

Center for Racial and Gender Equity

Down, but not out!

2024

ELECTION

REPORT

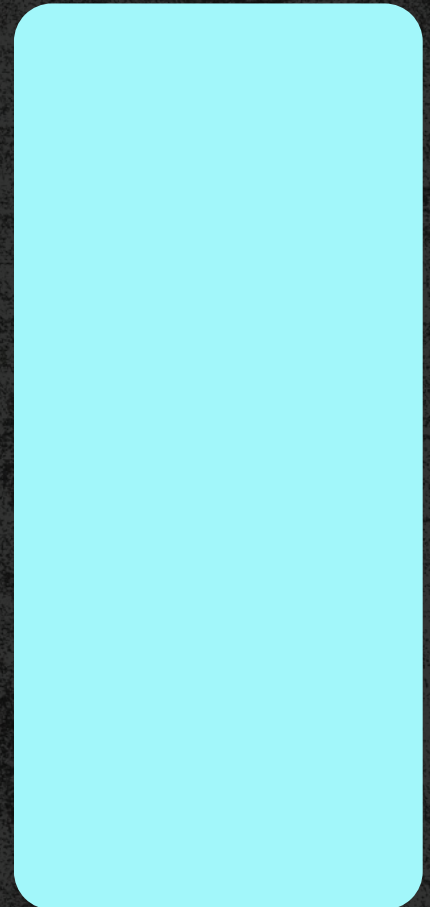


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Reflections

With critical economic and social issues on the line this year, The Center for Racial and Gender Equity (CRGE) and our sister organization, the Workers Center for Racial Justice (WCRJ), have been engaging Black voters across Wisconsin and Illinois since early 2024. Our core goal was to **ensure that Black voters had a decisive role in electoral decision-making**: from the next U.S. president, to our legislative leadership at the federal and state levels, to local prosecutors, judges, and Chicago's newly-created elected school board.

Our dedicated Inclusive Democracy Teams (IDT) of community-based canvassers in each state carried out **extensive voter outreach campaigns, including year-round,**

door-to-door canvassing as well as community events, phone banking, text messaging, virtual programming and targeted digital ads.

It bears saying up front that the re-election of Donald Trump represents an extreme setback for justice, equity, fairness and progress. His landslide victory betrays the reality that our country is still one that is rooted in racism, misogyny, and xenophobia, and that the soul of America still lives in Jim Crow. **But our collective liberation does not rest solely on the outcome of a single election, and there are important lessons that we as a field must internalize as we look towards 2026 and 2028.** This report includes our learnings, and we look forward to discussing them with our community leaders, partners, and funders.

In the coming years, our focus on local and state-level policies will be even more important, as we work to improve quality of life for Black communities and other marginalized groups in Wisconsin and Illinois against the backdrop of a second Trump presidency. **When it comes to down-ballot races, the picture is much brighter, and we are celebrating a number of key victories that lay the groundwork for progressive gains at the state and local levels.**



Additionally, with support from our funding partners and individual donors, we were able to greatly increase the capacity of our in-person voter engagement efforts.

Compared with 2022, this year we doubled the number of doors we knocked across Wisconsin and Illinois combined.

With added resources, we were able to convert many of our text messaging and phone banking contacts to canvassing contacts, a much higher-quality tactic.


There is a lot of fear about what Trump’s legislation and appointments can take from us - our bodily autonomy, our voting rights, and our right to exist. Yet, we stand resolved that these outcomes are not inevitable: together, we must be firm and declare that *we will not go back*. CRGE and WCRJ, along with our partners nationwide, have once again witnessed the power of reaching and engaging thousands of voters, even in a short period of time. **But this work must be cyclical and ongoing if we are to effectively bolster civic engagement in our communities:** we must engage in year-round, relationship-centered contact with current and potential voters.



Total program reach:

157,857 door knocks Completed by our Inclusive Democracy Team 

80k text messages Sent by grassroots members and staff 

30k phone calls Made during phonebank parties 

Wisconsin Highlights



As CRGE and WCRJ began our 2024 voter engagement work earlier this year, an alarming number of Black voters in Wisconsin were saying that they planned to sit this election out. They were disillusioned with their choices, and felt that their own quality of life had not improved during Biden's presidency.

Given what we were hearing from voters, we decided we needed to shift our strategy. **We started having longer conversations on the doors**, delving more deeply into residents' concerns, learning about the issues they were facing in their communities, and doing a lot of listening before attempting to make a case for the importance of their votes.

This change in strategy was more resource-intensive, and went against the grain of the usual emphasis on number of door knocks as the key voter (*cont.*)

Wisconsin contacts made

76,300 door knocks

Nearly double our 2022 total of 42,300



79k text messages

Sent by grassroots members and staff



17k phone calls

Made during phonebank parties



engagement metric. However, we started to see shifts in attitudes: between our deeper conversations and Biden dropping out of the race, voter apathy improved, with far fewer people saying they wouldn't vote in November. CRGE and WCRJ are part of the America Votes Table in Wisconsin, and **all together, our coalition knocked on more than 4 million doors**. Our far-reaching voter engagement program contributed significantly to the following wins:

Tammy Baldwin re-elected to the U.S. Senate

Making sure that Senator Tammy Baldwin was re-elected to a third term was an important part of the field's collective strategy to retain control of the Senate, and was one of CRGE's goals for our Wisconsin political work. While losses in other states (West Virginia, Ohio, and possibly Montana and Pennsylvania) mean that Republicans will now have a majority in the Senate, Baldwin's win remains essential if Democrats are to regain control of the Senate in 2026.



Ending the Republican supermajority in Wisconsin's legislature

Democrats gained 11 seats in the Wisconsin assembly on Election Day, and the political landscape in Wisconsin will be more favorable to progressives and to CRGE/WCRJ's policy platform for the state in 2025. With these victories, **Democrats ended Wisconsin's long standing Republican supermajority**, and they will no longer be able to override Gov. Evers' (D) vetoes.

Both chambers of the Wisconsin state legislature have been firmly Republican-controlled since 2011. Republicans held a trifecta from 2010 - 2018, broken when Democrat Tony Evers' was sworn in as Governor in 2019. **Democrats have since chipped away at Republican control:** the election of a Democratic Supreme Court justice in 2023 paved the way for Evers to sign new legislative district maps into law this year. Whereas previous maps heavily favored Republicans by spreading out Democratic voters, the new maps level the playing field and are already reshaping down-ballot races in Wisconsin.

CRGE and WCRJ have been working in Wisconsin since 2020, and we played an important role in the 2022 re-election of Gov. Evers, as well as the 2023 victory of Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Janet Protasiewicz. **This work is having the cumulative effect of reshaping Wisconsin's political landscape**, opening up new possibilities for us to move progressive policies that benefit Black communities.

Wisconsin Constitutional Amendments

Wisconsin voters were asked to amend their state constitution five times this year, with mixed results for progressives. Wisconsin was already the fifth-worst state in which to vote, according to the Cost of Voting Index, which ranks states based on how voter-friendly their electoral policies are. **In April, two Republican-backed amendments were passed that make it even harder for cash-strapped municipalities to administer elections:** one that bans private funding for election administration, and one that limits who is permitted to administer elections. In practice, these amendments mean that municipalities cannot accept grants for things like supplies, personal protective equipment, or security measures in order to improve election safety and efficiency; it also bans individuals who have not been approved by the Republican legislature from participating in election administration.

With a concerted grassroots effort to educate voters about their meaning and consequences, **Wisconsinites decisively rejected two more Republican-authored amendments** in August. These would have stripped the Governor of the power to deploy federal aid during times of emergency. A reaction to Gov. Tony Evers' control of emergency COVID relief funding in 2020, the amendment would have disproportionately impacted poor communities of color. **Defeating it was key to prevent further consolidation of Republican power in the state.**

On Election Day, a fifth Republican-authored amendment appeared on the ballot, this time proposing to insert language into the state constitution that explicitly bans non-citizens from participating in elections. Current federal and state laws already ban non-citizens from participating in national, state and local elections, and critics of the amendment interpret its intent as A) to **fuel baseless, dangerous claims that non-citizens are already voting in elections**, B) to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment to bolster Republican turnout and C) as a basis on which to impose more voter suppression laws.

Voting rights groups fear that the amendment could pave the way for laws that require proof of citizenship at the polls, posing a major barrier to millions of voters without such documentation. Vigilantly protecting and expanding voting rights in Wisconsin must be a top priority for our field moving forward.

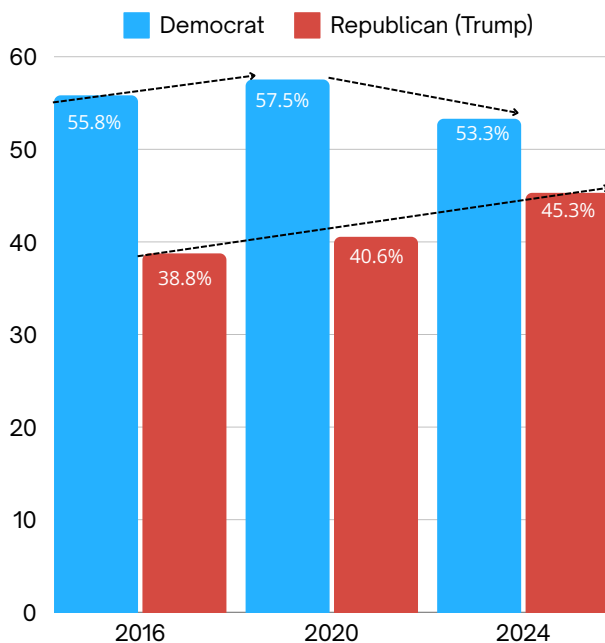


Illinois Highlights

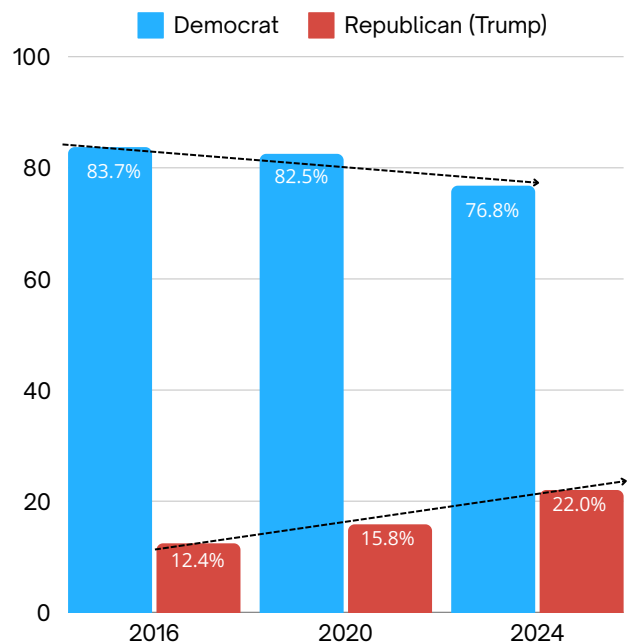


While Illinois is generally regarded as a Democratic stronghold, CRGE and WCRJ have long warned of the state’s rightward drift, which mirrors that of many other rust belt states in the last decade. The results of this presidential election confirm the continuing trend, as Trump’s performance in the state has steadily improved since 2016. Even in Chicago, Trump has gained significant ground since 2016:

Percentage of votes won by Presidential candidates in Illinois from 2016 - 2024



Percentage of votes won by Presidential candidates in Chicago from 2016 - 2024



We continue to urge funders to invest in our civic engagement programming, not only in Wisconsin, but also in Illinois, because our experience suggests that Illinois voters' preferences should not be taken for granted. The City of Chicago will not be able to carry the rest of the state if Illinois continues to trend in favor of Republicans, and the margin of Democratic victory continues to shrink in the city.

This year in Illinois, there were **critical local races on the ballot that will have a much more immediate impact on our communities** than the national-level races will. CRGE and WCRJ prioritized the following:

Chicago's first-ever School Board Elections

Grassroots organizers have long fought to give Chicago's residents a direct say on the city's school board, which was formerly appointed entirely by the mayor. On Election Day, Chicagoans voted in ten new school board members, who will serve on a 21-seat board along with mayoral appointees. Given Chicago's legacy of school closings, disinvestment, and disparities in Black neighborhoods, it was a priority for CRGE/WCRJ to engage and activate our members around these races.

All of the candidates CRGE endorsed were in line with the Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) slate of endorsements. Through deep conversations with voters about the importance of the school board, distribution of literature with our endorsed candidates, and coordination with our allies, **CRGE directly contributed to the victories of four of the candidates we endorsed.**

Illinois contacts made

82,600 door knocks

More than double our 2022 total of 36,800



13k phone calls

Made during phonebank parties



8 events

Held in-person and virtually



Lake County Prosecutorial Race

Another one of CRGE’s focuses in Illinois this year was the race for suburban Lake County’s state’s attorney. Progressive prosecutor Eric Rinehart, who CRGE also endorsed in 2020, was the first Democrat to win the seat in 40 years. **During his first term, he worked to advance restorative justice practices and reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system.** He is one of only two state’s attorneys in Illinois that supported the Pretrial Fairness Act of 2021, which ended the use of cash bail in Illinois. He also created a Conviction Integrity Unit to analyze and correct past injustices, and prevent future ones.



Rinehart defeated Republican challenger Mary Cole by 54% to 46%. CRGE’s work in Lake County emphasized voter education about the role that prosecutors play in the criminal justice system, and elevated Rinehart’s work to address systemic racism in Lake County’s criminal justice practices.



Lessons Learned



The lessons that we learned this year suggest a need for some key shifts in the way that we as a field educate and engage voters. We can no longer wait until “election season” to engage voters, because it’s not just about ensuring strong turnout from Democrat-leaning communities. We must have frequent, regular interactions with voters about their concerns. Without such, voters will remain politically apathetic. As we work to educate and empower voters in the upcoming 2025 and 2026 elections, we are grounding ourselves in this reality. Other learnings include:

1. As a field, the number of doors knocked should not be our guiding measure of success. The emphasis that is placed on door knocks and candidate IDs as the gold standard for evaluating a voter engagement program is incomplete, and encourages organizations to prioritize the number of knocks over the number of issue-driven conversations. Earlier this year, our canvassers were reporting high numbers of people who planned not to vote due to the frustration among Black voters who have not felt quality of life improvements under Biden’s presidency. It was only when canvassers made the strategic decision to have intentional, issue-driven conversations with voters, rooted in listening, that we began to see a shift towards electoral participation.

It is apparent that voters need more, so we must give more. Electoral justice organizations must focus on the reasons that are driving voters away from the ballot, or towards the right; and in order to do that, we need to engage in deep listening during canvassing. Our canvassers cited economic security as Black voters' primary concern, yet we know there are many other issues that plague our communities. It is time for us to hear them all, and make plans together through civic engagement to address them.

Based on our experiences, the number of high-quality, deeper conversations with folks on the doors should be the gold standard for effective voter engagement. By not prioritizing this type of voter engagement, we failed to truly understand what voters wanted this year.

2. Grassroots voter engagement must be funded all year, every year. Without the resources to build deep, lasting community connections, we cannot build voters' critical consciousness or contribute to the development of a stronger, consistent, shared ideology. We also cannot root our activities in our shared humanity if we are unprepared to engage in discussion when we disagree, or incentivized to prioritize number of contacts over quality and depth of relationships.

Given this reality, CRGE and WCRJ plan to reshape the priorities of our Inclusive Democracy Teams in Wisconsin and Illinois in 2025, focusing on re-engaging the thousands of voters we've already met through our civic engagement and organizing work and building those relationships. Asking someone to vote should not be the first thing we do when we meet them: instead, we need to establish an ongoing conversation that organically engages voters, develops leadership, builds consciousness, and empowers the communities that have been threatened by this election's outcomes.

Additionally, the cyclical nature of funding for electoral work, and uncertainty around whether or not it will continue year to year, has made it difficult to adequately staff our two-state organization. We receive general operating funds for our Illinois work because we have had more time to build relationships with funders. Our electoral funders, on the other hand, are generally interested in our Wisconsin voter engagement work, primarily in



election years. Since 2020, we've made important capacity gains and hired our first organizing staff for Wisconsin, but we have yet to identify the resources needed to sustain staff at the level needed to allow for growth between election cycles. Lack of general operating support for our Wisconsin office has created a need for Chicago-based staff to frequently travel between states; and, though we have made this work to the best of our ability, not having a permanent field director to manage our electoral work year to year is a barrier to the further growth of our Wisconsin program. **We need to identify consistent funding sources that we can reasonably count on year to year**, to allow us to retain more Wisconsin-based staff.



3. Starting early makes all the difference. In our report on the 2022 midterm elections, we noted that we had gotten a late start - this was due in part to the fact that primaries were so late in Wisconsin, as well as our reluctance to endorse Mandela Barnes before he was the official nominee. It was our assessment that, with more time for voter engagement, Barnes could have won his very close race. **This year, we took the lesson to heart, and set up our team in December to be ready to start talking to voters in January.** Getting started early allowed us to take the pulse of the Black electorate in our communities of focus, make adjustments, and evaluate the results with enough time to course-correct as needed.

This lesson again speaks to the need to listen, build trust, and develop relationships with Black communities well in advance of elections. When base-building comes first, civic engagement deepens more authentically, and our voter engagement messaging holds more weight with voters across both states.

4. The tech companies we rely on don't share our values, and we need to prepare for roadblocks. While we have historically relied on digital ads as an easy, cost-effective way to reach hundreds of thousands of voters with high-quality information quickly, this strategy forces us to rely on the whims of corporate entities like Meta. **This year, Meta blocked all of our ads as “too political” in nature**, and forced us to go through a poorly defined “re-verification process” that wasted valuable staff time and did not result in a solution.

Thankfully, we were able to identify a partner that was willing to run ads on our behalf, and was not experiencing the same roadblocks that we were facing. While we still missed out on much of the election season, this partnership allowed us to reach voters with pro-voting messaging and information in the last month before Election Day. This further emphasizes the need to rely more heavily on face-to-face connection. We should always be prepared to pivot when roadblocks like this occur - especially when dealing with corporate-owned, profit-driven tech tools - and have a plan should the rules of engagement change quickly for social media users.



CONCLUSION

We still have much to discern as we approach our 2025 election cycle. Our mission is clear: to elect candidates who support the marginalized, who acknowledge the impacts of white supremacy and oppression, and who will work to ensure a high quality of life for all of their constituents. Our roadmap to their election must include deep conversations with voters, cyclical voter education and engagement, and ultimately, a shift from assumptive organizing practices to intentional, relational ones. We look forward to continuing this work and striving for a liberated world for all people.
