

From Exclusion to Inclusion: Measuring Transformation in Nonprofit Civic Engagement

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Introduction

The first three words of the U.S. Constitution, "We the people," affirm the foundational principle of U.S. democracy: the reciprocal trust that exists between government and those it governs. Democracy, in its truest form, extends agency to its citizens, empowering them to shape society's path through collective decision-making. Yet for many voting-eligible citizens, "We the People" has never felt like a true invitation to participate in our democracy. The experience of historical, cultural, or institutional exclusion has long eroded trust in the same systems designed to serve. At the heart of civic disengagement lies a growing crisis, [a lack of trust](#). (American Progress, 2024)

This steady erosion of trust in government, media, and law enforcement has contributed to a cycle of detachment. What we are seeing is not just political apathy; it is, instead, a profound sense of invisibility and civic disconnection. When voters feel unseen, unheard, or actively excluded, they are less likely to participate, engage, or believe that their voice matters.

This paper is rooted in the belief that democracy cannot thrive unless all people, including those historically pushed to the margins, are invited in as full participants. It offers a framework for reimagining these invitations into the civic engagement process through the lens of inclusion and emotional transformation, rather than transactional participation metrics. We aim to highlight why some eligible voters do not vote, not due to a lack of awareness or interest, but due to a lack of trust, and how that trust can be built over time.

We present a theory of change and measurement framework grounded in the power of nonprofit organizations to serve as trusted messengers and leaders for civic inclusion. With their deep community roots, long-term presence, and commitment to nonpartisanship, nonprofits are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between excluded populations and democratic participation. Through this paper, we offer:

- **For practitioners:** A new lens for naming impact, not just by counting voters or registrations, but by identifying shifts in trust, belonging, and personal agency.
- **For funders:** A case for investing in closing emotional gaps of civic participation, and supporting metrics that track emotional transformation rather than solely turnout or reach.

- **For researchers:** A call for research that surfaces the lived experience of civic disconnect and that captures the identity shift from exclusion to engagement.

This work is informed by Nonprofit VOTE's national nonpartisan perspective as a civic engagement capacity builder and years of collaboration with deeply embedded field-based state and local partners. Together, we've observed and supported transformations that traditional surveys and metrics often miss; meaningful moments in which people began to believe that democracy might include them after all.

I: Status Quo, Limitations, and Need

Traditional civic engagement metrics prioritize reach and scale, with examples including the number of voters registered, doors knocked, or materials distributed. These indicators assume that removing logistical barriers, such as providing a registration form or a deadline reminder, will naturally lead to higher turnout. But these metrics often miss the deeper, emotional experience that shapes whether someone feels ready and willing to participate.

Take the example of door-knocking. It's often closely measured as a touchpoint, a "soft ask" meant to increase pressure to remind someone to vote. But for many, especially in swing states, door knocks can feel more like intrusions than an invitation to participate. This can trigger feelings of avoidance and annoyance, eventually turning into distrust, withdrawal, and invisibility as scripted, impersonal asks pile up and results are not delivered. Ask anyone who's had five out-of-state campaigners show up a week before election day.

Following the 2024 presidential cycle, many campaigns, funders, and voters were left asking: How could there be such high "reach" numbers, yet low resonance and turnout in comparison to more recent cycles? [Millions of doors](#) were knocked on by the Harris campaign, yet eligible voters in 2024 who had not turned out in 2020, favored [Trump by a margin of 54%-42%](#) (Pew, 2025). This widening gap between scale and outcomes demands a new approach, one capable of reflecting both the breadth and the depth of civic engagement.

Strategies like deep canvassing and relational organizing have sought to shift this dynamic, prioritizing listening and emotional attunement even within a flawed framework. Yet, despite evolving tactics, they are still measured by the same outdated metrics (ie 'How likely are you to vote on a scale of 1-10?') and too often miss out on meaningful investment because their impact doesn't fit the pre-existing definitions of success.

Even nonprofit organizations, motivated not by electoral wins but rather the belief their community should have greater agency, are often still held to traditional metrics of "success." They are accountable to funders, donors, and their board of directors, who often prioritize numerical outcomes over deeper, less tangible impacts like agency.

What gets lost in this output-first model is the more profound work that nonprofits do: shifting beliefs, building confidence, and creating pathways to civic identity. Helping someone move from *"I don't think my vote matters"* to *"I have the power to make a difference"* is rarely captured in a spreadsheet, but it's this internal transformation that defines true democratic engagement. And it's precisely this kind of shift that nonprofits are uniquely positioned to cultivate, if only we broaden the way we define and recognize success.

II. The Hidden Barriers to Action: Disempowering Emotions

A persistent narrative in voter engagement suggests that “nonvoters” simply don’t care about playing an active role in our electorate. But in our interviews with nonprofit staff and leaders, we’ve found something very different. What is often labeled as apathy is more accurately a *shutdown*; an emotional response rooted in overwhelm from fear, shame, isolation, or invisibility.

“It wasn’t apathy—it was voter depression.” - Khalilah, a faith-based senior organizer ([Signal Cleveland, 2024](#))

For many, voter disengagement stems from a tangle of anxieties that trigger something like a “freeze” response in the fight-flight-freeze response.

In 2022, only 22% of eighth graders scored proficient or above on the NAEP Civics test. This lack of civic education, combined with the constant churn of voting law changes and the relentless barrage of “unprecedented” events, often makes voting feel daunting, risky, or entirely unfamiliar.

Beneath the surface of powerful emotional barriers take shape:

- **Shame:** “I should already know how to vote.”, “I lack ability.”
- **Fear:** “I’ll get it wrong.”, “I’m not capable enough.”
- **Isolation:** “I have no one to ask.”, “I’m alone in this.”
- **Invisibility:** “My experience isn’t worth sharing.”, “I’ve been left behind.”
- **Powerlessness:** “I won’t matter anyway.”, “Voting isn’t for people like me.”

These emotions often begin as a form of self-protection, a way to guard against the sting of betrayal or exclusion by the very institutions we’re told to trust.

However, the challenge is that self-protection, when prolonged and unaddressed, crystallizes into something else: disempowerment. Left unchecked, it tells people, *“You don’t belong here,”* leading to withdrawal, not just from voting, but often from civic life altogether. The dominant narrative of voter registration efforts frames the problem as logistical: a lack of access to forms, ID issues, or missed deadlines, while overlooking a deeper reality: the emotional, relational, and cultural capacity required to believe that voting is for you.

This is where nonprofit civic engagement is uniquely powerful. When invested in, it doesn't just remove hurdles; it builds individual capacity and identity shifts. It nurtures people to believe: *"I can do this. I do belong"*. Through trust, built from cultural competency and relational consistency, nonprofit staff help people move from survival mode to self-determination. Their actions say, *You are not invisible. You are capable. You do belong.*

III: Emotional Transformation: Exclusion to Inclusion

In interviews with nonprofit staff, we repeatedly hear stories of transformation: of voters who began a conversation saying, *"I don't know enough"* or *"Voting isn't for people like me,"* and ending with *"Actually, I can vote"*, or *"Actually, this does matter to me."*

These 'emotional transformations' are the result of an intentional strategy to make an individual feel seen and heard as a result of people/organizations taking the time to listen, ask questions, and create space for them. This trust is the fertile ground where emotional transformation takes root. In these moments, the work moves beyond simply registering someone to vote. It becomes about reclaiming a sense of personal agency and belonging in our democracy, a shift from "I can't" to "I can" that numbers alone can't capture, but which defines true civic inclusion.

Marty, a staff member at a disability-focused nonprofit in rural Pennsylvania, illustrates this in action. Marty understands that shame can accompany living with a disability and transforms it into confidence through openness and trust. In her workshops, she creates a space where participants can admit, with vulnerability, *"I don't know how to vote."*

She notes, *"There's a big distrust of government... Sometimes they [community members] don't want to tell anybody that they don't know how to vote. There's a kind of voting shame."*

By clarifying how voting information is handled, she turns mistrust and doubt into confidence.

For organizations like Marty's, empowering independent living, civic participation becomes another way to help people towards autonomy and self-agency.

Julie, who works at a community food pantry in Colorado, shared with us the story of a mother of four who initially said she didn't have time to vote and was **afraid** of the process. But through Julie's joyful persistence and clear, empathetic explanations, the mom finally said: *"Fine, how do I vote?"*, realizing that voting wasn't just for her, but also for her kids' future.

Being in survival mode often looks like overwhelm and fear of making ends meet. Julie's approach is rooted in validating their **fears**, but also elevating them to what's possible by transforming resignation into action.

Julie's influence extended to her co-worker Michell, a naturalized citizen who was **afraid** she wasn't knowledgeable enough to engage and would only ask her husband for opinions on

politics. Michell had felt **isolated**, unable to engage with others in conversation about topics that impacted her and her family. After Julie kept at it, she was able to feel included in those conversations with older “politico” volunteers. She felt “more knowledgeable”, no longer feeling like she didn’t have a voice.

Other nonprofits echo these experiences of **belonging**: an 80-year-old naturalized citizen voting for the first time and helping others do the same; a voter shifting from “Voting isn’t for people like me” to “Actually, voting is for me, I deserve to be heard”; members of the LGBTQ community deciding to vote after realizing its importance in a local election year.

These moments of anxiety into agency, confusion into clarity, and helplessness into belonging were not anomalies. Now that we have identified this moment of change, in the following section, we propose ideas for measuring these replicable moments.

IV. Identifying and Measuring Empowerment

“What keeps me going with voter engagement is validating people who feel like nobody listens to them and they’re discouraged in life, really do matter in this process, and it is **their right**.” - Julie.

Empowerment is deeply emotional labor, and its impact is personal, as it is powerful. We feel grateful to have witnessed these moments of transformation, not just to the voters themselves, but to the nonprofit staff who catalyze them. We’ve held space for tears, candid vulnerability, and profound joy.

To understand what these “emotional transformation indicators” look and *feel like*, we listened deeply. Through recorded video interviews and a user research platform, Dovetail, we tagged emotions such as fear, shame, belonging, and confidence to identify patterns and shifts over time.

We asked nonprofit staff:

- *What motivates you to engage voters?*
- *What moment stuck with you or moved you?*
- *What made someone feel seen, included, or powerful?*

We asked the voters they engaged:

- *What changed for you?*
- *What were you most worried about when it came to voting?*
- *What would’ve helped you feel more confident?*
- *What do you think prevents people in your situation from voting?*

From these discovery interviews, we've begun developing replicable ways to measure similar shifts, showing what inclusion looks and sounds like at scale. Our proposed measurements focus on emotional states and shifts, contrasting with traditional canvassing questions such as, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to vote?"

Proposed Measurement Approaches

- **Exit surveys from workshops or one-on-one engagements:**
 - Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree to capture shifts in capacity to participate.
 - "I feel more confident voting now."
 - "I know better what to expect at the polls."
 - Yes/No survey questions to capture first-time outreach
 - "This was the first time anyone asked me about voting."
- **Before-and-after self-assessments on readiness:**
 - On a scale of 1 to 10
 - "How ready do you feel to vote?"
 - "How open are you to voting?"
 - Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
 - "I feel confident voting."
 - "I know what to expect around voting."
 - "I feel like my voice does matter."
- **Voter file analysis for re-engagement:**
 - Identifying individuals who had not voted in multiple election cycles, or who only voted in presidential elections, but voted in a recent local election after engagement.

In all cases, we aren't just asking *what happened*; we're trying to understand *what has changed*. In some cases, that change is not an immediate jump to voting enthusiasm, but a smaller step: from a three to a five on readiness, or a quiet "Actually, I do matter," or "I might want to learn more." Sometimes it's just voting in two elections in a row, [solidifying their identity as a voter through a new habit](#). (ScienceDirect 2020)

This is only the start of a broader conversation about measuring meaning and impact in voter engagement. Measuring empowerment is challenging, subjective, and iterative, but it's essential if we want to observe the true impact of nonprofits, not just as service providers, but as nonpartisan builders of civic identity and personal power. Empowerment isn't a one-time act. It's a felt experience. When we learn to listen for it and measure it, we open the door to scaling not just actions, but meaningful, lasting change.

V. Trust: The Vehicle for Safety and Inclusion

In this section, we outline why trust must first exist, as a prerequisite, to facilitate inclusion through emotional safety and belonging.

Shifts from civic exclusion to belonging are uniquely possible through the trusted relationships nonprofits cultivate by showing up with empathy and consistency. Aaron, a grant writer we spoke to at a Colorado nonprofit, describes the impact of long-term trust and how it has been foundational in facilitating voter engagement.

“We [organization] leverage the trust that we’ve built in the community. We’ve been here since 1971. With our clients and the community, they trust us to meet needs and to be a resource. Leveraging that is something valuable in this voter engagement process.”

Similarly, Erin, who works at an all-encompassing faith-based community organization based in Ohio, spoke about how trust is built over many small, human moments. She shared,

“If I smile at you, if I give you a hug, if I care about your children, if I wave at you when you walk in the door, if my tone sounds warm and not harsh, I am showing you that I love you, that I care about you, that I think you’re worthy of time, investment, and education.”

These daily gestures, often taken for granted, become acts of empowerment at service-based organizations. It establishes a foundation of safety and dignity before any request for democratic action begins. It is this unique trust that allows nonprofit staff to engage relationally, not transactionally. They are trusted because their theory of change relies critically on inclusion and empowerment, not simply on turnout or winning elections. As Callie, an Ohio food bank leader, put it:

“We see it as our responsibility to use our trust that we’ve built over multiple decades to showcase to people the importance of what it means to exercise your right to vote.”

When institutions and organizations prioritize outcomes over relationships and view communities as tools rather than partners, trust erodes. Yet [nonprofits consistently rank as the most trusted sector](#) in the U.S, ahead of small businesses, the military, and far above government or media (Independent Sector, 2025). Among Gen Zers and Millennials, who now make up the largest generational voting bloc, nonprofits hold some of the highest trust levels, even as trust in media and Congress declines. [\(NYTimes, 2025\)](#)

This trust is earned through years of showing up and building those consistent, empathy-based relationships. It is what facilitates nonprofit staff to hold space for difficult emotions and transform them: invisibility into being seen, fear into confidence, shame into self-worth, isolation into agency. It is the invisible architecture behind every emotional shift described in this paper.

The future questions are not just how do we get people to vote, and how do we measure that?

They are instead: How do we create a civic space where people want to [belong](#), and how do we measure belonging and the shifts the spaces facilitate?

VI. Addressing Challenges of Nonprofit Engagement and Measurement

Understanding emotional barriers and distrust is essential to moving towards long-term civic power. Yet, identifying and measuring emotional transformation, in the context of nonprofit voter engagement, presents real and practical challenges.

1. Limited Time and Resources

Nonprofits face unprecedented demand with fewer resources, and burnout makes it harder to create space for deep listening and validation. Transforming negative feelings is emotional labor, and burned-out staff may struggle to help others through it. Still, emotional attunement can be woven into outreach as trust grows through consistency. Thoughtful educational materials and voting reminders that validate concerns can keep voting top of mind, while clear boundaries and realistic expectations can help mitigate these impacts.

2. Collective Harm Requires Collective Solutions

When institutions we once trusted fail us, our society tends to shift the blame from systemic failures to individuals. When turnout is low, the story is too often about personal apathy, rather than acknowledging structural barriers. Just as a food bank cannot bear the entire burden of hunger, individuals or nonprofits alone cannot be solely responsible for healing systemic and historical harm.

Nonprofits do foster individual empowerment, but feelings like “I did vote, yet nothing changed” reflect broken trust in governance beyond their organization. Still, they play a powerful role in rebuilding civic trust through candidate forums, listening sessions, and coalition spaces that give communities visibility and voice. Deeper community-wide healing must happen in parallel with individual empowerment.

3. Measurement Requires Emotional Skill and Balance

Capturing emotional transformation is not just a matter of data collection; it's about skilled emotional work. Canvassing, deep listening, and relational trust-building require attunement, presence, and empathy, yet these skills are rarely a line item in budgets.

Measurement can begin simply with tallied responses like “No one has ever asked me to register before” or “This will be my first time voting.” However, it is important to ensure measurement does not become a quota-driven metric. Surveys that explore how people who are included or

excluded feel can serve as a strong starting point that, when paired with powerful storytelling, allow an organization to convey depth and nuance.

4. Transformation Takes Time

Emotional transformations are nonlinear and deeply personal. Fear or shame may be protective responses, especially for individuals with histories of trauma or systemic exclusion. As with any long-term effort, change may take multiple touchpoints. Today's brief interaction may be the spark that leads to action months later. For nonprofits at the heart of their communities, engagement can be like planting seeds and creating conditions for agency and inclusion to grow when the time is right. Tracking local-level turnout, like low-income zip codes, can also get at those shifts on a more macro level.

VII: Framework Applications Beyond Civic Engagement

Any nonprofit aiming to communicate the true depth of its impact can apply the framework of **emotional transformation**, moving people from "*I can't*" to "*I can*," from isolation to inclusion, to illuminate value beyond numbers.

These emotional shifts are at the heart of the sector's most powerful stories. Whether it's a client going from survival mode to stability, from assistance to independence, or from being unseen to being heard, naming and measuring these transformations makes the invisible visible.

A mother escaping domestic violence and finding safe shelter experiences hope. A parent ashamed of needing food assistance finds dignity in being able to feed their family. A child unable to afford paid after-school activities gains belonging at a free summer program. These stories allow us to tell a deeper contextualized story of full public and private life: not just what services were delivered, but what *changed* for the person who received them. Capturing lived experiences of exclusion is as logistical as it is emotional. Imagine reporting that 90% of mothers in your shelter feel "more confident in their ability to create a better life," that 85% of parents without other childcare options say free programs are "critically important to their ability to work," or that 80% of clients strongly agree food access is essential to their stability.

Measuring emotional belonging reflects a deeper organizational and personal ethos: empathy as a core outcome, not an incidental benefit. When people feel included, seen, and believed in, their material outcomes change. That's as true in voting as it is in food security, housing, or community health services.

VIII: Conclusion

This paper begins to tell the larger story of personal experience through data and empathy. Measurement is too often reserved for "objective" disciplines like RCTs, yet the complexity of

people's struggles and how those struggles shape their ability to show up demands more. We must measure what matters, and what matters is whether people believe they have a voice.

Nobody is moved by a fact sheet alone. Stories and lived experiences move people in ways numbers simply cannot. Policy makers and the public are not shaped by error bars, but by moments in which they see themselves. Measuring how people feel and making it a goal explicitly names the world we do or don't want to live in, and what values as a society we're prepared to fight for. In civic engagement, by measuring this, we say that all people deserve to say "I do matter", "I can do this", and "I deserve to be heard".

Winston Churchill once changed his stance on solitary confinement after a play that depicted its devastating impact. Art, and by extension, story, moved him in a way just data alone could not. Nonprofits, too, act as connectors between lived experience and societal values. They reflect the forks in the road where we choose what kind of society we want to be, fund, and build.

Most nonprofits are born from a feeling: *"This is too hard, no one should go through this alone"*, which they transform into: *"I am not powerless anymore"*. That is the story we must tell, across civic engagement, food security, housing, and beyond.

When we articulate not just what we do, but how people *feel* before and after, we tell the real story: one of inclusion, belonging, and the possibility of change. That's the measure of a society we choose to be.

If democracy is to be more than a promise on paper, it must live in the felt reality of those it serves. Measuring emotional transformation is not a soft add-on, or a nice-to-have: it is a blueprint for rebuilding trust and belonging at scale. The stories in this paper show that when people feel seen, heard, and capable, they step into their role as co-authors of our shared future. The choice before us as we face America's milestone 250th year is clear: continue to count actions and miss the meaning, or commit to measuring the moments that ignite lasting civic power. Our democracy will be defined not only by how many participate, but by how deeply they believe they belong.