

Hearing More Voices Across a Divided California

Lessons from the Valley Families Unite Campaign

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THE MAGA AGENDA HAS EXPANDED under two Trump administrations, fraying the moral and social ties that are foundational to fostering connections and organizing toward progress. Communities are increasingly fractured by economic stress, political anger, and a media ecosystem that reinforces biases rather than seeking shared truths. And in just a few years, right-wing policies that once outraged people across the political spectrum – such as separating undocumented immigrants from their families – have been normalized and even embraced by growing numbers based on partisanship.

Images and personal stories of these tragedies will sometimes break through and influence public opinion for a short while. But we are clearly at an inflection point for our democracy and the future of how we are – or are not – able to see each other as all part of “the people,” and to demand our leaders govern as such. Our social contract and the promise of liberty and justice for all must be transformed from the ground up, by rejecting partisan political division and building broader solidarity through deeper, longer-term connections based on empathy, shared experiences, and a belief that community-based change is possible and necessary.

The need for such transformation is just as urgent in California as anywhere. While, overall, the state’s center of gravity continues to be inclusive and justice-oriented, we can see – from public opinion polls to school board meetings – that partisan divisions are entrenched and possibly growing.² Just as troubling is that the divisions and corrosive political conversations are pushing many people out. Many of those who disengage are exactly those whose experiences need to be heard in order to solve significant problems like economic inequality, environmental racism, and much more. How do we build opportunities to bring those who are turned away by toxic political debate – and even activist culture – back into the conversation?

We see evidence of expanding civic action in response to this administration, from immigrant defense actions to protests against the military occupation of cities to calls on Congress and the administration to stop healthcare cuts. But the purpose of this paper is to consider ways that social change organizations can better engage Californians who may be directly affected by inequality and injustice, *but who tend to stay away from political activity*. I use examples from my work at [Courage California](#) to dis-

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2 Othering and Belonging Institute’s 2017 and 2024 California Surveys on Othering and Belonging, for example, show that Californians’ views have polarized on a number of questions concerning fairness, opportunity, and power in relation to racial, immigrant, and other identities.

cuss the kinds of spaces we can create, and the new partnerships we must forge, to connect with more working families in our state. Among other things, I highlight the benefits of foregoing “asks” in favor of listening, avoiding partisan political talk, communicating through local media, and building bridges with direct service providers.

Rebuilding Engagement from the Ground Up

From 2023 to 2024, Courage California experimented with a new (to us) model of organizing that saw positive gains and had the potential to serve as a foundation for a sturdy community engagement infrastructure. The **Valley Families Unite campaign** integrated digital and field, local and statewide, all supported by a national partnership. Over the course of a year, we engaged residents in the Central Valley and Inland Empire on multi-issue affordability advocacy and accountability with their congressional representatives. We focused in particular on speaking with working families who otherwise were not involved in any political actions, and spotlighting local voices in the communities most impacted by con-

gressional policies. Though the campaign was broad, it was centered on two primary bodies of work that were most effective for engagement and advocacy:

(1) Issue-based local events that connected lived experience to federal policies, and working families to related supplies and resources: We had the most success hosting community events with giveaways and relevant information and support from trusted partners. For example, over 100 families turned out for our **Working Families Winter Fest campaign launch** at a brewery in Modesto. We gave away toys, featured local organizers who spoke about how their congressman voted on bills that directly impacted daily costs, and families shared their own stories and desire for their representatives to prioritize affordability. Similarly, at the Menifee Public Library in Riverside County, we gave away backpacks and school supplies and had families sign postcards to their representatives opposing cuts to education. For other events, we distributed groceries, brought in tax experts to guide people in filing their taxes, and gave away Halloween tote bags. Critically, none of these events were advertised with a political agenda. Instead, they were promoted as issue-driven events



Organizers and participants celebrate at the Working Families Winter Fest at Persuasion Brewery in Modesto in December 2023.

with an emphasis on giveaways and free resources.

(2) Op-eds by local community leaders that shared their perspectives and made the case for funding critical care and support:

We worked closely with four advocates on op-eds in local media outlets that framed federal policy decisions in terms of their personal experiences. One **op-ed** featured a Filipino food entrepreneur and nonprofit leader who recalled how his family and community in the Central Valley depended on CalFresh (the state SNAP program) for access to culturally important and nutritious food, and called on his representative to vote against SNAP cuts. Prior to his op-ed, we sponsored and tabled at his Stockton food festival. Another **op-ed** was authored by a former health insurance employee whose experience making decisions about people’s health coverage informed his advocacy for government programs that made healthcare more affordable. We connected with him at one of our community events. All of the op-eds were pitched to, developed with, and placed in local media outlets that reached Colton, Palm Springs, Rialto, San Bernardino, Fresno, Merced, and Modesto.

Through Valley Families Unite, we met hundreds of residents throughout the Central Valley and Inland Empire who were eager to share their stories, hear from their neighbors, and get more involved in advocacy. These residents spanned a broad spectrum of political affiliation and prior civic engagement. This

was the goal: Moving beyond spaces that are explicitly, or even implicitly coded as, “political” or “activist.” Though the campaign was more expansive than the events and op-eds, these were the two elements that are most relevant and replicable beyond a specific political agenda and election cycle.

The campaign’s successes were largely driven by a few factors that helped us develop a strong local community engagement infrastructure with shared support of a statewide team and a national partner:

- A dedicated team of paid local organizers, a communications lead, and a project manager who were supported by regular Courage California staff. We hired people who lived in the regions and had experience working on political and issue-based campaigns. Though they were already connected to leaders and organizations on the ground, it was important that they spent part of their time growing their networks in particular ways. This included connecting with fellow activists and activities like worker strikes, but also attending community events and building bridges with service providers that are consciously non-political. The communications lead also built relationships with local reporters, targeted residents of smaller cities and communities with event ads, and supported the op-ed authors and publishers.



Valley Families Unite organizers welcome families to a school supply giveaway at the Menifee Public Library in July 2024.

- Local and statewide partners who had long track records of organizing year-round and intersectionally in the regions. California Alliance for Retired Americans (CARA), Communities for a New California (CNC), and IE United were our anchor Valley Families Unite partners that co-planned our events, sourced speakers, and turned out members and the public for our events and actions. Each organization designated a point person that we met with regularly, and some of our events and actions were extensions of the work they already did. For instance, CNC distributed flyers for one of our events in one of their quarterly community canvasses, and one of their organizers spoke at the same event.
- Substantial funding and technical assistance from a national partner with experience supporting this kind of campaign. Valley Families Unite was the more intensive, deep community engagement campaign that Courage California had always hoped to carry out in these regions, but lacked the funding to do so. Working with an experienced national partner enabled us to learn and launch quickly, and their campaign infrastructure set-up, extensive research, and weekly meetings gave us a strong grounding for the work. The national partner could also connect us with other organizations with experience with similar campaigns. Most importantly, they trusted us to do the work on the ground with our anchor partners and prioritized local voices.

A Necessary Approach to a New World Order

The Valley Families Unite campaign concluded after a year, and now, under a second Trump administration, we find ourselves in an even more fraught political time. Among other things, organizations have to do more with less funding. While significant investment to continue a campaign like Valley Families Unite would be ideal and most fruitful, I also see the potential for organizations to approach our shared goals with a similar core framework. A new world order – one that foregrounds shared lived experiences and grounds our actions in real human stakes – needs a

new way of working together to serve, engage, and connect our communities so that we can overcome divisions and push for more humane, just, and prosperous policies together.

Strengthen and expand ongoing partnerships between direct service, advocacy, and political organizations. Cross-functional partnerships and coalitions already exist, often with a specific focus on a common issue area and/or common policy outcomes. Organizations leverage their memberships, relationships with decision-makers, and communications and outreach infrastructure on shared campaigns, and I have experienced how these coalitions are effective at influencing legislators and policies. Going further, organizations can collaborate on the functions they provide in their communities to reach more people, meet their immediate daily needs, and invite them into deeper engagement.

For instance, in the Valley Families Unite event examples, we worked with direct service organizations to give away supplies that were related to a timely topic and policy decision (e.g., school supplies at a back-to-school event where we discussed potential education cuts), identified residents with relevant lived experience to tell their stories to open conversations, and co-hosted with issue-focused organizations to provide information and resources. Additionally, we worked with local labor unions and partners to secure event spaces and conduct outreach to their members and the public.

This kind of expansive, regular coordination is urgently needed to alleviate hardship, share important relevant information and resources, and create multiple touch points with communities centered on civic engagement.

Tell a more unified story of our communities, connecting the dots across regions, issues, and policies, and inviting people to connect. In this hyper-partisan environment, people's stories are often told within a pre-defined political context and seen only by others who are already sympathetic to their experience and point of view. Organizations are training storytellers and having people share their stories at town halls, press conferences, and advocacy and lobbying

visits. There's a greater opportunity and need for communities to hear from and connect with each other.

The storytelling and personal connection at the center of the Valley Families Unite campaign echoed Courage California's previous work. For example, in response to the passage of Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriage, Courage hosted workshops around the state starting in 2009 to train LGBTQ+ people, family members, and allies on how to tell their stories in their communities. Participants shared their deeply personal experiences, gained confidence to be storytellers, and forged relationships with new people. Many would go on to volunteer to knock on doors to push for the repeal of Prop 8 (which a federal court ruled unconstitutional in 2010) and continue in the work that enshrined marriage equality into the state constitution with Proposition 3 in 2024. Such training and storytelling continues to be needed – now more than ever – with the prominent rise of the anti-transgender agenda and its ties to white supremacy.

Fighting Division Through Community

This second Trump administration operates on dehumanization in order to enact inhumane policies. It has successfully exploited the reduction in people's in-person interactions and our increased stressors to create and widen divides across our differences. The most powerful rejection of this agenda of dehumanization and division has come not from leading politicians or other elites or institutions that, until recently, touted diversity and inclusion. It has come from communities – mutual aid, protests and rallies, and demands for policies focused on care and protection. The time is ripe to build on the popular backlash to the cruelty and violence of the MAGA movement by welcoming people into structured spaces where they can continue to support each other, build camaraderie, and engage hearts and minds.

This will take commitment and investment to work across our own divides and silos as leaders and organizations, to scale and deepen partnerships on the ground that are year-round and multi-year. While

challenging at a time when organizations are losing funding, closing down, and overstretching even more in near-constant rapid response mode, it is even more necessary for the survival of our communities, our movement work, and the democratic spirit that will lead us to a better, more humane, and just future.