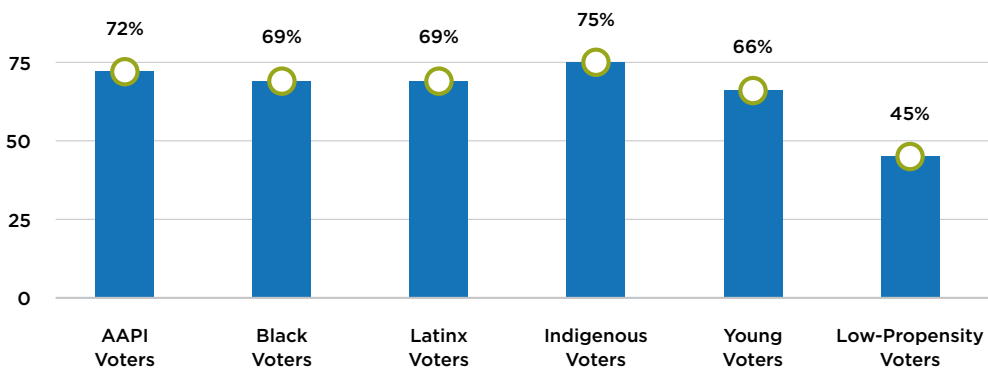
SIF's **flexible funding** also allows organizations to get the **capacity-building services and support** they need—including communications, technology and data analysis, management, and evaluation assistance—to achieve their goals. And SIF's **rapid response grants** help grassroots groups respond quickly to urgent crises or opportunities through organizing, communications, litigation, and other activities.



When COVID hit and we had to transition our outreach strategies to digital, SIF connected us to communications experts and offered extra funding, as well as gave us the chance to change our budget. That allowed us to hire a full-time staff person to oversee our Election Protection program to spread the word about our hotline through digital media and radio ads. And now we have that hotline open year-round—not just on Election Day.”

—Nsombi Lambricht,
One Voice (Mississippi)

**Voters Contacted by SIF Grantees:
Percentage of Voters Contacted and Engaged by SIF in the 2020 Election**



The increase in turnout by BIPOC voters engaged by SIF grantees outpaced the turnout increases seen nationally.

Source: State Infrastructure Fund Grantee 2020 Quantitative Grant Report Results



Voting rights litigation and Election Protection facilitation

The State Infrastructure Fund created and continues to coordinate the **Voting Rights Working Group** (otherwise known as the Litigation Collaborative). Launched in 2014 in response to the Supreme Court's *Shelby County v. Holder* decision that severely undermined Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, the collaborative comprises 12 national voting rights organizations and has become one of the nation's most powerful forces for protecting voting rights and battling voter suppression. Members meet regularly to identify, discuss, and share litigation strategies and align efforts to capitalize on each group's capacities and experience. To date, collaborative members have been involved in more than 126 voting rights cases, at least 81 of which involved issues related to the 2020 elections. Since 2016, collaborative members have achieved successful results in 80 percent of the cases they have filed.

“

SIF understands that litigation can be—and has historically been—a powerful lever for change, which a lot of funders don't support. When funders invest in litigation it sends a message that they're in it for the long term, which some funders avoid because they want a quick ROI.”

—Sue Van, Coulter Foundation

Issues Litigated in 2020

- Early voting, vote-by-mail, and absentee ballot processes and administrative systems
- Ballot drop boxes
- Voter purges/list maintenance
- Voter ID and proof-of-citizenship requirements
- Restrictions to ballot collection and assistance efforts
- Expansion of curbside voting
- Polling place closures
- Felon disenfranchisement
- Voter-directed misinformation/disinformation
- Challenges to the Voting Rights Act
- Challenges to election results certification
- Challenges to invalidate ballots cast during election

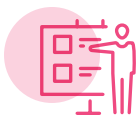
SIF staff also helps to coordinate and strengthen the **Election Protection Coalition**, a national network of national, state, and local voting rights and civic engagement organizations that collaborate to protect the rights of historically disenfranchised voters in the states. Working together, partners employ a range of strategies and programmatic activities, including: meeting with election administration officials to understand rule changes to the voting process; educating voters about their rights and helping them register/vote; challenging voter suppression attempts; advancing equitable voting laws, election rules, and policies; and litigating to remove barriers to voting, especially in traditionally disenfranchised and underrepresented communities. The coalition also runs national hotlines that provide information about the voting process in English, Spanish, AAPI, and Arabic, as well as a TTY text-based communications service for people with disabilities. It also helps voters address obstacles they may be experiencing in trying to cast their ballots.



Coordination of organizations, initiatives, and leaders working in and across states to align strategies, forge networks, and enhance communication

SIF supports coordinated state-based networks of organizations that are increasing voter participation rates in historically underrepresented communities through year-round advocacy, organizing, leadership development, voter mobilization, and Election Protection programs that link voting to the issues communities see as important. This approach reflects SIF’s strategy of integrating voter/civic engagement and voting rights, as well as its commitment to providing the consistent financial and capacity-building support needed to successfully execute that strategy.

State Infrastructure Fund staff also connect groups and leaders across states and with national organizations wanting to work in those states to ensure that strategies and programs are coordinated year-round in ways that benefit the entire civic and voter engagement ecosystem. In Mississippi and Alabama, for example, SIF has helped state voting rights/civic engagement groups build stronger relationships with national organizations and funders committed to challenging voter suppression through litigation and other activities.



Trainings and technical assistance to state-based grantees, including hands-on troubleshooting, capacity building, and leadership development

The State Infrastructure Fund provides **a range of technical support** that complements direct grants by strengthening grantees’ organizational capacity and their ability to overcome obstacles when they arise. For example, in the face of a pandemic that prevented in-person canvassing, SIF provided training and coaching that allowed grantees to rapidly and successfully pivot to digital organizing and outreach strategies. SIF also brokered partnerships with creative talent that worked with grantees to develop customized still and video content for their digital campaigns. The success of these efforts prompted SIF to develop an ongoing technical assistance and training program for grantees in communications, organizational development, and other capacity-building areas.

Additionally, SIF’s senior program staff offers **hands-on assistance** to grantees to help them develop and fund complex, tailor-made programs in each of their states. And because SIF staff are in continual contact with grantees, they are quickly able to identify and troubleshoot problems, including conflicts, funding setbacks, and/or programmatic complications.



An annual voting rights convening

The State Infrastructure Fund’s annual **Voting Rights Convening** brings together litigators, policy advocates, communications specialists, and funders to share information, brainstorm strategies, and explore opportunities to strengthen and integrate this work more deeply in states and nationally. A diverse group of grantees—including representatives from BIPOC-led civic engagement, voting rights, legal groups, civil rights, and “good government” organizations—also

participate, providing insights and recommendations about strategy and ways funding can have the most impact. The convening and additional webinars are coordinated by SIF's Senior Program Officer for Voting Rights, who works with a steering committee of diverse organizational leaders to set the agenda and select and lead discussion topics. The gathering has been instrumental in increasing the larger voting rights community's capacity to forge strong relationships between national and state partners, as well as share information and strategies across regions.



Donor assistance and philanthropic leadership

The State Infrastructure Fund plays a leadership role in the larger philanthropic arena by advocating for increased support for voting rights, and civic engagement and mobilizing funders around high-impact issues and investment opportunities. As a pooled fund, SIF gives funders the opportunity to leverage their resources for maximum impact and support initiatives they may not be able to fund directly.

SIF funders are also able to collaborate with their peers by sharing strategies and ideas, learning from each other, exploring best practices with experts in their fields, building relationships with colleagues and grantees, and ultimately, implementing a coordinated, well-executed voter engagement and voting rights funding strategy. For example, SIF organizes the **Collaborative Funds Alignment Group**—a coalition of collaborative funds working to align civic and voter engagement strategies that strengthen democracy and increase the impact of collaborative fund giving in the field. Members explore co-grantmaking opportunities and find ways to support each other in achieving different but interlocking goals.

SIF also offers funders personalized assistance that matches their interests with targeted funding opportunities. For example, SIF is creating a unique tool—the **Voter Engagement and Election Protection Gaps Analysis and Mapping Project**—that tracks funding gaps across Election Protection and voter engagement programs. This roadmap helps funders quickly see where their support will have the most impact.

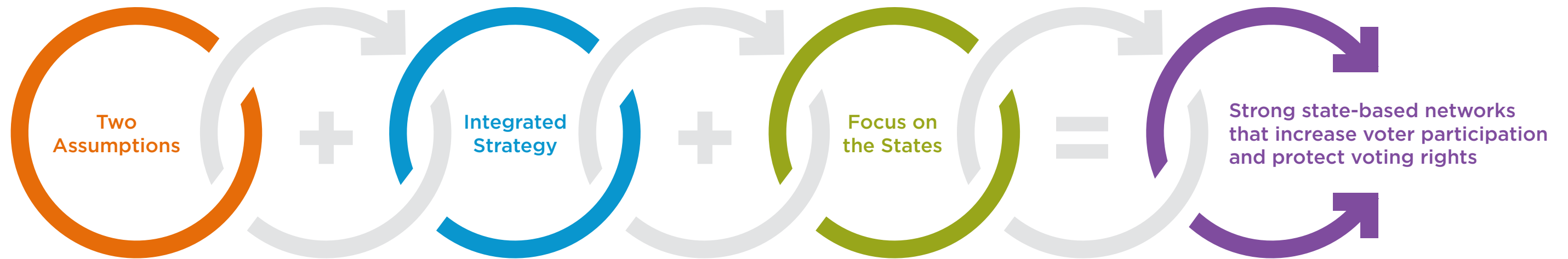


Data and evaluation

SIF has developed an internal evaluation framework that lays out four goals with corresponding outcomes and indicators. The quantitative and qualitative data being collected will demonstrate the growth and impact of grantees' work. Also, to ease grantees' data collection and reporting burden, SIF is working with the Collaborative Funds Alignment Group to develop shared proposal and report templates that can be submitted to multiple funders. To ensure that grantees have access to research on the most current best practices and tactics, SIF was a first funder of what has since become an annual report by the **Analyst Institute** that consolidates results from field experiments assessing the effectiveness of voter engagement and advocacy approaches. This aggregated data is synthesized for and available to funders and the larger field.

State Infrastructure Fund: Theory of Change and Strategy

MISSION: To increase voter participation and protect voting rights in historically underrepresented communities by building a permanent civic engagement and voting rights infrastructure on the ground.



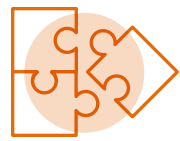
SIF's strategy is based on two assumptions:

These assumptions are the foundation for SIF's integrated strategy, which has two components:

The core of SIF's strategy is supporting state-based/focused organizations and networks:

Assumption 1

Voting is critical to positive community change. If people vote and elect representatives that share their values, they will have a stronger voice in decisions and issues that affect their communities.



Assumption 2

Even the most robust civic/voter engagement programs won't be successful if barriers to voting and suppressive tactics keep people from accessing the ballot box.



Year-Round Voter Engagement

SIF supports networks of organizations in states to increase voter participation rates in historically underrepresented communities by engaging people in year-round advocacy and organizing on issues they see as priorities. Communities also do voter education and mobilization, as well as challenge voter suppression. These efforts reinforce each other to create a seamless cycle of robust civic and political engagement.



These two components are not discrete. They are inextricably linked - a deeply integrated strategy that's necessary to increase voting and civic engagement among historically underrepresented communities.

Voting Rights and Election Protection

SIF supports organizations that are protecting and advancing the voting rights of historically disenfranchised communities year-round through litigation, monitoring, public education, organizing, and Election Protection programs that remove barriers to voting and advocate for equitable election reforms.



Focus on the States

Working with its grantees, SIF staff develops tailored state strategies that reflect their unique capacities, challenges and opportunities. State plans are grouped into three categories based on current capacity levels, funding needs and existing donors:

1. In states with **nascent** infrastructure, SIF provides grants and personalized technical assistance from its experienced program staff—who also serve as connectors and network-creators—to **strengthen** that infrastructure.
2. In states with **growing** civic engagement infrastructures and a history of SIF funding, SIF provides sustained funding and capacity-building to **deepen** that infrastructure.
3. In states with a **robust** infrastructure, SIF targets support to filling gaps or responding to challenges/opportunities as they arise to **protect** that infrastructure.

In 2010, SIF focused on a set of target states including those with low voting and high voter suppression rates among underrepresented groups. In 2018, SIF began focusing on three regions—the South, Southwest and Great Lakes—all of which have shifting populations and a history of entrenched racism, voter suppression and/or economic inequality.



SIF also provides support to **national and regional organizations** doing civic/voter engagement and voting rights work in states that helps groups forge stronger networks, collaborate on advocacy or issue organizing, litigate, and work in coalition to promote voter engagement and/or respond to voter suppression.



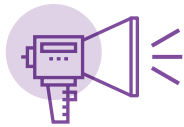
2020 RESULTS:



100M+

VOTER CONTACTS DURING 2020 ELECTION CYCLE

These were primarily BIPOC and low-propensity voters



SIF-supported national media campaign, "Your Voice is Your Vote," aimed at reaching BIPOC, disabled and low-propensity voters ages 18-55 in 13 states, had:

40M

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPRESSIONS

4.2M

PODCAST HITS

15.2M

BLACK RADIO LISTENS

45M

SPANISH IMPRESSIONS

\$56M

IN FUNDING TO

140

ORGANIZATIONS IN

17

STATES:

AL • AZ • CO • FL • GA • LA
MI • MS • MT • NV • NM • NC
OH • PA • TX • VA • WI



SIF-supported national media campaign, "Get the Facts," which featured celebrities and influentials providing information on all aspects of voting, had:

10M+

IMPRESSIONS

10M+

VIDEO PLAYS



To help grantees pivot from in-person canvassing to digital outreach, organizing and engagement due to COVID-19, SIF provided:

\$3M

IN TRAINING, COACHING,
CONTENT DEVELOPMENT/SUPPORT
AND INCREASED SMS CAPACITY TO

270

Individuals

- FROM -

150

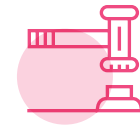
Orgs



2.3M+

NEW VOTERS

added to grantee contact universes through online town hall meetings and events



SIF-supported Litigation Collaborative—a coalition of 11 national civil rights organizations—took on

125+

VOTING RIGHTS CASES



Election Protection funding that supported 43 community field programs involving:

25,000+

Grassroots organizers and legal counsel

75+

Election-related litigation cases filed in 27 states and Puerto Rico

243,000+

Calls received* to hotlines in all 50 states that engaged 42,000 legal volunteers

* A 93% increase over 2016

The SIF Story: Patient Investment Pays Off

Ask the State Infrastructure Fund’s funders what makes this funding collaborative different from others, and nearly all will say that it *began* with a focus on building a strong infrastructure for voting and civic engagement in the states. This was a stark contrast to traditional civic engagement funding, which was driven by and disproportionately skewed to national organizations that often “parachuted in” to states to do voter registration and get-out-the-vote projects that left nothing behind to build upon when they left. That approach, says SIF Director Lisa Versaci, “wasn’t building the enduring machinery needed to sustain civic participation and voter turnout over time.” A small group of national democracy funders agreed.

In 2010, these funders set up SIF at NEO Philanthropy, a philanthropic intermediary known for its success in using state-based donor collaborative models to tackle other social justice issues. “NEO was a natural home for SIF,” says NEO’s Executive Director Michele Lord, “because we’d seen first-hand the powerful results that come from supporting state organizations and networks to advance an agenda and, ultimately, build a field that includes the entire ecosystem of groups in the states—not just national organizations—working together. We knew that this then-new fund could do the same thing for the democracy field.”

“

The results bear out that the groups SIF has been supporting are the ones other funders should support too because those grantees are taking care of business. And the community of funders has thoughtful conversations, which is a good way to get information and hear from grantees about the issues they’re facing in certain places.”

—A Senior Program Officer,
Open Society Foundations

State Tables to Coordinate State Civic Engagement Planning

A core part of SIF’s early grantmaking—and one that continues—was to support “state Tables.” These organizations, many of which are associated with a national umbrella organization State Voices, coordinate the activities of civic engagement groups in a state so they are strategically aligned, and their collective plans are designed to have the greatest impact. They provide space for organizations to build trust; gather and analyze program data; participate in trainings; co-create and align programs; and coordinate voter engagement and Election Protection plans across partner organizations. They also serve as organizing hubs for statewide redistricting efforts and voter protection programs, as well as regrant to partner groups to increase their capacity and strengthen coordinated efforts.

The *Shelby County v. Holder* Decision and SIF’s Deepening Commitment to Voting Rights

By 2013, SIF had given \$4 million in voter engagement grants to 36 organizations in 15 states. Most of these states had a long and deep history of voter suppression, as well as lower voter registration and turnout rates. That same year, the Supreme Court handed down its decision in

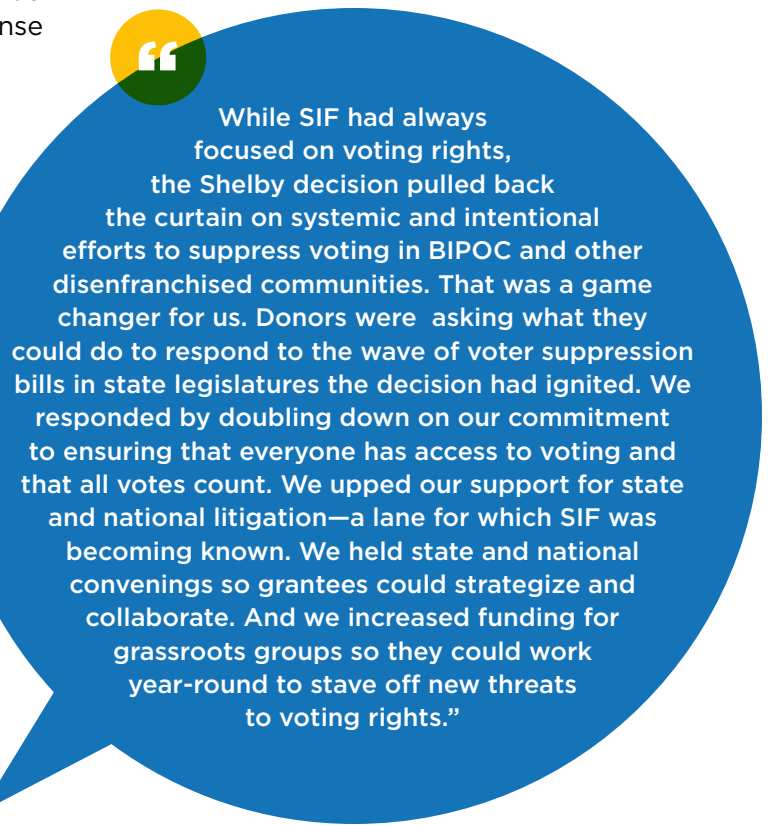
Shelby County v. Holder, which invalidated a decades-old “coverage formula” naming jurisdictions that had to pass federal scrutiny under the Voting Rights Act—referred to as “preclearance”—to pass any new elections or voting laws. Those jurisdictions were selected based on their history of racial discrimination in voting.

Shelby was an inflection point for SIF. “Donors were coming to us, very concerned, about this decision and the tidal wave of voter suppression laws that were being introduced in state legislatures,” Versaci says. An increasing number were small and/or state-focused foundations—a mix that allowed SIF to respond more effectively to this crisis, says Geri Mannion of Carnegie Corporation of New York—because “state donors had the chance to talk about work in their states to the national funding community, and national funders had the chance to learn about what was happening on the ground.”

SIF responded to the *Shelby* decision in a number of ways. First, it established the Shelby Response Fund, which would earmark funding to voting rights litigation groups for voter suppression cases and monitoring changes in states previously covered under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act (preclearance states). SIF also supported grantee-designed initiatives to help voters cast their ballots despite this new flood of voter suppression policies and tactics coming out of state legislatures.

Additionally, SIF created the Voting Rights Working Group, twelve national organizations that stepped in to do the election monitoring that the U.S. Department of Justice was no longer permitted to do because of the *Shelby* case. This included monitoring election-related changes and voter suppression in the states and helping state-based groups address those issues through litigation—something donor collaboratives had historically shied away. SIF, however, found that its litigation strategy was attracting funders “who saw this as a lane we were becoming known for,” says Versaci.

The alarming uptick in state voter suppression laws following the *Shelby* decision also solidified SIF’s commitment to a more integrated approach to this work. “For a long time, funders talked about civic engagement, voting rights, and voter protection as if they were all in different lanes doing different things when it’s often the same groups doing all of them. SIF understood the interconnectedness of all of these efforts from the beginning, which made them well positioned to take on the challenges the *Shelby* decision raised,” says Sue Van of the Coulter Foundation.



—Lisa Versaci, State Infrastructure Fund

Presciently, the Voting Rights Working Group was established before the 2016 election, when a new administration bent on destroying democratic norms, delegitimizing democratic institutions, and challenging the integrity of the vote came to power. Rather than being blindsided by this transition, SIF “was already positioned to fund groups on the ground so they could respond quickly and effectively because they’d already seen what was coming and were prepared,” says trellis stepter of the Mertz Gilmore Foundation.

SIF also launched its now-annual **Voting Rights Convening** to share best practices and facilitate more coordination in the voting rights field. One of the first major efforts of convening participants was developing the “Voting Rights Principles,” which provided guidance to funders on how to support voting rights more effectively.

Dedicated Senior Program Staff Hired to Firmly Ground SIF’s Strategy

In 2017, SIF brought on two full-time senior program staff members with years of experience in this field, which allowed SIF to offer more hands-on assistance to grantees and on-the-ground analysis for funders. Tanya Clay House would lead SIF’s Voting Rights and Election Protection programs, including coordinating the Voting Rights Working Group and organizing the annual Voting Rights Convening. Page Gleason would oversee SIF’s Voter Engagement and State Strategy work.

“These hires were a game changer in the field. They also enhanced donors’ perceptions of SIF,” Versaci says, “because we now had people from the field who were out talking directly with people on the ground doing the voting rights and civic engagement work. Funders were hungry for that kind of information, and we were able to provide it, making us more than just a funding mechanism. And grantees felt heard and understood.”

Strategic Planning Sharpens SIF’s Integrated Voter Engagement and Voting Rights Approach Grounded in Racial Equity

In 2018, State Infrastructure Fund staff and board members took a step back to reassess its strategy in light of the 2016 election, racial unrest, and increasing voter suppression. They decided to shift from focusing primarily on specific states to targeting three regions of the country. Two of these—the South and Southwest—continue to grapple with entrenched racism and institutionalized voter suppression. The third region, the Great Lakes, suffers from severe economic distress and a rapidly diversifying population that has exacerbated racial tensions and has become a new testing ground for voter suppression strategies, including large-scale, aggressive voter roll purges.

An important part of the strategic refresh was a sharper focus on racial equity, specifically, support for BIPOC-led organizations that authentically represented their communities. While SIF had always focused on racial equity and prioritized support for BIPOC-led groups in historically underrepresented communities, “this process moved us to be more intentional about that focus by building out networks on the ground that include organizations and communities that may not receive national or institutional funding,” says Angela Cheng of The JPB Foundation. “SIF’s staff have been particularly skilled at identifying these groups, developing those networks, and leading us to support new and important work we may not have known about otherwise.”

Alignment of Voter Engagement and Voting Rights Work in the States

As SIF progressed over the years, the work of its grantees—many of which were running a range of voter engagement, voter protection, and civic engagement programs—indicated a need for SIF to reflect how deeply entwined these issues are more clearly in its strategy. Voting is critical to positive community change, but if people don't understand the links between the issues affecting their daily lives and political processes—and don't have opportunities to address those issues through civic/political engagement—they'll be less likely to vote. Even the most robust civic/voter engagement programs won't be successful if barriers to voting and suppressive tactics keep people from accessing the ballot box.

As Senior Program Officer Tanya Clay House notes, “The right to vote—and not be discriminated against in doing so—is a core tenet of our American democracy and what gives every voter some form of power and control of what happens in their community. This is why there has always been a struggle to suppress the vote because it's easier to do this than educate the public about issues. We at SIF understand this dynamic which is why we believe in the criticality of removing barriers to the ballot box so voters can truly empower themselves and their communities.”

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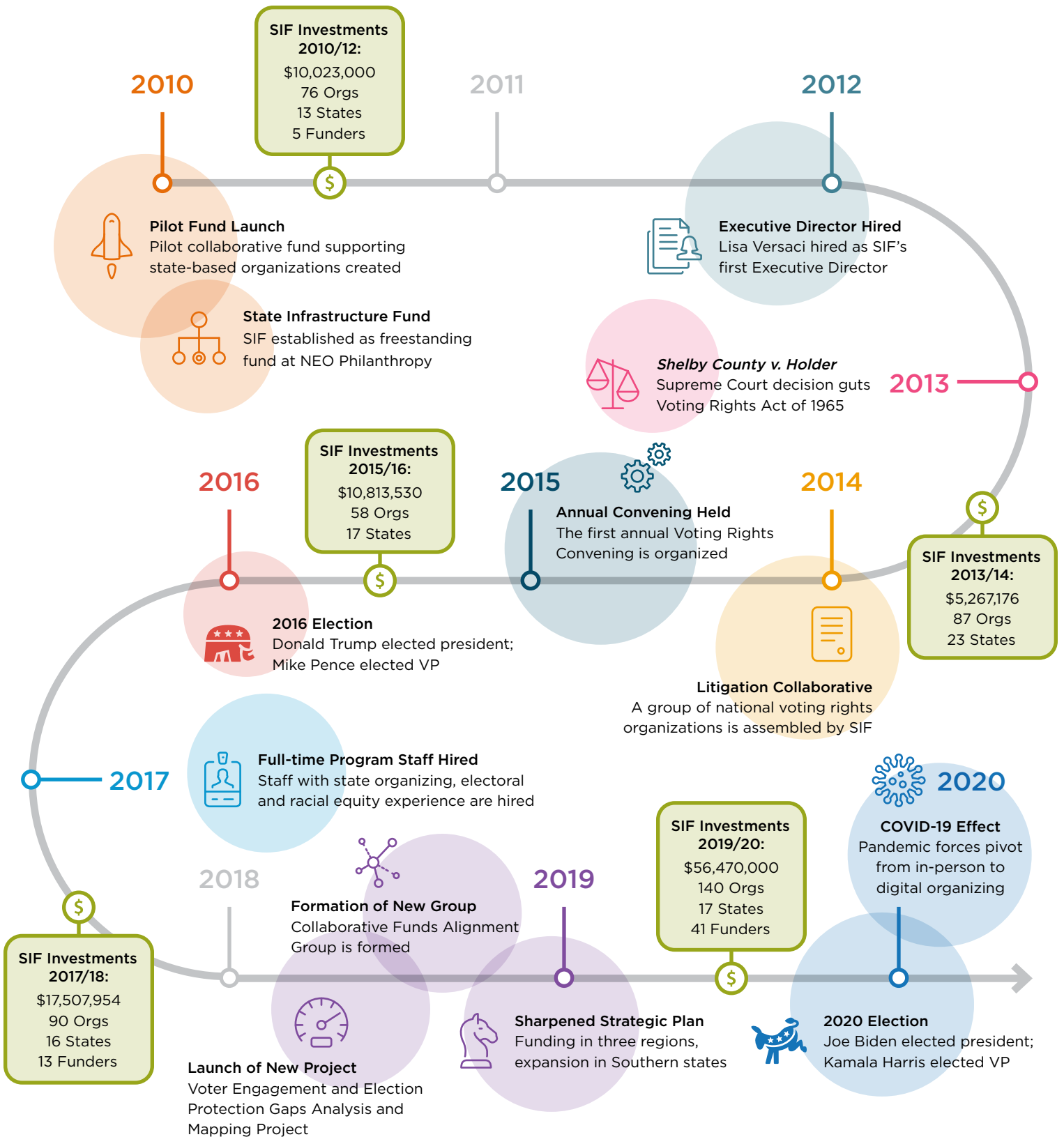
SIF allows my foundation to support many different organizations in different states without having to become an expert in each state. If you're a funder who cares about supporting smaller and national organizations, SIF is a good way to leverage your funding in one place versus having to manage grants for so many organizations, which is especially helpful to small foundations with little or no staff. Big foundations benefit too, though, because they're learning about state or local efforts that they may not hear about otherwise.”

—Angela Cheng, The JPB Foundation

Responding to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced SIF's grantees to limit their face-to-face interactions with voters, but they were still successful in making **1.3M door attempts** and having more than **765,000 conversations** with individuals to encourage them to vote. On average, **64%** of voters who were contacted by SIF grantees in person voted in the 2020 election. Phone calls played a much bigger role in SIF grantees' engagement and mobilization programs and led to higher contact rates, due to stay-at-home orders. SIF grantees made over **10.9M phone attempts** and had over **3M phone conversations** with voters. On average, over **65%** of those voters contacted by phone voted in the 2020 election. Similar to phone calls, text messages became a primary mode of communication for SIF grantees in reaching out to voters. Grantees sent over **23M text messages** to individuals in advance of the 2020 election, more than **55%** of whom voted.

SIF Timeline: 2010 – 2020



Commitment to Racial Equality and Justice

By Rinku Sen

In 2018, SIF undertook a strategic planning process that led to a reenergized and more explicit focus on racial equity and justice as key elements of a functional and fair democracy. While this focus has been a fundamental component of all SIF's efforts since its inception, growing calls for democracy funders to reevaluate that commitment in light of increasing racial unrest, inequities and voter suppression had become more urgent.

Some of those calls were coming from grantees and other community-based organizations that had been working on these issues for decades. During the past five years in particular, a wide range of multiracial organizers—as well as more traditional community organizations and networks—had been erasing the line between issue-based community organizing and civic engagement work by incorporating activities like voter registration and ballot initiative campaigns into their overall programming, reflecting a belief that elections matter.

In response, SIF launched a ten-month strategic direction-setting process that engaged both its staff and board in a thoughtful discussion, analysis, and review of new research, racialized trends in voting policies, regions of the country where voters of color were struggling for their rights, and the needs of BIPOC-led voting and democracy organizations. This deep dive led to several changes:

- Prioritizing racial equity and communities of color as criteria for determining which states would receive resources. This includes providing funds to smaller organizations that had had trouble accessing national funding in the past because they lacked the social capital or development resources to attract national funders.
- Explicit focus on Southern states, where Black-led community organizations have struggled with voter suppression since Reconstruction but have had little national investment.
- A more collaborative stance with grantees, who help shape SIF's strategy in specific states, as well as identify new organizations to fund.
- New progress and outcome metrics developed in partnership with the grantees.
- Addition of senior program staff with deep experience, relationships, and strategic skills stemming from their own long histories of racial equity and voting rights work.

SIF and its partners are committed not only to making these changes but to also continuously questioning and improving the organization's racial equity practices and perspectives. As one member notes, "There is no going back to a broad civic engagement strategy that does not have racial justice at its center because you can't have a democracy in America without it"—a view that philanthropists, organizers, candidates, and voters across the country have started to act on more intentionally.

“

There are a lot of donor collaboratives working on democracy issues, but SIF's focus on prioritizing communities of color as a major part of its strategy is what sets them apart. **You see it in their grantees, 83 percent of which are led by people of color.** Even during meeting calls, SIF is laser-focused on communities of color. The way they talk about this work is always with a racial justice lens.”

—Scott Moyer, Langeloth Foundation



Proof of Concept: GEORGIA

For many years, Georgia wasn't a state that national political operatives and party leaders deemed investment-worthy, nor did many foresee it becoming ground zero in deciding a presidency and Senate majority. But some activists and funders did, including the State Infrastructure Fund, which began supporting grassroots groups doing voter engagement and issue organizing in BIPOC and other underrepresented communities in 2013.

SIF's investment in Georgia sharply increased in 2017, with the addition of groups like the New Georgia Project, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (Atlanta), Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, and Black Voters Matter to its portfolio. Combined, these groups have been widely credited with increasing turnout over the past few years, especially Black, Latinx, Asian-American, and young voters. In November 2020, Georgia saw its highest turnout in 20 years. Voter turnout in the Georgia 2021 Senate runoffs, races that usually see extremely low turnout, was larger than the 2016 presidential election—an increase driven by people of color.⁸

The increased turnout wasn't a fluke: it was the culmination of years-long organizing led by these groups, especially ProGeorgia and the New Georgia Project, which orchestrated sophisticated large-scale voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts across the state.

For the State Infrastructure Fund, Georgia is proof that the strategy it adopted ten years ago gets results. A key element of this strategy is long-term, year-in and year-out investment that creates, builds, and sustains state-based infrastructures ready to take on a range of opportunities and challenges. That doesn't happen overnight, says Malika Redmond of Women Engaged. "Nonprofits doing this work need the breathing space to forge relationships with BIPOC communities to engage them on issues affecting them every day, not just before elections. They're trusted messengers who reduce the transactional nature of voting and make it more relational—something that's critical to building a strong civic infrastructure and keeping BIPOC voters civically engaged between elections."

Doing this well requires resources, and when SIF began funding in Georgia, most grassroots groups had few of them. In addition to lacking funds to hire staff or run programs at the scale they knew they could, they didn't have many opportunities for strategic collaboration and alignment. That changed when SIF and other funders like the Mary Reynolds Babcock and Sapelo Foundations stepped in, providing funds to grassroots nonprofits for sorely needed financial help, legal assistance, and communications tools.

A core part of the funders' strategy was creating a state Table. Planning for it began in 2011 with support from the executive director of the Sapelo Foundation and an Atlanta donor who had heard about the model and wanted to create one in Georgia. One year later, the state's first Table—ProGeorgia—was officially launched.

As ProGeorgia's first director, Page Gleason immediately began testing a strategy the group was considering by identifying a set of highly diverse voting precincts with similar demographics and doing coordinated outreach to a targeted group, using another that didn't have any contact as a control. The result: voter turnout in every one of the targeted precincts was higher than the control set, which "demonstrated that this model worked and laid the groundwork for a Table," Gleason says.

These efforts caught the eye of SIF staff, which made its first grant to ProGeorgia in 2013, “one of the first times a national funder paid attention to what was going on in our state,” Gleason says. “It took us to a whole new level and gave other national funders the confidence to follow suit. And it told us we could do this work the way we dreamed it should be done and couldn’t do before.”

In 2013, ProGeorgia broadened its scope to include municipal elections and down-ballot campaigns and created a work group to fight voter suppression and develop relationships with election officials. SIF supported both ProGeorgia and its work with members of the Voting Rights Working Group to challenge cuts to the in-person early voting period, bi-annual redistricting, and discriminatory voter registration policies. That ability to bring lawsuits in response to attempts to suppress the vote—and win—was a game changer in ProGeorgia’s ability to go toe-to-toe with those who wanted to make it harder for people of color to vote.

In 2016, ProGeorgia, its partners, and the New Georgia Project launched the most ambitious voter registration effort in the state’s history that registered more than 150,000 new voters. By 2017, ProGeorgia had 35 member organizations that were coordinating nearly all their efforts and achieving economies of scale that were unimaginable a few years before. That same year, Gleason moved to SIF as a senior program officer, and Tameika Atkins—ProGeorgia’s deputy director and founding director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (Atlanta)—took the reins, bringing extensive community organizing experience to the organization’s leadership.

In 2018, millions of voters were purged from the rolls—a textbook case of voter suppression and a “glimpse into the more novel voter suppression tactics that would be used in 2019 and 2020,” says SIF Senior Program Officer Tanya Clay House. SIF staff responded by working closely with groups on the ground and nationally to shore up the Election Protection infrastructure and move early funding to priority states, particularly Georgia because, Clay House says, “we knew Georgia would be ground zero some of the most potent voter suppression tactics.”

It also was a clarion call for ProGeorgia and its members, as well as other SIF-supported groups, to join forces and mobilize BIPOC and younger voters in preparation for the 2020 presidential campaign. During 2019-2020, SIF provided \$7.6 million to these organizations for coordinated action plans, voter suppression hotlines, misinformation reporting, and digital outreach strategies.

This work paid off. Roughly 76,000 new voters registered between the 2020 presidential election and the runoff, fewer than half of whom (46%) identified as White.⁹ And while runoff turnout usually wanes after general elections, the number of votes cast in the Senate run-off was at least 90%¹⁰ of the November turnout and larger than the turnout in the 2016 General Election.¹¹

“SIF’s ability to get in early with critical funding and consistently providing it was a major factor in winning those outcomes. SIF believed in this little scrappy group, opened doors for us, and helped set the path for it to become the powerhouse it has under Tameika’s leadership.

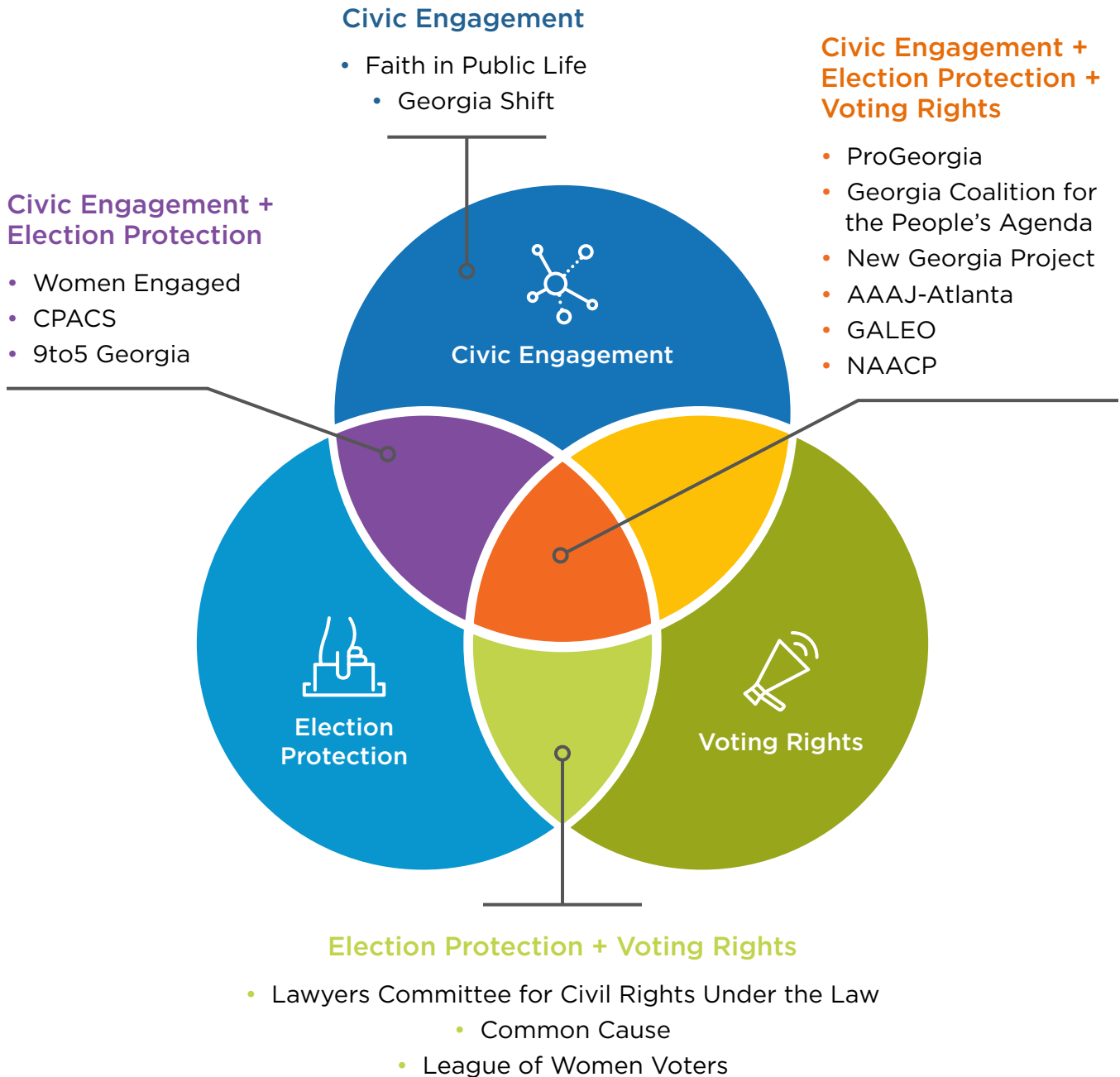
“

Without the kind of assistance SIF provides, we wouldn’t have been able to cover the large territory we do to protect people’s right to vote, monitor polls, or operate hotlines. SIF also supported our expansion. Today, we have seven offices with staff doing outreach to 88 surrounding counties.”

—Helen Butler, Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda

It's a powerful example of how all of this can come together with the right funding strategy," reflects Gleason. Helen Butler agrees: "SIF's support for the people doing this work 365 days a year—not just during a high-profile election time—is exactly the kind we need to ensure this work continues."

SIF Grantees in Action: GEORGIA



SIF Grantees in Action: ALABAMA

No place illustrates the fight for voting rights better than Alabama, a state with a history of segregation and voter suppression. Forty-eight years after Martin Luther King led the march from Selma to Montgomery that fueled passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that same law was decimated by a 2013 Supreme Court case originating from Alabama's Shelby County.

Four years later, Black voters responded to that decision by turning out in record-breaking numbers. This shift was widely credited to organizing by Black organizations that went beyond traditional get-out-the-vote campaigns to improving voter mobilization programs in ways that could be sustained through future elections.¹²

The bulk of these campaigns had been carried out by individual state/local nonprofits, but there was growing consensus among these groups that working in coalition would be more effective. While there was some interest in starting a state Table, there wasn't funding to get one off the ground. Even if there was funding, the investment would be risky, given Alabama's racist history.

The State Infrastructure Fund's experience in other Southern states suggested it was worth the risk. SIF funding had helped create Tables in North Carolina and Georgia that were growing in membership and political heft, and people were noticing. In 2019, SIF's senior program officers traveled to Alabama several times to lead strategy sessions to lay the groundwork for a Table there. One year later, SIF made a \$250K grant to launch that Table, now known as Alabama Forward. This support was part of a longer-term commitment SIF made that same year to the state, as well as others in the South with large Black populations and a history of underfunding for voting rights and voter engagement work.

That same year, SIF also supported the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Alabama to challenge voter intimidation through messaging campaigns, legislative advocacy, and hotlines that fielded 1,300 calls from Alabama voters seeking help. That support, says then-new Executive Director JaTuane Bosby, was "critical in building a coalition of national and state organizations advocating for affirmative policies that would expand voting rights over the long-term. Plus, our affiliate is small, and historically we hadn't received grants like this, which strengthened our ability to work across the state."

SIF Senior Program Officer Tanya Clay House agrees: "SIF's continual engagement and relationship building in Alabama allowed us to support the ACLU affiliate so they could coordinate with other Alabama-based organizations in implementing a coordinated Election Protection campaign. This kind of coordination in Alabama had not occurred in years."

Recently, Alabama Forward hired Evan Milligan, an organizer and lawyer who'd grown up in Alabama, as its first director. Under Milligan's leadership, Alabama Forward has already regranted \$300K to grassroots groups in the states—support made possible, in part, through SIF's funding. "That support has given our new state Table the leverage to approach other funders so that, ultimately, Alabama will have the civic infrastructure it needs and deserves," Milligan says.



SIF's support has given our new state Table the leverage to approach other funders so that, ultimately, Alabama will have the civic infrastructure it needs and deserves."

—Evan Milligan, Executive Director,
Alabama Forward

SIF Grantees in Action: PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania has long been unpredictable when it comes to presidential elections—one of the reasons it was part of SIF’s first grantmaking tranche ten years ago. That funding—which led to the creation of the state’s first Table, Pennsylvania Voice (PV)—“was critical,” says former founding Executive Director Erin Casey, “because there weren’t many in-state donors funding this work, let alone national ones like SIF. The grant attracted the attention and, later, the support of those in-state donors.”

Today, Pennsylvania Voice has more 44 organizational partners and multiple funders— including the Heinz Endowments, Chesapeake Bay Network, William Penn Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Everybody Votes Campaign—backing its efforts to build a data-informed civic engagement and democracy movement in 23 counties. The goal: to “create a democracy that works for everyone by changing systems rooted in racism that have been rigged against communities of color.” That mission emerged from an analysis that Pennsylvania Voice undertook in 2011 to assess the state’s electoral landscape, which showed BIPOC communities’ growth in every part of this Rust Belt state—not just major cities. Strengthening the nonpartisan political voices of these communities became the core of PV’s strategy, which emphasized “centering BIPOC voices at the Table and applying a racial equity lens to all the work Pennsylvania Voice does,” Casey says.

That same year, Pennsylvania Voice brought together policy and legal experts with grassroots organizations to challenge lawmakers who were proposing a restrictive voter ID plan and, ultimately, win in the courts. In 2019, Pennsylvania Voice’s nonpartisan Keystone Votes, a coalition of 38 organizations, helped advance updates to the state’s election law. PV also staffed Keystone Counts, the statewide hub for 2020 Census advocacy. In 2020, Pennsylvania Voice registered nearly 90,000 voters, made 3.7 million phone calls, sent 5 million texts, and knocked on 105,000 doors to provide voter resources to BIPOC households on the Census, voting rights, and the election.

With two other SIF grantees—One Pennsylvania, a statewide social change coalition, and Make the Road PA, which organizes working-class Latinx communities on social justice issues— Pennsylvania Voice conducted a demonstration experiment comparing the effectiveness of tablet versus paper ballots. The results were so successful, the project was designated as a “best practice” by the Analyst Institute, an evaluation firm that works with progressive organizations and campaigns. In 2021, Pennsylvania Voice will focus its efforts on redistricting to ensure that BIPOC communities are partners in drawing those maps.

“

SIF’s support was critical because there weren’t many in-state donors funding this work, let alone ones like SIF. The grant attracted the attention and, later, the support of those in-state donors.”

—Erin Casey, former Executive Director,
Pennsylvania Voice

SIF Grantees in Action: NEVADA

To say that the Latinx vote was the deciding factor in the 2020 election results across several states would be putting it mildly. Nationwide, Latinx voters cast 16.6 million votes, an increase of 30.9% over the 2016 presidential election, compared to 15.9% greater among voters of all races.¹³

One state, in particular, illustrated the power Latinxs bring to the ballot box in tight races: Nevada. According to Cecilia Alvarado, Nevada state director for Mi Familia Vota, a SIF grantee, “Nevada is a state where winning an election requires Latinos to close the deal. So, we need to make sure that everyone has the right information because it’s important for the Latino voice to be heard.”¹⁴

Mi Familia Vota is just one of several groups that has been registering and engaging Latinx voters for more than a decade. Many of these groups were—and continue to be—supported by SIF, which saw early on that a growing Latinx population and other communities of color, especially Asian and Native Americans, would eventually become a powerful voting bloc in the state.

SIF’s early funding helped to establish a state Table in Nevada called Silver State Voices (SSV), a coalition of 19+ organizations that has helped increase voter participation and civic engagement among Latinxs. In 2019—an off-year in the election cycle—SIF helped SSV, the Asian Community Development Council (ACDC), the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN), and other partners launch the largest mid-term voter education and mobilization program in their history. That same year, SSV successfully advocated for same-day and automatic voter registration, as well as a bill to restore voting rights to people with prior felony convictions.

These efforts paid off in 2020 when the Asian American/Pacific Islander community—the fastest-growing population in Nevada—turned out in record numbers to vote in the presidential election. Compared to 2016, this increase was more than double the AAPI early voting turnout and more than any other racial demographic in the state.^{15, 16}

Emily Zamora, Silver State Voice’s executive director, says that SIF has a special place in her heart because “they really came through for us at a time when we didn’t have a lot of funding.” This is very different, she says, from “what national organizations tend to do, which is parachute in and decide what the priorities are. The funding comes, but after the election is over, all the organizations and people being supported by it have to be let go, which doesn’t allow us any capacity to sustain and build for the next election.”

During 2021–2022, Silver State Voices will focus on increasing voter engagement among residents of underrepresented communities, ensuring Nevada voters have fair and accessible election administration systems, and supporting redistricting processes that accurately reflect the state’s diversifying population.

“

SIF...came through for us at a time when we didn’t have a lot of funding. That’s different from what national organizations tend to do, which is parachute in and decide what the priorities are. The funding comes, but after the election is over, the organizations and people being supported by it have to be let go, which doesn’t allow us any capacity to sustain and build for the next election.”

—Emily Zamora, Executive Director,
Silver State Voices

What Makes SIF Effective?

It provides sustained general operating support.

SIF provides year-round general operating funds aimed at creating a strong infrastructure for promoting and expanding civic and voter participation in communities across the country—over the long term, not just before high-profile elections. SIF also has the capacity to provide rapid response funding to address urgent needs or challenges.

It offers more than money.

SIF provides capacity-building assistance; site visits; funder briefings; troubleshooting; and coordination among funders, grantees, and national organizations working on these issues.

It focuses on communities of color and historically underrepresented constituencies.

This focus allows SIF to identify and support leaders and organizations that have traditionally been overlooked or underfunded, rather than the “usual suspects,” and take the kind of risks that bring new voices to the table.

It employs a state-based strategy...

SIF directs resources strategically to key states and regions where economic and social difficulties, as well as entrenched racism, have contributed to voter suppression and disengagement.

It then works with organizations on the ground to develop tailor-made strategies that align with each state’s specific needs and challenges.

...but also supports national organizations working in states tackling voting rights issues.

By supporting groups at both levels, national organizations learn what’s happening on the ground, and state/local groups hear what’s happening at the national level. This reciprocal learning process strengthens field-wide advocacy, capacity building, and effectiveness and reinforces SIF’s coordinated and collaborative strategy through its grantmaking.

Its deeply experienced program staff provide hands-on support to—and work as partners with—grantees.

SIF’s staff and leadership have deep knowledge of the state/local landscapes; considerable expertise and experience, including in racial equity and justice issues; and strong relationships with state-based organizations and networks that contribute to more effective capacity building, sharper analyses, and successful strategies.

It uses a comprehensive approach to civic engagement and voting rights.

SIF’s strategy and funding are rooted in a holistic view of civic engagement that integrates voter engagement (registration, get-out-the-vote, community leadership, and issue organizing) and voting rights (voter suppression/access programs and advocacy, Election Protection, policy reform, litigation, and communications).



SIF has the right strategy. They go to the communities and support the people who are working in the community every day, not just during high-profile elections.”

—Helen Butler, Georgia Coalition for the People’s Agenda

“We Don’t Fund Democracy...”

Ask any funder that says their foundation “doesn’t give grants for democracy” why they don’t, and they’ll most likely say they’re more focused on issues like health care, education, fill-in-the-blank. But they should, say SIF funders, some of whom were also not funding democracy before they joined the Fund. “We aren’t a civic engagement foundation,” says the executive director of a family fund, “but we got involved with the State Infrastructure Fund because we started to see that the issues we were focusing on were part of a larger ecosystem where those issues were playing out. We saw if we wanted to move the issues we cared about, we needed to support efforts to get people engaged enough to advocate for them. SIF was able to provide us with that kind of funding mechanism.”

The Langeloth Foundation, says President Scott Moyer, had also never been a “democracy funder,” but instead focused on gun violence. “Then the Parkland shooting happened, and we started seeing people getting involved in marches and organizing activities around this issue. That pushed us to understand that the issues we cared about tended to involve people most excluded from the democratic processes and affected by the structural issues that allow gun violence to exist.”

Awareness that “there’s no avenue to success on any specific issue—whatever one your foundation or donor cares about—without a civic engagement investment behind it,” Scott Nielsen, a founding SIF funder, says is evidenced in the uptick in SIF’s membership in recent years. “We’ve seen an increase in the number of donors who care about issues like climate, immigration, and health care joining the Collaborative Fund because they’re seeing the links between their issues and elections,” says Geri Mannion of Carnegie Corporation of New York. That’s important, says philanthropic advisor Mary Jo Mullan, because “if you ever want to get to scale, you need policies in place and to ensure effective policies, you need voter engagement, no matter what the issue.”

And it’s not just about voting. “Funders will never win on their issues unless they do something about democracy, but that goes way beyond elections,” says trellis stepter of the Mertz Gilmore Foundation. “It’s understanding how policies and elections impact real people’s everyday lives, especially people of color and other disenfranchised groups who need to be engaged beyond voting if they’re going to see change in their communities.” That holistic view of democracy, says Sue Van of the Coulter Foundation, “is what makes SIF different. They understand the interconnected nature of voting and other kinds of civic engagement and how that leads to greater impact.”

The bottom line, Moyer says, is that no matter what issue funders are supporting, “it’s all about people having a say in what happens in their communities, and that rests on having a strong democratic process in place. And not knowing what democracy organizations to invest in isn’t an excuse for not doing it because the State Infrastructure Fund exists to help funders do that, and they’re very good at it.”

“

There’s no avenue to success on any specific issue—whatever one your foundation or donor cares about—without a civic engagement investment behind it.”

—Scott Nielsen,
Founding SIF Funder

What Funders Get from Participating in SIF

SIF provides a range of collaborative opportunities for new and existing funders to support civic engagement and voting rights, including litigation. Funders point to several advantages to joining SIF, especially the chance for funders to have the kind of deeper impact and broad reach that would have been impossible individually. SIF also offers funders a place for strategic learning and relationship building with their peers, experts, and grantees, and above all, a smart, coordinated, and proven platform for strategic investment.

Specific ways funders say their participation in SIF adds value to their work include:



Track Record

As the most established civic engagement and voting rights collaborative fund in the country, SIF's growth during its first decade and track record engenders confidence and commitment among its donor members and the larger field.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"SIF has a strong track record ensuring that funds are effectively deployed. Last year, I recommended a set of grants to a donor-advised fund with which I work. Based on SIF's efficient system and track record in effectiveness, the recommendation was quickly approved. Word of mouth about SIF's ability to get results reached other donors with whom I work, and they became interested in joining SIF. In fact, it was originally my colleague Geri Mannion at Carnegie Corporation of New York, who tuned me into SIF's highly successful approach. Word continues to get out about SIF's success."

—Mary Jo Mullan, Philanthropic/Donor
Advised Fund Consultant



Strategy

The State Infrastructure Fund's creative and entrepreneurial approach melds funders' individual goals and priorities with a larger and cohesive long-term strategy that is more than the sum of its parts.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"SIF's integrated approach moves us away from a tendency to see issues like voting and civic engagement as siloed and, instead, see them within the whole democracy ecosystem and what is possible. That's critical because people need to be engaged beyond voting if they're going to see real changes in their communities. It also gives us funders a chance to align our individual investments with larger strategy because dividing up democracy in issue buckets isn't effective. Each of us have pieces, but SIF provides us with the larger frame we need to be more effective."

—trellis stepter,
Mertz Gilmore Foundation



A focus on BIPOC and historically underrepresented constituencies

SIF is one of the few donor democracy collaboratives that prioritizes communities of color and other disenfranchised constituencies—and uses a racial equity/justice lens—in efforts to increase civic participation, reduce voter suppression and support policy reforms that engage and empower communities of color.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“SIF is one of the only funder collaboratives that invests in strengthening democracy in BIPOC and other underrepresented communities that are heavily disenfranchised and increasingly targeted for voter suppression. That focus has been there since SIF began, but its commitment to and experience in supporting local and state engagement in states where we know voters are being targeted, continues to make it truly unique in the democracy funding arena.”

—Scott Moyer, Langeloth Foundation



Learning

SIF offers peer-to-peer-learning for members who participate in regular conference calls and meetings to discuss emerging issues, strategic plans, and specific funding recommendations.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“SIF provides so many opportunities for funders to convene, talk about the issues, and share ideas—those forums are so valuable to me, not only for the knowledge I gain but for the relationships I’ve developed with peers over the years. It’s not always about the grantmaking; it’s about the community of funders SIF has built.”

—Angela Cheng, The JPB Foundation



Knowledge and Expertise

As established leaders in the civic engagement, voting rights, and philanthropic fields, SIF’s program staff provide detailed and strategic analyses of the state and national landscape for funders, including a dedicated “donor portal” and mapping that identifies where funding will have the most impact.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“SIF’s trusted staff has deep knowledge and first-rate expertise about democracy and civic engagement issues and the landscape, especially at the state and local levels, which not only gave me the opportunity to invest wisely but to better formulate my strategic thinking going forward.”

—Sue Van, Coulter Foundation



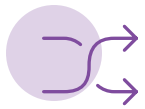
Leverage

The State Infrastructure Fund brings more resources to critical issues by leveraging and aligning the investments of state and national funders and other collaborative funds.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“SIF gives us the chance to align our individual institutions’ investments with a larger, more comprehensive strategy. They understand that our impact will be greater if we work together as a group, decide on the things that should be funded and set them up for success, rather than taking a chance on good things that are only partially resourced and fall flat.”

—Anonymous Donor



Efficiency and Flexibility

SIF’s flexible and responsive funding mechanism allows national funders to not only make more targeted grants in multiple geographies but to do so rapidly and responsively—something for which most larger foundations aren’t structured.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“SIF has the flexibility and ability to make grants quickly. If something happens in states, they can get out an email to or talk on the phone with grantees immediately. They then communicate that information—what’s happening on the ground and what folks need—to the funders. And they coordinate a discussion about where funding is needed and how much. There is no question that responding quickly and thoughtfully to challenges and opportunities is one thing SIF does really well.”

—Senior Program Officer,
Open Society Foundations



National/State Funding Connections

Through their SIF membership, national funders have the chance to support state-level work that they may not know about or be able to fund directly, and state funders are able to see how the efforts they’re supporting are part of a national movement.

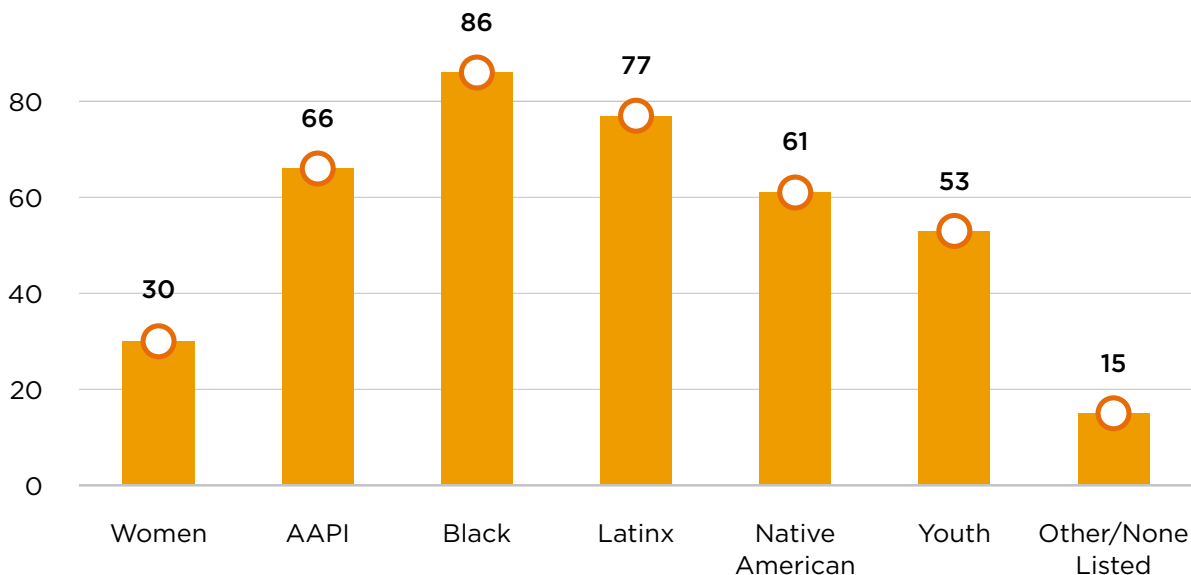
IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“National funders often don’t know the organizations doing the best work in states, and state organizations ‘often don’t have access to national funders. SIF links the two.’ SIF allows national funders to support organizations in a number of states, so they don’t have to become an expert in—or develop a separate strategy for—each state. And they give groups on the ground instant visibility, validation, and credibility with national funders who’d never know they existed otherwise.”

—Geri Mannion,
Carnegie Corporation of New York

CONSTITUENCIES SERVED

A recent survey of SIF grantees asking them to identify their primary constituencies found that nearly all worked with multiple groups.



Going Forward: What's Next for SIF?

Increasing threats to democracy, as well as a pandemic that illuminated deep economic and racial inequities, were clearly major factors in pushing millions of voters to the polls in 2020. What isn't as clear is whether that participation will continue, especially when there is still relatively little financial support for community-based efforts such as organizing, volunteering, advocating for policies benefitting BIPOC and other historically underrepresented groups, and others that keep people engaged in civic life beyond high-profile elections .

During the past decade, SIF has been a catalytic force for strategically and consistently investing in the state-level groups doing this work every day. And the results—including a steady increase in voter participation by young and BIPOC voters and a burgeoning infrastructure in 17 states that supports that participation—speak for themselves.

It's not a time for complacency, though. As SIF's Tanya Clay House notes, "While voter suppression, intimidation, and discrimination were more closely tracked and reported during the last election, thanks to the work that SIF's grantees have been doing for ten years, they didn't disappear and will continue to be major barriers to ensuring that everybody's vote counts." Proof of that is in the backlash to the 2020 election results in many states, including a raft of proposed laws and regulations designed to suppress voter participation in BIPOC communities—the bulk of which are being introduced in state legislatures. As of June 2021, six lawsuits (all of which involve SIF grantees and Voting Rights Working Group members) have been filed in Georgia in response to these legislative bills, with more expected to follow in other states as the 2021 state legislative season continues.

Perhaps one of the most important challenges SIF and its grantees will face in the coming year is building trust in the democratic systems and institutions that have been badly damaged from a relentless onslaught of misinformation and partisanship. That kind of trust is only built through strong relationships—the kind that SIF's grantees have been forging for decades in BIPOC communities. It also requires a commitment to helping grassroots organizations ramp up their communications capacity to combat escalating disinformation campaigns—something that has been an integral part of SIF's grantmaking since its inception.

Trust, however, can be easily broken—something that those in power have historically counted on as the basis for instituting discriminatory, racist, and inequitable policies and processes that target BIPOC communities disproportionately. And those efforts are escalating, led by those who want to suppress the vote and return to the days of Jim Crow.

That's why SIF remains steadfastly committed to mitigating these threats to voters, their communities, and, ultimately, the democratic process by supporting BIPOC-led organizations that have historically been under-capitalized and overlooked by institutional and individual funders. As Angela Cheng of The JPB Foundation, notes: "These are the organizations that are working the hardest with the least resources but facing the biggest challenges. It's important that their voices are heard and votes counted because they provide the best and first line of defense in protecting our democracy."

“

Despite the progress SIF grantees have made in responding to voter suppression, intimidation, and discrimination, the backlash to the 2020 election has exploded, with a raft of new laws and regulations designed to suppress BIPOC voter participation. SIF's strategic, continual, and comprehensive support will be essential to ensuring that everybody's vote—especially the votes of those who've been historically disenfranchised—counts.”

—Tanya Clay House,
State Infrastructure Fund

State Infrastructure Fund Current Grantees

482Forward
9to5 Georgia
AAPI Civic Engagement Fund
AAPI Vote
ACLU Nevada
Alabama Forward
Alliance for Youth Organizing
Alliance of Families for Justice
American Association for People with Disabilities
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
American Oversight Committee
Andrew Goodman Foundation
Arizona Advocacy Foundation
Arizona Coalition for Change
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles
Asian Community Development Council (ACDC)
Black Leaders Organizing for Communities (BLOC)
Black Men Build
Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute
Blueprint North Carolina
Brennan Center for Justice
Campaign Legal Center
Capturing the Flag
CASA Pennsylvania
Center for Civic Policy
Central Arizonans for a Sustainable Economy (CASE)
Chispa Arizona
Chispa Nevada
Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund
Civic Tennessee
Colorado Civic Engagement Roundtable
ColorofChange.org Education Fund
Common Cause Education Fund
Center for Pan Asian Community Services (CPACS)
Democracy North Carolina
Dēmos
Detroit Action
Ethnic Media
Fair Elections Center
Faith in Public Life
Faith Organizing Alliance
Florida Rights Restoration Coalition
Florida State Voices
For Our Future Education Fund
Forward Montana
Freedom Inc.
Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials (GALEO)
Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda
Georgia Shift
Headcount
Hip Hop Caucus Education Fund
Hometown Outreach Fund
InterTribal Council of Arizona
iVote Civic Education Fund
Latino Justice/PRLDEF
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT)
League of Women Voters
Make the Road Pennsylvania
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
Michigan Civic Education Fund
Michigan Liberation Education Fund

State Infrastructure Fund Current Grantees

Michigan Voice
Mississippi Votes
Missouri Voter Protection Coalition
Montana Voice
MOVE Texas
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund
NALEO Educational Fund
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation
Native American Rights Fund
Native American Rights Fund (NARF)
North Carolina A. Philip Randolph Institute (NCAPRI)
New Era Colorado
New Florida Majority Education Fund
New Georgia Project
New Virginia Majority Education Fund
New Voices for Reproductive Justice
Nonprofit Vote
Ohio Organizing Collaborative
Ohio Student Association
Ohio Voice
OLÉ Education Fund
One Arizona
One Pennsylvania
One Voice
Opportunity Agenda
Organize Florida Education Fund
Organizing Empowerment Fund
Pennsylvania Voice
People for the American Way Foundation
People's Action Institute
Poder Latinx
Power Coalition
ProGeorgia State Table
Progress Now Michigan
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN)
Project Pulso
Push Black
RePower Fund
Rethink Media
Rock the Vote
South Carolina Progressive Network
Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition (SEAMACC)
Silver State Voices
Skinner Institute
Sojourners
Southern Coalition for Social Justice
Southern Echo
Southside Organizing Center
State Voices
Step Up Louisiana
Texas Civil Rights Project
The Ordinary People Society (TOPS)
Together Wisconsin
Transformative Justice Coalition
Verified Voting Foundation
Virginia Civic Engagement Table
Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)
Vote America
Vote.org
Voter Participation Center
VotER Project
Voto Latino
We the People
Western Native Voice
Wisconsin Voice
WISDOM
Women Engaged
Women with a Vision
WORC Education Project

Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 <https://circle.tufts.edu/2020-election-center>
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- 6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/politics/georgia-democrats-black-women.html>
- 7 The group included Lisa Versaci (Committee on States), Geri Mannion (Carnegie Corporation of New York), Allison Barlow (HKH Foundation), Scott Nielsen (McKay Family Foundation), Frank Smith (Bauman Foundation) and Michele Lord (NEO Philanthropy).
- 8 <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/blog/who-voted-in-georgias-runoff-elections>
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-democrats-won-the-georgia-runoffs/>
- 11 <https://www.axios.com/georgia-runoff-turnout-black-vote-5011009f-ed3b-4520-8b3c-e9217db59afc.html>
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- 13 <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/latino-vote-analysis-2020-presidential-election>
- 14 <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/latino-voters-could-swing-nevada-they-worry-their-ballots-won-n1241908>
- 15 <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/growing-progressive-force-in-the-electorate-aapi-voters-turn-out-at-higher-rates-than-2016>
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STATE
INFRASTRUCTURE
FUND

<https://neophilanthropy.org/collaborative-funds/state-infrastructure-fund/>