

Integrated Voter Engagement

A Proven Model to Increase Civic Engagement

A Case Study

The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Leadership Development and the Role of Immigrants in Integrated Voter Engagement

When the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) began its nonpartisan voter engagement work in 2004, a consultant advised the group to recruit people from out of town to conduct its voter outreach, because these out-of-towners would work around the clock without friends and family nearby to distract them. ICIRR took this advice in 2004 and was successful at one level: the organization registered 27,000 new immigrant voters.

But the day after the election, only two of the organizers remained in Chicago. When the rest left town, the skills they learned and the relationships they developed were no longer available to help advance ICIRR's issue campaigns and involve voters in future election cycles. ICIRR decided it would do things differently when the next election cycle rolled around. It had learned a basic principle of Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE): the most effective way to increase civic participation over time is for local people, not outsiders, to reach out to their peers.

About ICIRR

The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights is one of the preeminent organizations representing immigrant communities. Founded in 1986, ICIRR is a coalition of 160 groups in metropolitan Chicago, including health, human service, labor, community and ethnic organizations. It has a staff of 18 and a budget of \$2 million. ICIRR works at local, state, and national levels, addressing immigrant empowerment, citizenship, and integration issues.

Through its New Americans Democracy Project, ICIRR successfully engaged citizen immigrant voters in the 2004, 2006 and 2008 election cycles. By fall 2008, it had registered more than 78,000 new voters, and made contact with 95,748 voters of immigrant background. In addition, ICIRR helped 34,255 legal permanent residents fill out their applications to become U.S. citizens, contributing to a 56% increase in citizenship applications from the Chicago area.

In this case study, we will focus on two aspects of the organization's work: leadership development and the role of immigrants in IVE.

Immigrants and Voter Engagement

With more than 1.7 million foreign-born residents, representing approximately 20% of the city's population, Chicago is one of the top five U.S. metropolitan areas in terms of the size of its immigrant population. Moreover, Chicago's immigrants are a diverse group, coming from more than one hundred countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America. When you also count U.S.-born children of immigrants, the total immigrant family population is more than 3 million, roughly 37% of the metropolitan Chicago population.

ICIRR has become an acknowledged force in creating political power for Chicago's immigrant constituents through IVE. To succeed, ICIRR had to bridge the diversity of its immigrant communities, including differences in nationality, language, and economic and legal status. ICIRR's challenge was to unite immigrant communities despite their divisions, overcome feelings of powerlessness, and convert potential fissures or weaknesses into

actual strength. Under the inclusive overarching message “Participate – Become a Citizen – Vote,” ICIRR developed distinct voter engagement strategies in eight different languages aiming at four subsets of the immigrant community, each with differing legal status.

The first two groups that ICIRR targets are naturalized citizens and U.S.-born children of immigrants, because these groups are already eligible to register and vote. Naturalized citizens are likely to cherish their hard-won status and vote at higher rates than native-born citizens. ICIRR’s voter registration and mobilization efforts target the 700,000 naturalized citizens in the Chicago area. ICIRR’s voter education efforts target this group as well as the 1.5 million children of immigrants who are eligible to vote once they become 18 years old.

ICIRR’s third target group is the population of legal residents, who generally hold what are known as ‘green cards.’ ICIRR encourages and assists legal residents to apply for citizenship, offering citizenship schools that teach immigrants what they need to know to become citizens and eligible voters, and guiding them through the necessary steps and paperwork.

Lastly, ICIRR targets undocumented immigrants. The people in this group are often highly politicized and interested in fighting for basic rights, but they are politically invisible and insecure, and are not eligible to vote. To promote widespread participation without fear, ICIRR volunteers are not asked about citizenship status. Undocumented immigrants therefore feel free to volunteer in all ICIRR programs. Though not able to vote themselves, they encourage civic participation and citizenship among eligible family and community members.

Many immigrant families have members with differing immigration status living in the same home. ICIRR’s multi-pronged strategy enables it to interact appropriately with all members of a mixed status household. For instance, when ICIRR’s outreach workers come across legal permanent residents who can’t yet vote, they invite them to participate in the citizenship program. As Executive Director Joshua Hoyt explained, “The key to our election strategy is helping *legal permanent residents* become citizens, and mobilizing to vote *naturalized immigrants*, who are citizens, plus *U.S.-born children*, who are also citizens. If only one-third of immigrants can vote – why pay attention? But if taken together with their children, they number 2.2 million people eligible to vote – that’s a lot of voters.” The group’s IVE work, funded with both 501(c)3 nonpartisan and 501(c)4 lobbying dollars, has helped pass significant legislation, including the creation of a robust state program to promote citizenship and invest public resources in immigrant communities and organizations. ICIRR continues to help lead and strengthen this program.

Leadership Development

Learning from its first successful voter engagement effort in 2004, ICIRR realized it needed to train local people, not outsiders, to do voter contact work during the 2006 election. ICIRR recruited and trained 18 bilingual immigrants and children of immigrants as New American Democracy Fellows, who were based in local neighborhood organizations, mosques and churches. Rather than conducting all of the voter engagement work themselves, each fellow recruited and trained 50 to 100 immigrant community members. The community members formed door knocking teams in 15-20 different precincts where they registered new voters, educated new and infrequent voters about where and how to vote, and encouraged voters to go to the polls on election day. As a result, ICIRR and its member groups had 1,500 local voter engagement volunteers on the street in 2006.

All ICIRR fellows attended a week-long intensive program where they were trained in both community and nonpartisan electoral organizing principles and practices. The curriculum and some of the trainers were drawn from well-regarded organizing and electoral training groups, including the Midwest Academy, Wellstone Action, and the Center for Community Change. ICIRR staff met with the fellows regularly throughout the election cycle to provide follow-up training and support.

ICIRR ran a companion less-intensive training program called the Democracy School for 400 of the most promising volunteer leaders recruited by the fellows. For one full Saturday each month, these leaders received

training in nonpartisan electoral organizing and had opportunities to meet with elected officials. In exchange, leaders committed to volunteer for six hours each week on issue education or voter mobilization. These leaders became the volunteer backbone of the campaign, essentially working as area coordinators or precinct captains supervised by the Democracy Fellows.

This intentional focus on leadership development proved successful for ICIRR. With more and better-trained staff and leaders working with longer-term commitments to the community, ICIRR's voter engagement program in 2006 was very successful. For the immigrant rights movement this investment in leadership development was particularly striking and continued to pay off long after Election Day. Twelve of the 18 fellows continue to work as full-time organizers for immigrant groups in the area and more than half of the leaders who attended the Democracy School participated in ICIRR's post-election issue campaigns to advocate for federal comprehensive immigration reform and a state drivers' certificate bill. In addition, almost all the leaders who participated in the Democracy School continue to use their leadership skills in the community and religious groups from which they were recruited. These trained organizers and leaders put ICIRR at a significant advantage going into the 2008 election cycle.

Leadership development is one of the key characteristics that distinguishes Integrated Voter Engagement from other models of voter work. Mehrdad Azemun, ICIRR's Organizing Director, explained:

Leadership development is the lifeblood of any organization that is serious about justice. Helping leaders grow and learn new skills – doing that continuously and doing it well, and now integrating it into the electoral cycle – is crucial to what we do. It is the way that people realize the sense of their own power. It is how change happens.

Outcomes of ICIRR's Voter Engagement Program

The effectiveness of ICIRR's IVE program is manifest in the success the organization has had mobilizing voters, gaining visibility for key issues, winning policy victories for the immigrant community, and developing new organizational capacity.

By electoral measures alone, the New Americans Democracy Program yielded significant results. Fellows were held accountable for high performance goals, and registrations were collected door-to-door, at sites where members of the community congregated, and through family and community networks. ICIRR registered more than 27,000 new voters in 2004, and more than 16,000 in 2006 – a year without a presidential election and thus with less funding and community interest in voter engagement work. Detailed reporting for 2006 showed that ICIRR had 144,875 direct voter contacts in 357 precincts, more than 300 trained volunteer organizers and 1,552 all-day volunteers on Election Day, and 39 lawyers ready to solve voting problems. Turnout rose substantially in many of the immigrant communities where the program did its most intensive work. All of this work was nonpartisan.

Other measures further indicate the program's effectiveness. In the 30 months beginning in February 2005, ICIRR directly assisted more than 29,000 legal permanent residents in filing citizenship applications. In 2006, ICIRR trained more than 2,500 naturalization volunteers. It helped organize one of the largest marches in the country during the immigrant mobilizations in the spring of 2006. The group then organized a mass demonstration over Labor Day, leading marchers on a four-day trek from Chinatown to U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert's office outside of Chicago to urge him to support comprehensive immigration reform - and garnering four days of excellent press.

The success of ICIRR's voter engagement work contributed significantly to the organization's success in moving its issue agenda forward. For fifteen years ICIRR has worked on a bill to promote drivers' certificates to allow immigrants to drive and hold car insurance regardless of immigration status. For the first time, the bill passed the Illinois House in 2007, and came up just two votes shy in the Senate. Support for the bill is increasing,

and ICIRR hopes to see it pass soon.

More recently, through its combination of community and electoral organizing, ICIRR successfully advocated for legislation establishing the We Want to Learn English Initiative. Looking ahead, ICIRR will now shift its effort to winning \$25 million to fund the program.

ICIRR's voter engagement work helped change the political climate on immigrant issues in Illinois during a time when there has been a significant backlash against immigrants nationally. No anti-immigrant legislation has passed in Illinois in the last few years, while at the same time the state increased funding for citizenship, preschool and children's health care programs that include undocumented immigrant children, and a day labor protection act. The governor signed the groundbreaking New Americans' Executive Order, which created a proactive planning process for the integration of immigrants into the state's civic and economic life. There is a state-supported citizenship program. A local newspaper called Illinois "the most immigrant friendly state in the country."

Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez (D-IL) explained the impact that ICIRR and its Integrated Voter Engagement program have had in Illinois:

During the past six years, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights has emerged as a vehicle for countless individuals to realize the American dream, by increasing immigrant naturalization opportunities, stimulating voter participation, and winning support for humane immigration policies. The results are helping us change the political landscape in Illinois every day and improve conditions for immigrants throughout the state.

Postscript 2008

In 2008, ICIRR expanded its immigrant voter engagement work. The group reported registering 25,804 new immigrant voters, targeting 144,277 immigrant voters in Get Out The Vote efforts, knocking on 212,091 doors, and making 57,831 phone calls, all in more precincts – 694 — than ever before. ICIRR organizers also made better use of voter databases, and improved training and support for the American Democracy Fellows.

According to Hoyt, "This was the first time the overall voter program was of such scale that elected officials really had to take it into account." U.S. Senator Richard Durbin attended a rally that kicked off ICIRR's election organizing campaign, and Mayor Richard Daley, state Attorney General Lisa Madigan, and U.S. Rep Gutierrez attended a rally in the week before the election. As SEIU's website Progressive Illinois described it, "This impressive roster is a testament to how ICIRR has outgrown its origins as a small coalition of Chicago nonprofits and emerged as an electoral force and a leader in the nation's immigration debate."

By Lee Winkelman, based on research and writing by Jeff Malachowsky.

LEGAL NOTES

1. Voter registration – Some funders who wish to support nonpartisan voter registration, in particular private foundations, need to follow special guidelines. One important rule specifies that private foundations can only fund voter registration drives conducted by certain public charities that work in at least 5 states (known in the tax code as '4945f organizations'). The registration groups featured in the case studies can all be supported through general support grants to the groups themselves, or through grants to 4945(f) organizations with which they are affiliated. In ICIRR's case, this is the National Center for Community Change, and its Community Voting Project. Foundations cannot "earmark" their grants to work in specific states.

2. Ballot measures and lobbying – Nonpartisan 501(c)3 organizations like ICIRR are legally entitled to conduct lobbying, within limits, including both work on ballot measures and advocacy around legislation. Funders who wish to support this work directly may face certain restrictions, and private foundations may not earmark grants for lobbying. Your tax advisor

or legal counsel will be able to advise you on how best to support lobbying, and excellent resources are available on the FCCP's website at www.funderscommittee.org. General support grants, while not earmarked for lobbying or any other activities, will also allow grantees to include advocacy and ballot measures among their programmatic activities.

3. FCCP represents a broad array of funders in the nonpartisan civic engagement funding community, including private foundations, public charities, and individual donors. These various legal entities are governed by a wide variety of legal structures and constraints, each with different capacity for supporting particular kinds of nonpartisan voter engagement work. These case studies describe a range of efforts, some of which may be inappropriate for certain funders, or may require special attention in grant agreements and work plans. As always, we suggest that funders interested in supporting this work, particularly private foundations that may face greater IRS restrictions, consult your tax advisors or legal counsel and consider making general support grants as the most flexible and effective means of funding.

FCCP

FCCP is a resource for the philanthropic community on a broad range of civic participation issues. It serves as a vehicle for identifying trends, sharing best practices, engaging strategic discussions, strengthening relationships and providing and identifying resources for the field. FCCP is a special project of Public Interest Projects.

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