

Floating the Vote So it Won't Sink: A Call for Political Innovation

It's August 31st, three days before the Unstoppable Voters Project proposal deadline set by the Center for Artistic Activism (C4AA) and I'm just learning about this grant opportunity, let alone the hosting organization. I didn't exactly jump at the opportunity to get in people's faces about voting after my previous experience with organizing, but I read over the call for proposals and an idea came to mind that made me say, "I could run with this!" I quickly reached out to my friend and creative collaborator, Christiana Laine Beckley, to ask if she had any interest in leading the project with me assuming the proposal was chosen. She agreed, encouraging me to go for it, and when it was all said and written I ended up submitting the application at around 11:45pm on the day of the deadline. What came next feels straight out of a fairytale, but before sharing that story here's a bit of a prologue to set it all up.

As a field organizer with the Michigan Democratic Party during the 2016 presidential election, I discovered first hand that the fundamental significance of any community is to come together to form an infrastructure that allows for capacity building. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to help mobilize the Brightmoor and Rosedale Park communities within the city of Detroit because I gained greater awareness of how involved citizens like myself and campaign volunteers become the building blocks of purposeful assemblies, this nation, and society as a diverse whole. However, I would be remiss if I did not speak to the growing multitude of hardships and barriers, both sociocultural and socioeconomic, that undermine the inclusion of certain groups of able-bodied citizens in the collective practice of voting. Over the course of managing and executing phone banks, neighborhood canvasses, and voter registration drives, among several other activities to further raise political awareness, I encountered a range of attitudes and impressions about voting that were hard for me to correct, refute, or deny because a part of me shared the same sentiment. Therefore, in reflecting on the many conversations I had with engaged voters, wayward voters, and those that vacillate somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum, I felt compelled to create a diagram that depicts the "tide of voting" through the often unseen and overlooked forces that affect voter turnout (see figure 1).

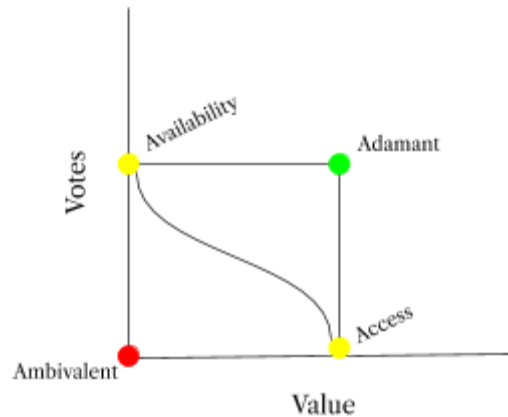


Figure 1. The tide of voting.

To briefly describe this diagram, the horizontal axis is labeled “Value” because one’s freedom of action or thought determines their latitude and the vertical axis is labeled “Votes” because the goal of any election is to maximize the number of votes. “Adamant” refers to those passionate and engaged voters who make sure they vote in each and every election, “Ambivalent” refers to those apathetic, wayward voters who don’t really care to vote at all for any number of reasons, and “Availability” and “Access” refer to those individuals who are sluggish voters because the timing of their lives distracts them from voting or there are barriers limiting their ability to cast their vote. The connection between “Availability” and “Access” creates a “tide” that when low diminishes the value of voting, therefore suppressing the vote, and when high boosts the value of voting, thereby empowering the vote.

Balancing my experience as a field organizer with what I learned from constructing this diagram, I developed and pitched *Float the Vote*.

But oh, how quickly a dichotomy forms between one’s anticipated journey to manifesting a very clear idea and the actual path taken to fully see it through when the idealistic rhetorical devices of a vivid imagination meet the practical facts of everyday life. As a serial ideator who roams the vast annals and curated catalogues of an absorbent mind, I draw upon the endless array of experiences that make up my own life to inform my curiosity around the feasibility of creating certain interdisciplinary projects. *Float the Vote* was one such point of curiosity that I felt could be fully realized and brought forth into the physical world because of a sincere focus on strengthening access to voting in communities around Detroit. I was ecstatic to discover I wasn’t the only one who felt this way after pitching the concept to C4AA and becoming one of eleven Unstoppable Voters Projects selected to receive funding to actually carry it out. Feeling calm, ready, and vigilant, our five-person team set out into the sprawling urban

landscape of Detroit to recruit food trucks and reach as many people as possible. Though this endeavor would soon turn out to have the kinds of twists and turns that made us grateful we brought along a moral compass for staying the course.

The original concept of *Float the Vote* endeavored to recruit the services of entrepreneurial food truck owners for a day of community service and engagement, but the experimental nature of converting these mobile kitchens into mobile polling locations to better reach voters within assigned voting districts (through the implementation of electronic voting machines, polling booths, etc.) wasn't viable in the time allotted. Therefore, we called upon food trucks to "float" around different parts of Detroit raising voter awareness and holding registration drives on specific days of community service and engagement leading up to the November 3rd election. Additionally, after the polls closed on Election Day, food trucks would embark on a celebratory parade through the city, which people can follow, to a festival site where all can gather to patron and build community around the fact that "together, we were able to float the vote."

Our initial approach to recruiting food trucks appeared fruitful at first, but it became abundantly clear that the day-to-day for these mobile businesses is less glamorous and casual than people realize. However, we were able to account for the various factors that impact the costs of operating a food truck and secured partnerships with three trucks—*Hot Dogs Yo Way*, *Sno Biz Detroit*, and *Rocky's Road Brew*. Scheduling "floating shifts" to take place over a four-hour time frame became difficult because most of the trucks didn't have the capacity to move around as freely as we thought. Therefore, we needed to quickly contact grocery stores, shops, recreation centers, and any other brick-and-mortar spaces that might happily get on onboard with our project. This, being outside of the original scope, added yet another logistical obstacle as correspondence with these places was rather stagnant or unresponsive.

Still, we pressed forward and were able to hold multiple actions around Detroit having conversations with people of different voting habits as we ramped up to our Election Day event. We went to some of Detroit's major local parks, such as Rouge Park, Palmer Park, and Riverside Park engaging with voters. On Vote Early Day, October 24th, we also visited each of the 27 early voting centers and absentee ballot drop-off boxes around the city to attract attention to the location as well as promote our project effort. Our very presence in the community evoked feelings of solidarity among voters and reflected back on the hard work and dedication of *Float the Vote*. The ability to be there solely for people and not declare a particular side or candidate was special

because interactions were more natural carrying a spirit of genuine concern for hearing their voices rather than pushing an agenda.

Unfortunately, the festival that the team initially envisioned on Election Day faced many challenges as well, most notably the danger of gathering crowds amidst COVID-19, no matter how celebratory in nature. But remarkably, with the help of a large donation of almost 2500 plant-based burger patties by Impossible Foods, we managed to powerfully pivot and travel around the city flanked by eye-catching vehicles and food trucks, decorated with *Float the Vote*-themed flags, posters and signs, serving free Impossible burgers to voters at various polling locations. Our presence on Election Day serving voters and poll workers free Impossible burgers gave further conscious clarity and affirmation to the project's cause. From the moment we arrived at the first polling location that day, Osborn High School on the city's east side, we knew *Float the Vote* had truly accomplished what it set out to do all along. Election Day 2020 in Detroit was more of a party than anything I would've anticipated! I was surprised by the number of public figures that were out—I managed to make it in the Michigan Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist's Instagram story talking about *Float the Vote* within 10 minutes of arriving at Osborn, and chat with rapper Royce Da 5' 9" after he performed at Wayne County Community College District's Northwest Campus—and the amount of activity happening at different polling locations around the city—there were DJs, #JoyToThePolls party buses, radio stations, and even other food trucks serving free food!

I am confident this kind of project activation was truly valued by the communities we served because our purpose wasn't to play bipartisan, political chess, but rather present the opportunity to take action, if desired, through voting on Election Day. Projects such as the Unstoppable Voters Project should definitely be facilitated again aligning with other collective practices or traditions that require the participation of the general public as a whole to bring about more social cohesion. For example, the underlying truths about certain national holidays like Thanksgiving or "Columbus Day" are becoming less distorted in the shared memories of the collective consciousness within American society. Therefore, I truly think now is as good a time as any to make an intentional effort to support those individuals who aspire to use their skills and talents to bring about the formal acknowledgement of such inconvenient truths. One such truth revealed through the efforts of the *Float the Vote* team is that we have to relinquish the convenient notion that people will make the choice to do something that benefits them on their own because this presupposes that they even believe in the idea that it actually does.

The challenges of aligning my vision with what actually transpired at each progressive stage of the project called for me to relinquish complete authoritative control over its maturation. This was particularly key to continuous rapid improvement over such a short period of time, especially as I continued to rely on the trust and support of my fellow team members who were just as passionate as I was about our efforts. I cannot definitively say whether I would do any one thing differently if I had to do the project again, but generally speaking I would explore the possibility of buying out food trucks to give away free food for a limited time in the days leading up to Election Day rather than just on that day alone. This would surely bolster voter engagement since there is a great need for intersectional community engagement on a grassroots level, given the disparity of the urban fabric in many cities around the nation where more and more native city dwellers are living in impoverished neighborhoods while newcomers opt for the ease and amenities of revitalized areas. I would also really love to explore the idea of making trucks mobile polling locations with proper time to work through all the logistics and potential legal barriers. I honestly think this could be a real game changer when talking about increasing access for the disenfranchised. Furthermore, the current pandemic may have impacted the original plans for *Float the Vote* and further exacerbated its expected trajectory, but it made our efforts even more notable given we still showed up as a team to effect change. Effort is often overshadowed by the outcome, but it is that very effort that creates the biggest change. Frankly, that is the change. When we show up, we are the change.