



2018 SOLVE CONFERENCE REPORT
May 31 - June 1, 2018
Raleigh, NC

This report summarizes a two-day program of presentations, panel discussions, and interactive dialogue at the 2018 SOLVE conference, which took place from May 31 to June 1, 2018 in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The event brought together approximately 60 people from 30 different advocacy and philanthropic organizations to discuss the state of voting rights advocacy in the South, as well as the upcoming 2020 Census and the role it plays in voting rights work. It also provided a valuable networking opportunity and set the stage for further cooperation between SOLVE member organizations.

The conference began with opening remarks from Kareem Crayton, Interim Executive Director of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, and continued with interactive panel discussions, guest speakers, and small group strategy sessions. It concluded with affirmations about the work of SOLVE members and motivations for moving forward.

Session 1: Panel- Advocacy in the New Wave of Voter Suppression

Panelists: Aunna Dennis, Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; Laura Grace, Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under Law; Allison Riggs, Southern Coalition for Social Justice; & Mondale Robinson, Florida Rights Restoration Coalition

Kicking off the panel, Aunna Dennis and Laura Grace presented a powerpoint about the Election Protection program. They shared how organizations can become involved in helping voters gain access to the polls and overcome obstacles to voting through: year round voter assistance hotlines in a host of languages, voter education and engagement, voter protection at the polls, election administration advocacy, and litigation on key voting rights issues.

Allison Riggs and Mondale Robinson followed up the presentation by talking about what voter suppression looks like in 2018. A major topic of concern was the criminalization of voting and voter engagement and assistance. Allison talked about how advocates

conducting voter registration drives and assisting voters at the polls have been the target of administrative investigations and even criminal prosecutions. Mondale shared the work of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, which has been engaged in a campaign to end the felony voting law that disenfranchises Floridians with a criminal record. He talked about what successful advocacy looks like on the ground and how centering returning citizens in this campaign has created buy-in from affected community members and voters. Many of the attendees expressed concerns about similar laws in their states and the effect such laws have on voter participation. Allison used a case from Alamance, North Carolina as an example of what advocates can do to help those who are charged under one of these felony voting laws. The session ended with Mondale offering advice to attendees who are looking replicate the efforts of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition in their home state.

Session 2: Small Group Strategy Session

During this session, attendees broke out into small groups to discuss a series of questions before reporting back to the rest of the conference participants. The questions were designed to get advocates thinking about what problems might occur during the upcoming election and to encourage them to think through strategies to address them.

The first question asked, “Given the new tactics of voter suppression, what do you perceive to be the biggest hurdle to voting in your community?” Participants identified a long list of hurdles. Although not an exhaustive list, some of the common themes were the lack of education around felony voting laws, lack of voter education, limitation on early voting options, polling place closures and site changes, and poor National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) compliance.

Second, “What do you anticipate might happen during elections this fall? What strategies do you anticipate being used to undermine voting rights?” Many of the answers were similar to those from the first question, but a few additional concerns came to light: unified suppressive message, “election integrity efforts”/intimidation, voter ID laws, and failing voting equipment.

Third, small groups were asked to think about what they could do to respond to efforts to undermine the voting process before, during, and after elections. Advocates in the room had a lot of ideas of what could be done to support voters before and during elections, such as providing rides to the polls, canvassing and phone banking, remaining vigilant to new laws and policies, social media campaigns, early voting advocacy, poll monitoring, and holding election administrators accountable. Something that came out during this discussion is that advocates are not always used to thinking about how to support voters after the elections. Some suggestions were to map voters through the VAN program and to assist voters with provisional ballot follows up. There was also an emphasis on using the time after elections to advocate for positive election reform that could address the problems voters experienced during the election.

Next, the groups were asked to reflect on resources they will need to respond to suppression efforts. This included things such as access to more volunteers, water and food for volunteers, transportation, policy experts, legal experts, data and research capabilities, and the ability to collaborate and exchange information regionally. But the most resounding need was for more funds to do the work.

Finally, advocates were asked to reflect on potential collaborations and what a regional response might look like. There was some push back on how to define “regional” and a desire to allow local communities to drive the efforts that make the most sense for those areas. This means involving local media, local artists, neighborhood churches, community based organizations, local government officials, and legislative representatives from those communities. But there was also a recognition that a larger regional effort is helpful for organizing coalitional letters, the exchange of ideas, sharing of model legislation, and amplifying the work of allied organizations.

Dinner with guest speaker, Angela Bryant, and performer, Carly Jones

To open up the dinner, Carly Jones, a local performing artist, performed a set of songs centered on social justice and the South. Towards the end of the dinner, Angela Bryant, a former North Carolina Legislator, shared her story of serving as a change maker in the state. She encouraged the advocates in the room to forge alliances, and spoke to how even the most unlikely of alliances can produce change for the good.

Session 3: Values Messaging, Ginna Green, Christ Melody-Fields, and Emma Weinstein-Levey with ReThink Media

To kick off the second day of the conference, the team from ReThink Media, led a presentation and exercise on values-based communications and voting rights. The presentation helped the participants understand the importance of values in communications. ReThink played different news clips and stories and asked the audience to identify the values they saw in those messages.

ReThink shared that successful messages meet an audience where they are, paint a picture of where they want to go, and show them the path to get there. In order to shift the narrative about voting rights and put ourselves on offense, the best place to start is the place where we and our audiences agree: values. According to research, freedom, responsibility, and trust are the top values people associate with voting and the democratic process. Integrity is fourth. These values resonate across racial, partisan, and age divisions. Although each demographic group differed in defining their number one value, messaging that calls upon freedom, responsibility, equality, and/or integrity will be relatable to most Americans.

ReThink then had everyone break out into small groups to complete an exercise. Each group had a series of clips pulled directly from websites and news blips about the organizations in the room. Each group edited those examples and rewrote the messages so that they reflected the values that come up in voting. After discussions in small groups, each shared with the larger room.

ReThink ended the session with an important take-away about values-based messaging. “Freedom is the top value in our democracy and when we include that value in our frame, we force a question for our opposition and frame a choice for our audience: Which side are you on?”

Session 4: Panel – 2020 Census

Panelists, Stacey Careless, NC Counts Coalition; Mike Cline, North Carolina Demographer; & Juliana Cabrales, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund

A three-person panel of census administration and census advocacy experts led a panel about the upcoming 2020 Census. Mike Cline started off the panel with a presentation about how the census works from an administrative perspective. As a demographer for the state of North Carolina, he was able to provide insight on how the government uses census data in its day-to-day operations and in the development of public policy.

Juliana Cabrales, the Mid Atlantic Director for NALEO Educational Fund, followed with a presentation on the state of the 2020 Census and how it might impact Latinos. She spoke about how the census will affect reapportionment, including which states are set to gain and lose seats in the next round of reapportionment following the 2020 Census. She also discussed proposed changes and new approaches to the census, such as budget cuts, internet responses, the use of administrative records and other third-party data for canvassing and non-response follow up, and the reduction in the number of local census offices and field staff. The main topic of discussion, however, was centered on the last minute addition of the untested question on citizenship status. There are serious concerns about how the addition of a citizenship question will impact participation, possibly resulting in far less accurate data. Juliana shared opportunities for organizations to get involved in the bi-partisan opposition to the addition of the question.

Stacey Careless, head of the NC Counts Coalition, shared what advocacy for the census looks like in North Carolina and how others may replicate efforts in their home state. This includes: (1) review outreach and messaging approaches used in voter engagement efforts to determine which strategies can be adapted to the 2020 Census, (2) identify potential partners and build/strengthen relationships with likely “trusted messengers,” (3) assess feasibility of working with state and local “Complete Count Committees,” (4) advocate with federal policymakers to provide the Census Bureau with the ramp-up in

funding needed for a sound 2020 Census, (4) and assess capacity to carry out potential “Get-Out-the-Count” activities.

A Q&A session followed the panel. Many of the organizations in the room expressed concerns about how the citizenship question may impact participation in their community. A question many advocates in the room were struggling with was whether they should encourage participation in immigrant communities or whether they can instruct them not to answer the citizenship question. Mike Cline shared that while there technically is a fine for non-response and fraudulent responses, he has not heard a case of anyone being fined. Rather, it is typically organizations that come under fire for instructing individuals not to participate or to answer questions falsely. Juliana offered to share messaging research conducted with Latino communities in the South about the citizenship question once the study concludes.

Lunch with guest speaker Anita Earls

Anita Earls, one of the founding organizers of SOLVE, shared her vision for what the coalition can accomplish. She provided background on how the coalition came together and offered words of encouragement and advice for keeping the work going.

Session 5: Census Advocacy Workshop

During the Census Advocacy Workshop session, attendees were asked to break out into small groups and engage in a practice census advocacy planning session. They answered a series of questions to get them thinking about census engagement and then reported their findings back to the room.

The first of these questions asked the groups to identify who their audience would be. Their responses covered a wide array of constituencies, including families, churches, public schools and teachers, hard-to-count communities, labor groups, civic leaders, other grassroots organizations, immigrants, and businesses. Advocates in the room were not just thinking about how to engage individual people, but also other entities who may advocate for participation and connect with people who the advocates in the room may not otherwise reach.

Second, the groups were asked about potential barriers to census participation. In addition to the concern over a lack of leadership at the Census Bureau to drive census efforts, there was great concern about different populations that have unique barriers. For example, people with debt or outstanding warrants may be hesitant to hand over personally identifiable information or engage with any sort of government entity. There are also populations with literacy issues, whether they are foreign language speakers or individuals with learning disabilities. And, because the census questionnaire will primarily be conducted over the internet, there were concerns about poor access to the internet and technological literacy.

Third, having identified an audience and potential barriers, groups were asked to think about who might be trusted messengers in those communities. Some ideas included relying on community faith leaders, teachers, and representatives from services the community interacts with on a regular basis, such as United Way and social services offices. There was a general consensus that, unless a government representative is already well-trusted in the community, a government figure would be highly distrusted and could interfere with engagement messages in certain communities.

Finally, groups were asked to consider action steps as to where and when to hold census outreach efforts. The groups had a number of ideas, some focused on in-person events and others using social media and television. Most everyone agreed that there should be a combination of the two strategies, with some events focusing on church, school, or community fair events, and others pushing a campaign via social media, local radio, print media, and phone banking. Advocacy could mimic Get-Out-the-Vote efforts through the use of pledge cards, circulation of a sample census form, and even census parties where everyone gets together to fill out the census.

A lot of great ideas came out of the census advocacy workshop and attendees were sent home with informational packets about how to form Complete Count Committees in their community. It also became clear that there is a strong need for financial support for outreach efforts, as well as research on where hard-to-count communities are located that would be in the most need of advocacy efforts.

Session 6: Strategy Moving Forward, Allison Riggs, Southern Coalition for Social Justice

To wrap up the conference, attendees gathered together to reflect on everything that was presented over the course of the conference. Allison Riggs made a call to action for all of the SOLVE members. She demonstrated how members can share news updates and links to resources on the SOLVE listserv, and explained how to apply for catalyst grants to support their work.

The conference ended with an affirmation activity in which all of the participants were asked to gather around and share words of encouragement and gratitude with one another. Participants said that they walked away feeling more connected with other SOLVE members and recharged and eager to get to work.

Conference Feedback:

Towards the end of the conference, participants were provided with an evaluation form to complete. This report does not capture all of the answers, but here are some general themes.

- 1) *How has the conference helped in your day-to-day voting rights work?*
 - New connections and relationships

- Gained a wealth of knowledge
- Information on ways to support communications work and messaging
- Learned about specific outreach tactics
- Learned about how organizations from other groups handled issues similar to those experienced in their community

2) *What did you find helpful about the small group discussion?*

- Networked and met new people
- Enjoyed hearing from people from other states
- Hearing that other groups experience the same issues
- Hearing different points of view

3) *What resources do you wish were presented?*

- Wish there were funders present to hear the needs of the organizations in the room
- A directory of all SOLVE organizations, not just those present at the conference
- A story bank with stories from victims of voter suppression
- Handouts/hard copies of the presentations
- An action guide on how to tackle voter suppression

4) *What topics would you like to see covered at future SOLVE conferences?*

- Redistricting
- Case studies from states where voting rights reform efforts have been successful
- How to help returning citizens restore their voting rights
- Have people from the community come and give their perspective
- More social media strategy sessions
- Session on legislative advocacy

5) *What can we add for a more successful conference next year?*

- More workshops around various voting rights issues
- More detailed information on presentations in advance to come prepared
- Presentations from each state
- Longer conference