

The Latino Voter ID Workgroup: A Case Study of Collaborative Leadership in Philadelphia's Barrio

Will Gonzalez 23 January 2013

Ceiba, a coalition of four Latino nonprofits in Philadelphia, used collaborative leadership principles to coalesce 20 organizations to turn concern about the new Voter ID law's potential to suppress voting in the Hispanic community into a catalyst to promote voter registration and turnout. This collaborative leadership encouraged dialogue, promoted trust, and fostered a sense of ownership of the work of the collective among the participating organizations in the group. This cooperative effort helped the organizations focus on results instead of on who got the credit. It furthermore made clear that Ceiba's role was to provide leadership of the collaborative process, rather than leadership of the group. Collaborative leadership has served the Latino community well, not only because it helped to tackle a serious threat, but also because it has demonstrated its potential to nurture future collaborations.

On March 12, 2012, one of the most restrictive Voter ID measures in the nation became law in Pennsylvania. The

law mandates that voters in the Keystone state present identification every time they vote, though it limits the forms of acceptable IDs at the polls. Proponents praise the law as a tool to prevent voter fraud. Opponents consider it a vehicle to suppress the voting rights of people who have difficulty securing acceptable forms of ID.

Latinos, specifically Puerto Ricans, are one of the voting groups most adversely affected by the law. One reason for this is the Department of Homeland Security's 2010 ruling that invalidated birth certificates issued to people born before July 1, 2010 in Puerto Rico, a US island territory in the Caribbean. Puerto Ricans of voting age can no longer use their original birth certificates to obtain driver's licenses or photo identification cards. They must now acquire entirely new birth certificates. Long queues, an inefficient online application system, and poor recordkeeping make procuring new birth certificates from the Puerto Rican Government a difficult process.

Sixty-five percent of the more than 187,000 Latinos who live in the Philadelphia area are Puerto Rican. The Voter ID Law appeared destined to suppress voting in the Latino community of the city in 2012.

Latino nonprofit organizations concerned about the erosion of voting rights in their community during a presidential election sought to take action to help people comply with the law. Some of them joined the Committee

of Seventy's non-partisan PA Voter ID Coalition, but soon realized that a more focused, community-based approach was needed.

In July, Asociacion de Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM), Concilio de Organizaciones Hispanas de Filadelfia (Concilio), Congreso de Latinos Unidos, Esperanza, the Hispanic Bar Association, and the National Council of La Raza joined forces and utilized Ceiba as a convener and lead organization to develop the Latino Voter ID Workgroup. Ceiba is a coalition of four organizations in the Latino community: Concilio, Esperanza, Finanta, and the Norris Square Civic Association.

The Latino Voter ID Workgroup became an affiliated subgroup of the PA Voter ID Coalition and aggressively recruited other Hispanic organizations to be part of the effort. Over the course of the summer and fall, the group successfully:

- Helped people understand, in English and Spanish, the Voter ID Law by organizing over 30 presentations in community settings, discussing the issue in the media, and carrying out door-to-door outreach in over 30 political divisions in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods;
- Equipped community-based organizations in the Barrio with information and tools related to the Voter ID Law and voting rights by organizing staff trainings and preparing resource guides;

- Assisted voters with challenges they faced in obtaining their ID to vote by organizing birth certificate legal clinics, assisting people at the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, and referring people to the appropriate agency or legal services organization to resolve their issues.

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These activities reduced confusion about the Voter ID Law generated by litigation, the mixed messages and often-confusing policies of the State, and the malicious or misguided efforts of some political action groups.

Collaborative leadership was instrumental to the Workgroup's success. The Workgroup organized regular meetings, encouraged inclusiveness, assured participants an opportunity to be heard, and quickly addressed conflicts and disputes within the group.

The focus on facts over feelings, nurtured by the collaborative leadership process helped to address disputes. When conflict did arise, the organizations presenting divergent points of view were encouraged to bring more information to the table and to work together to help the collective make decisions based on their findings. Requests for additional information also quelled the occasional gadfly that participated at a single meeting and tried to subvert the process.

Collaborative leadership was able to help the Workgroup carry out its activities despite limited material resources. Using the mantra of 'We do not want to reinvent the wheel,' the Workgroup relied on existing materials, and partners' experience with particular activities. For example, instead of issuing its own flyers or informational materials about the Voter ID Law, it embraced those created by the PA Voter ID Coalition, and the ACLU. The emphasis was on the integrity of these materials in terms of information, and on the quality of the translations, not on whose logo was on the heading.

Motivating partners toward effectiveness after they committed to carry out an activity was achieved by the collaborative leadership principle of developing small teams of fellow partners to plan, report, reevaluate, and implement the task. The partner that made the commitment was primarily responsible for the activity but was not left alone to bear the brunt of the planning. This approach was useful even when dealing with prominent and experienced partners in the Workgroup. For example, in the midst of planning the birth certificate legal clinics, the partner that committed to undertake the activity had to attend to important organizational responsibilities including participation at a vital conference out-of-state. The partner had been responsible for organizing birth certificate legal clinics in previous years but was now tasked with organizing two clinics in seven days that aimed to serve a large number of people. Having a team

plan the clinics allowed the partner to attend to its other responsibility while Workgroup teammates continued organizing the event during the hiatus. The clinics took place in a timely and efficient manner.

In terms of the media, the Workgroup coordinated but did not try to control the messages or the exposure of its partners. The media spotlight has been known to generate jealousies within groups and detract from the positive work being done. Partners were free to speak to the press if they so desired, and their work was highlighted when the Workgroup scheduled media events. Collaborative leadership, however, requires that the convener or leadership organization subordinate its ego. When the Workgroup organized its biggest Voter ID press conference, Ceiba limited its role to simply introducing the speakers. The partners made the substantive presentations, addressed media questions, and fulfilled subsequent requests for additional comments after the press conference.

A strategic planning process over the previous winter and spring had prepared Ceiba to use collaborative leadership principles in the following summer and fall. During the strategic planning process the board, staff and stakeholders of Ceiba reached a consensus that the organization needed to significantly augment its advocacy efforts. Protecting the voting rights of the community is connected in many ways to Ceiba's updated mission: promoting the economic development and financial

inclusion of Philadelphia's Latino community through collaborations and advocacy aimed at ensuring their access to quality housing.

The strategic plan calls for Ceiba to coalesce community organizations around advocacy efforts without requiring the administrative procedures of membership. Ceiba is on a course to amend its bylaws accordingly and eliminate the membership structure entirely. It is turning instead to collaborative leadership principles to guide its advocacy work.

It is almost impossible for any individual or organization to address today's complex socio-economic challenges alone. The growing size and diversity of the Hispanic community, however, presents Latino organizations with great opportunities to confront challenges in a collective way.

The Voter ID Law is still in effect however, and collaborative leadership is doing more than just keeping the Workgroup active. It is showing a productive way for Latino organizations to collectively address community problems, and is cultivating a renewed willingness to work cooperatively for a common purpose.

The Community Tool Box of the University of Kansas is right when it says collaborative leadership breeds more collaborative leadership and more collaboration leads to exploring novel ways to solve problems.

Author Bio

Will Gonzalez is the Executive Director of Ceiba, a coalition of Latino community based organizations in Philadelphia.

He has 25 years of experience working in the Latino community. The Philadelphia Foundation's Williams Award for Organizational Excellence & The Community Change Award from the Bread & Roses Community Fund recognized his leadership of non-profits in the 1990s.