

2025

ESSENTIAL TO DEMOCRACY

Engaging the Latino Immigrant
Community in Democracy-Building
Work **In Their Own Words**



A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY
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INTRODUCTION

Following the 2024 presidential election, Latinos in the United States have faced both heightened scrutiny in public discourse and state-sanctioned targeting through immigration enforcement, quickly shifting federal policy, and ICE raids that are surging across the country. Latino and mixed-status households are frequently framed as a political problem, as a drain on public resources, and as a population to monitor rather than embrace as an integral part of the civic fabric of the country.

This framing has placed Latino immigrant communities at the center of renewed national attention, drawn into a political environment defined by polarization, immigration crackdowns, and narratives that position them as either a threat or a test of national identity. Their labor, migration patterns, and demographic growth are being cited in arguments about the economy, border policy, and public safety, with lawmakers and media outlets disproportionately focusing on Latino immigrants as symbols of broader political conflicts. **In a climate of anti-immigrant rhetoric, Latino immigrants are treated less as neighbors and community members and more as evidence in competing political narratives.**

Over a dozen states have introduced legislation to restrict ID access, limit voter eligibility, and expand surveillance in ways that disproportionately impact Latinos and mixed-status households (Brennan Center for Justice, 2025). Concurrently, disinformation campaigns targeting Spanish-speaking communities have spread across platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube, undermining public trust and fragmenting trust even amongst Latinos themselves (Stewart, Arif, & Starbird, 2022; Media Matters, 2024).

Nationally, Latinos are the second-largest voting bloc in the U.S., with over 34.5 million eligible voters as of 2024 (Krogstad & Lopez, 2024). In the midst of both external threats (including policy rollbacks, disinformation, and surveillance) and internal divisions (shaped by immigration status, nationality, and generational experience), Latino immigrants are being called to participate more visibly in civic life. They are expected to vote, organize, and show up to political action, even as many are still navigating legal precarity, cultural displacement, and the emotional toll of survival.

Public narratives that label Latino immigrants as apathetic, uninformed, or civically disengaged are reinforced by media patterns documented in the Columbia Journalism Review. CJR finds that political reporting frequently relies on “shallow storylines about Latino disinterest” that ignore the lived barriers shaping participation (Columbia Journalism Review, 2018). These portrayals are amplified in mainstream and partisan media. These portrayals are echoed in broader media discourse. On Lou Dobbs Tonight, for example, immigrants were described as people with “very low skills” who are “not contributing the way real Americans do,” a framing that casts immigrant communities as deficient and less capable of civic involvement (Fox Business, January 17, 2018). Similar narratives circulate more explicitly in partisan outlets; Breitbart News has claimed that undocumented immigrants “refuse to assimilate and have no interest in participating in American civic life” (Breitbart, May 12, 2017). These portrayals fail to account for the structural constraints, emotional demands, and political skepticism participants described in this research. Such narratives flatten and dehumanize entire communities into caricatures, **failing to account for the structural barriers, emotional labor, and political disillusionment they are navigating on their unique, infinitely complex journeys in finding a foothold to life in the United States.**

The Popular Democracy (PD) network's membership is largely made up of Latino immigrants, spanning a wide spectrum of ages, nationalities, migration pathways, and time in the U.S. As members of PD affiliates, they are able to participate in programs that offer political education, leadership development, lead issue campaigns, and neighborhood based community organizing. These organizations are, and have been, deeply committed to leading work that provides wraparound support for immigrant and working-class families. They have won campaigns to stop evictions, secure wage protections, expand healthcare access, and defend immigrant rights, all while holding space for joy and collective care.

Even within these vibrant and supportive spaces, Latino immigrant members enter civic spaces with a wide spectrum of international political experiences. Many come from countries where civic life was shaped by repressive governments, disputed election results, fragile institutions, or violence against dissent. Participants referenced examples such as one-party dominance in Cuba, post-civil war instability in Central America, or election cycles in which fraud was widely perceived but never corrected. Others arrived from places where political participation was more communal, through neighborhood assemblies, church-based organizing, or local party structures, but still marked by exclusion or instability. These histories travel with people, shaping how democracy is understood, how risk is measured, and how trust is extended in new contexts.

Exclusion and political violence are not unfamiliar to the U.S. context, but this project argues that each person's preexisting relationship with civic participation profoundly shapes how they engage here; how concepts like democracy, resistance, and civic action are interpreted – and often questioned – when introduced in U.S.-based organizing spaces. For Latino immigrants whose perspectives may have been shaped by authoritarianism or government betrayal, U.S. civic engagement spaces may feel unfamiliar, untrustworthy, or even dangerous (Hajnal & Lee, 2011). Research shows that immigrants' prior experiences with state violence and displacement reshape how they understand civic "engagement" in the U.S. Studies show that for many Latino immigrants, participation is less about formal political activity and more about navigating exclusion, sustaining cultural survival, and building informal networks of trust (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014).

For this very reason, the work of these affiliates in 2025 and beyond is more important than ever, building the conditions that make participation imaginable. Affiliates of this network provide the relational scaffolding, political education, and healing-centered spaces that make trust and transformation possible. **Their members, in turn, are a pool of people who hold essential knowledge, insights rooted in lived experience, that can guide how organizing spaces must evolve to meet their specific needs, cultural realities, and political histories.**



PURPOSE & METHODOLOGY

This project investigates how Latino immigrants experience and interpret civic participation in the United States, with particular attention to the roles of identity, culture, and political movement. The study was conducted across six community-based organizations in the Popular Democracy network: Make the Road New York (MRNY), Florida Rising, Churches United for Fair Housing (CUFFH), Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), Make the Road Nevada (MRNV), and Communities Organizing Latine Power and Action (COPAL).

Twelve co-researchers, two members from each organization, who self-identified as Latino immigrants took part in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) process. They ranged in gender identity, having 3 male-identifying participants and 9 female-identifying participants. The group ranged in age from 21 to 72, spanned a multitude of migration pathways and time in the country, and represented diverse countries of origin, including Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Bolivia, Cuba and Peru. It is worth noting that while the group reflected a wide range of national origins, these perspectives should not be read as representative of any one national community. They offer qualitative insight into how a specific group of Latino immigrants, embedded in the PD network, understand civic life, not a definitive portrait of immigrant experiences as a whole.

Through a series of 3 focus groups, workshops, individual interviews, and a survey of 90 additional members' responses, the research centers the lived experiences, tensions, and strategies that shape Latino immigrant engagement with U.S. civic and political life. "Workshops" refers to the facilitated, structured sessions of guided discussions, storytelling exercise, brainstorming, reflection, and scenario-based activities that helped participants surface their experiences with democracy and evaluate how those experiences have shaped their participation today. The research was conducted in Spanish through all stages of the project, from designing our discussion priorities, to creating survey questions, and interpreting findings shaped with and by participants.

PAR is a community-driven research methodology that positions those most impacted by injustice as co-researchers and co-theorists. It seeks not only to understand the world, but to change it through collaborative inquiry, reflection, and action. This tradition is rooted in the radical education practices of the Global South since the 1970s, such as Orlando Fals-Borda in Colombia and Paulo Freire in Brazil, who emphasized critical consciousness (*conscientização*) and the co-creation of knowledge between educators and learners. The practice has been expanded by feminist scholars, such as Patricia Maguire, who in her 1987 book, *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*, introduced the first feminist critiques of PAR, which pointed out that traditional PAR often ignored the patriarchal structures and gendered power imbalances that limit women's participation (Maguire, 1987, as cited in FPAR Academy, n.d.). In the 1980s, Renu Khanna began using PAR in India, particularly in women's health and human rights, to develop feminist-inspired maternal health programs. Mary Brydon-Miller, Miriam Raider-Roth, Colleen Reid, Wendy Frisby, and other scholars focused on integrating feminist values into PAR and practitioner inquiry.

This particular project based itself from learnings directly from Michelle Fine and María Elena Torre's Public Science Project in New York, who foregrounded PAR's ability to disrupt extractive research dynamics and instead generate knowledge that is accountable to communities (Torre & Fine, 2006). These feminist and decolonial interventions into PAR emphasize the importance of relational ethics, reflexivity, and healing, particularly when working with communities who have experienced state violence, marginalization, or silencing. As Torre (2014) puts it, "the work is not only about generating knowledge, but about building collectivity and interrupting harm." In this project, co-researchers helped shape the focus group questions, identified which themes felt most urgent to explore, and co-interpreted emerging patterns during group analysis sessions. We treated the research spaces as both healing and organizing spaces: places where people could reflect on and share unsurfaced personal stories, in some instances, for the very first time. The model also created spaces for new ideas, to challenge interpretations, and decide together what lessons should be carried back into their organizations.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across interviews, focus groups and a survey, participants shared powerful testimonies of political turmoil, economic precarity, and forced displacement, as well as of resilience, faith, and resistance. They spoke of fleeing authoritarian regimes, enduring persecution for political dissent, and making impossible choices to protect their children and communities. These narratives contextualized why many participants came to the United States, and also revealed how deeply each of those unique histories shape their orientation toward civic institutions. Their reflections offered critical insights into what builds and breaks trust in U.S.-based civic spaces. Participants described the conditions under which they feel safe enough to share their stories, the relational dynamics that foster (or inhibit) belonging, and the kinds of language, structure, and facilitation that make political education feel either empowering or alienating. Together, they form a collective knowledge base that challenges assumptions about "hard-to-reach" communities and demands a rethinking of how civic engagement is defined, invited, and sustained.

This report offers general lessons and ten concrete recommendations for movement builders, practitioners, and political educators. These include developing civic fluency ladders, creating explicit intergenerational programs, protecting participants from extractive storytelling practices, and anchoring organizing efforts in joy, learning and familiar community gathering approaches. Ultimately, the research challenges prevailing assumptions about Latino political behavior and calls to build on what affiliates of the PD network have been championing: approaches to civic engagement that are trauma informed, rooted in history, and built through relational trust. The project acts as an offering for deeper provocation grounded in love and respect for our affiliates' work, and also going beyond broad organizing practices to one that is specific, catered, and emotionally intentional. What participants shared makes clear that current engagement cannot be separated from earlier experiences of political instability, loss, or repression. For organizers, this means recognizing that trust-building requires understanding those histories and the conditions people face now.

Rather than meeting people where they are, perhaps we must meet them where they have been.

THE GROUP'S DISCUSSION PRIORITIES

To ground the participatory action research in themes that felt resonant to Latino immigrant participants across geography, generation, and immigration status, our group divided the focus group prompts and analysis into three core areas: **identity, culture, and movement work**. These categories helped us both honor people's lived experiences and surface insights that could guide organizing and leadership development work in meaningful, nuanced ways.

IDENTITY

To understand how participants see themselves and explore how race, immigration status, language, nationality, and generational experience shape that self-perception in civic spaces.

This category surfaced narratives about how people locate themselves within the U.S. racial landscape, their experience of marginalization both back home and here, and the emotional complexity of building a life in a country that often views them as disposable. Many reflected on their internalized identities, not just as immigrants, but as racialized bodies, as mixed status people, and as Latinos perceived differently depending on skin tone, accent, or time in the U.S.

CULTURE

To explore how faith, family, tradition, language, and values influence how people engage — or hesitate to engage — in civic and political spaces. These features of everyday life, or culture, was the vehicle through which many participants made sense of politics, risk, power, and belonging. Participants reflected on how communal values shape what feels possible, what feels safe, and what feels aligned. Religion, music, storytelling, and food all came up as core touchpoints for trust-building and political consciousness.

MOVEMENT WORK

To examine how participants came to engage with organizing, politics, or civic life and what may have kept them or other Latino immigrants in their community from engaging more deeply. This section focused on the pathways and blockages to civic participation directly from their lived observations. It looked at everything from migration stories and political trauma to barriers like work, documentation, or time. It also elevated the importance of our affiliate's relational organizing work, community safety, and ladders of education as key conditions for sustained involvement in movement work.

OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Latino immigrants' layered political experiences, identities, and histories shape the way they understand and participate in democracy in the United States? **How do those understandings influence their engagement in civic and organizing work today?**

One participant's story helps illustrate how migration decisions, family responsibility, and political disillusionment come together in ways that later shape civic participation. A 58-year-old Bolivian immigrant described how her family's path to the United States unfolded and how that experience reshaped her sense of political responsibility.

Bolivian, 58 year old woman living in Florida

I'm from La Paz, Bolivia. I came here with my two young daughters because the political situation in Bolivia was difficult, and we couldn't get work unless we were aligned with the government. That simple. And my daughters' father — they were coming after his mother, and after him. So he left. And I followed, because I didn't want my daughters to grow up without both parents. Back in Bolivia, I was a lawyer. But I understood that, here, I'd have to do whatever work I could to get by. And so I became — proudly — a domestic worker: cleaning homes, taking care of children, and caring for the elderly. As time passed, I held on to hope that someday, like during Reagan's era, there would be a path to permanent residency or citizenship. But the years went by and nothing changed.

My younger daughter was able to benefit from a petition her father filed. But my older daughter couldn't, because she had arrived at age 12 — she didn't qualify. With time, I started to grow desperate. At 16, she no longer had the same opportunities as her peers — they were working, getting driver's licenses, moving forward. She couldn't. I began to see her reality as a young person, full of intense emotions. And as her mother, it hit me hard. I had made that decision for her. And even though my intentions were good — to give her a better life — I had placed her in an infinite struggle. In Florida, she couldn't attend college. She finished high school, but we hit a wall. I didn't know if I had made a mistake, but I felt terrible. She was deeply depressed. She had done everything right and still lost out on scholarships and so many things that Dreamers lose out on.

She joined a group of Dreamers here in South Florida. That changed her life. She saw that her sadness — her experience — wasn't unique. There were others like her. She could lean on their shoulders. That was very emotional for me, because I had made the choice. I watched them fight, cry when the DREAM Act failed, and then pick themselves back up two days later to fight again. With those brave young people continuing the struggle, we eventually got DACA. And that taught all of us — especially us parents — that we had to fight, too. I made myself a promise that from that day forward, I wouldn't let a single day go by without fighting for permanent status for those youth. And that's exactly what I did. That change, that transformation, showed me that we, the parents, were also Dreamers. **We were the first Dreamers** — we made the bold move to bring our kids here.

Everyone came here to work hard for a dream. We also came because the United States has interfered in our countries. No one leaves their country because they want to. U.S. policies destabilize our governments, drain our natural resources, and sometimes even protect the cartels. That's part of the reason we leave. No one wants to leave home. In my profession here — as a proud domestic worker — we had no rights. No sick leave. We need to let go of this illusion that the U.S. is the land of perfection, a utopia of human rights. It's not. There is deep hypocrisy here.

Seeing all this made me realize our responsibility to build social consciousness. Too often, people in our community just wait for things to change, chasing the dream — buying the newest car, the best perfume. **They forget.**

IDENTITY & CULTURE, FINDINGS

The shame of such hefty sacrifice, the sense of loss and self-erasure it can carry, is rarely spoken aloud. For many Latino immigrants, the dream of a better life in the U.S. is so fragile, so hard-won, that it feels safer to fold into the very forces that oppress us than to confront them. To challenge the illusion is to risk admitting that what we've built here — in survival mode — is in a system set up for our failure. And so we stay quiet. We keep our heads down. We hide the complexity of who we are. *"They forget"*. But another participant held a divergent perspective.

"It's not that people forget where they come from. It's that they're ashamed—ashamed of their roots, their humble towns, their language, everything beautiful our countries have, to the struggle they live now in the U.S.. It's a taboo topic. We don't share the food, the culture, the beauty we bring. It's not that they forget—they remember. But they're ashamed."

What follows are the findings from our conversations about culture and identity— not the kind checked on a census box, but the identity forged in silence, scarcity, and struggle. The identity that shapes what we risk, what we question, and whether we believe our voices belong in the room at all.

UNSPOKEN HIERARCHIES AND INTERNAL DIVISION

While often seen as a unified voting bloc, Latino immigrants named stark differences and divisions based on nationality, colorism, documentation status, and time in the U.S. These unspoken hierarchies create deep, often unacknowledged fractures within the Latino immigrant community — fractures shaped by nationality, time in the U.S., migration pathway, and documentation status. While "Latino" is often used as a collective identifier, it flattens a range of cultural, historical, and political differences that continue to shape how people see one another, and themselves.

Some spoke of arriving early and developing a sense of superiority over newer immigrants. Others noted that those who migrated with legal pathways — or who assimilated faster — looked down on those who didn't. "I used to say, 'How can someone who just arrived six months ago already have papers?'" That was ignorance on my part. Slowly, I've learned to think differently. There's judgment within us — if you're undocumented, if you don't speak English, if you just got here. Some people act like they've earned more respect just because they've been here longer".

Even national identity became a dividing line — not a bridge. Differences in cultural values, home-country politics, and pride often mutated into exclusion. "In the 'Doña group, we're a group of women.

Sometimes we invite each other to activities with people from different countries — Ecuadorians, Hondurans, Central Americans, who tend to come together the most. And sometimes they say to me, 'Why did you come here if you're not Ecuadorian?' And right there, we divide instead of supporting each other. We can't even fathom coming together as a Latino identity. **That shared grouping is assumed here. But we don't see ourselves as one group**".

These dynamics have historical roots. Colonialism, colorism, and U.S. intervention shaped migration patterns unevenly across Latin America. Some came fleeing dictatorships. Others left because of poverty created by structural adjustment and trade. These distinct realities carry into the U.S. — shaping trust, fear, and pride in different ways.

As one participant put it: “Our different countries of origin cause us to segregate ourselves from one another.” Without intentional space to name and unlearn these internal hierarchies, participants said, it becomes harder to imagine collective action — or even simple belonging. The promise of unity often runs into the reality of silent divides unnamed in traditional organizing efforts.

In survey questions about civic participation, there was a clear pattern: newer arrivals reported lower levels of confidence to participate or engage in community meetings.

11% wrote in that they felt “looked down on” or “less deserving” than people who “have been here longer.”

But a 71 year old, Native Indigenous participant from Perú living in New York City saw this self degradation as a colonial, inherited practice, taught long before we walked this earth.

“We’ve been told we are “mestizos” and therefore almost European, and because of that, we’ve been taught to reject our Indigenous or African cultures. We subconsciously have been taught to feel less than, to do anything but recognize that we are valuable *because* of the rich, ancient culture we carry. Even calling ourselves us Hispanic or Latino erases our Indigenous origins.

When discussing what participants wished they saw in organizing and training spaces, several participants hoped for content that dug deeper in establishing solidarity within the Latino identity, explicitly naming the tensions and prejudice we hold amongst each other. One participant asked “Beyond being Latino in this country. Who are we?”

INHERITED FEAR

While national pride and cultural identity are deeply held, many participants emphasized that those same attachments can shape how civic engagement is modeled — or withheld — across generations. Latino immigrants often identify more strongly with their countries of origin than with a shared U.S.-based Latino identity. And with that national identity often comes a legacy of political disillusionment, trauma, or fear that gets passed down at home. These inherited experiences don’t just shape how we vote — they shape how we see ourselves in relation to power. One participant shared:

“There’s a lot of fear. The trauma from what we lived through in our home countries is still with us. Sometimes we don’t speak up because we grew up afraid. In Honduras, for example, journalists were killed just for speaking out. That fear gets passed down from generation to generation. My great-grandmother died in a peaceful protest. So my grandmother told my mom, ‘Don’t get involved in politics.’ And my mom told me the same. Even now, she asks me, ‘Is it peaceful?’. My yes never makes a difference. But we still feel that fear. We should have a workshop that talks directly about fear. What is the biggest fear among the Guardians? Among women? Among young people? We have to name it. Because if we don’t talk about it, we won’t ever heal.”

Our youngest participant, still in his teens, also added how his parents who immigrated don't feel like this is their country, so they don't instill in their children the confidence to get involved. "Since there isn't a civic engagement culture at home, children don't see civic participation as a norm. Instead, us as first-generation Latinos see that we come with a poverty mindset. We see hard work as the only way out, but we don't prepare ourselves out of fear—with language, with our rights as human beings. How can we help people wake up to being respected human beings?"

One of the clearest through-lines across our conversations was the deep desire from members to learn how to better engage the young people in their families and communities. Many parents and older adults named that their children or younger relatives often have more formal status, safety, and access to participate civically — but they aren't always given the tools, language, or time in training spaces to learn how to talk with them about civic power. Breaking the chain of fear and inherited disengagement means supporting members to become confident messengers to the next generation. As one participant put it:

"Why don't we ever address generational differences between older and younger Latinos? We as parents come from a home country where politics there is handled differently. So what happens is maybe we think it's not worth it to even try because we come from a place where things aren't done right, that aren't done properly. There are no processes.

So we don't get interested in informing our kids or supporting them to build that civic education for the whole family to get motivated. If, for example, the parents can't take an action, but the kids can vote, then the support of the parents, the family support, to push their kids to get civically involved — and to take action — that would be invaluable is my point."

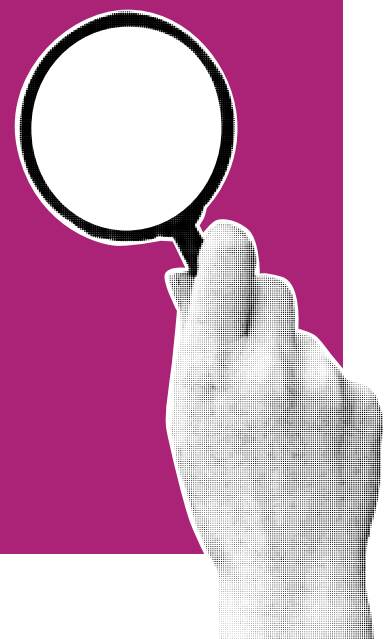
What does the survey data say?

- 39% of respondents listed "lack of trust in the government" as a top barrier to participation.
- 41% specifically named "fear of legal consequences" as a barrier.

These are not just individual worries — they become collective patterns when you see how consistent they are across immigrant communities.

- When asked whether they felt they had enough information to participate safely, a significant portion selected "No" or "Unsure."
- Only about 12% reported "very confident" that they know how to participate civically without risk.

In the section on how often civic issues are discussed at home, a large share indicated **"rarely" or "never."**



One participant described how this fear shows up in the smallest moments, freezing even the desire to speak

“In school, I liked English. But when I got here, I was mute. I was afraid. I felt like everyone knew... I felt like everyone knew that I was going to stay here and that I didn’t belong. That they saw me as an intruder. An alien. I wouldn’t even talk, not even to order a hamburger. I let my husband do everything -- the fear paralyzed me. And then, well, I saw the need to move forward because my kids had to go to school and everything. And so, little by little, I started letting go of that fear.”

Fear is not a switch that turns off with a “know your rights” card. It’s a wound carried across borders and generations, and it cannot be addressed by information alone. 33% said their homeland experiences made them less likely to participate in U.S. civic life, and **45% cited mistrust in the idea of democracy as their community's top barrier to getting involved.**

Participants who finally spoke these truths out loud called the space healing — a rare chance to loosen fear’s grip by witnessing each other’s survival. Many asked for more of this: spaces that treat healing and political education as inseparable, so we can grow the deep empathy our communities need to break out of silence. Without this kind of collective healing, the fear we inherit too easily turns inward — feeding mistrust, division, and a sense that we’re alone in what we’ve lived through. And it is in that silence that the stories we tell ourselves about each other — about who “deserves” to belong — can take root.



Cuban, 69 year old black woman living in Nevada

I lived my whole life in Cuba, from birth. I've only been in this country for three years. I built my entire life in Cuba, so I can tell you everything about the totalitarian system there — the dictatorship that has lasted more than 64 years. I lived through it all. I lived under a system so criminal, so unjust — a totalitarian dictatorship where only the Castros have the right to everything. The people are starving, with no access to doctors or anything. For a while, medicine was somewhat accessible to the community. But that didn’t last long. It was and continues to be a façade the rest of the world comfortably believes.

Eventually, everything deteriorated. Conditions worsened, and people couldn’t even buy medicine because their salaries were never enough. Healthcare quickly became a business, profiting off Cuban doctors and healthcare workers by sending them abroad. They call them ‘medical missions.’ But really, they rent out the doctors to other countries that pay. The government takes most of the money and gives doctors very little. They call it a mission, but it’s just how the regime makes money. Soon, doctors started disappearing from clinics. There were no specialists. Even now, it’s hard to see one. It’s still the same system. It’s extremely difficult.

The people have no vote. The people are starving. Deep poverty. Long blackouts. People can't speak freely. **Just putting up a sign that says 'freedom' can land you in prison for years, alongside violent criminals.** My son, while he lived in Cuba, didn't agree with the system. They summoned him, detained him, released him, and repeated the cycle. He's a veterinarian. Studied there. A good man, with a wife and daughter. But he refused to join any party or institution. And for them, that's unforgivable. So they jailed him.

If you're against the system, they make sure to retaliate. This was clearest on July 11, 2021. The people were fed up and took to the streets. And the government practically massacred them. The Cuban president went on TV and said, 'The order to combat has been given.' You can't live there anymore. The ones who stay have no other choice. You're told you can eat one piece of bread a day. You go to the store with a ration card, and you're allotted two pounds of rice per month. You don't eat. That's why people are starving. It was so brutal.

I managed to escape, like many others. That's why I say with all sincerity: I will always fight for democracy. Always. Because democracy means all voices and opinions must be heard freely. So things like this never happen. But people too afraid to get involved in work like this, after our lives in Cuba, I can't blame them. I say it with some shame, but I never want to return to Cuba. I got out. For me, it's as if Cuba doesn't exist. As if it never did. That's my story. Real. Very painful. Very sad. Very hard. Under that communist, totalitarian regime that hides behind the word 'democracy.' But there is no democracy. Only the Castros and their circle have rights. No one else. What more can I say to you Abraham, you know it well. After all, they were a part of the original cancer that brought Venezuela to where it is now.



The group emphasized that barriers to civic participation extend beyond paperwork or language and are often rooted in layered traumas and misconceptions about U.S. political systems. One participant from Peru reflected: **“I never thought corruption existed in the U.S., or even could exist.** It wasn't something I only felt was unlikely — it was an impossibility. That's what I was sold. So I didn't realize it was necessary to take action, even when I was the object of the oppression.”

In our roundtable discussion, it was mentioned that many immigrants arrive with the belief that the United States represents the ultimate solution to their hardships. This expectation frames injustice or exclusion not as systemic issues, but as personal failings, discouraging collective action.

In the author's perspective, these reflections suggest that migration narratives often intensify the tension between expectation and lived reality. When immigrants confront the gap between the promise of opportunity and their actual experiences, they encounter both disillusionment and the often scary possibility of new political awareness. This highlights why information alone is insufficient: community members need the intentional spaces that surface contradictions, examine sources of political knowledge, and unlearn the notion that survival depends solely on silence or gratitude.

FAITH AND CELEBRATION

Participants also described how silence operates within communal gathering spaces, particularly faith-based settings. Faith, spirituality, and church life were consistently identified as culturally foundational sources of trust, belonging, and influence for many Latino immigrants. Prior research supports this role of faith institutions. A growing body of research shows that religious institutions often function as early entry points for immigrants, providing trusted social networks, practical assistance such as help finding work, and guidance on navigating unfamiliar systems, particularly for those facing legal or social precarity (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007; Hirschman, 2004; Levitt, 2007). Within these spaces, values and political ideas can be shaped, even when politics is not discussed explicitly.

So why don't we talk more about what it means to organize with these spaces, not just around them? Despite their central role in community life, faith spaces are often overlooked in organizing strategies. This raises critical questions: how can organizers engage these spaces not only as cultural backdrops, but as active partners in democracy-building? And how can this be done in ways that respect spiritual ties while also opening room for dialogue about inequality and civic responsibility?

Organizations across the country are beginning to lean into this question. A participating affiliate, Churches United for Fair Housing, spearheads an organizing model rooted in faith based community spaces to organize working-class BIPOC communities around issues of housing, immigration, social, and economic justice. Faith in Action also spearheads this work, a national organizing network working to create an organizing model around this idea, building community power through faith congregations and other trusted local institutions. Its model centers on shared values and long-term relationships, provides leadership training on democratic participation, and supports sustained campaigns that begin with local issues and scale to city, state, and national policy change.

Elsewhere, one of our participants, **a 70 year old local pastor from El Salvador living in Minnesota**, named this tension clearly:

"I'm a leader in an evangelical Christian church, and there, we try not to talk about politics because it causes tension. Sometimes someone speaks with a lot of anger toward a political party, and someone who supports that party feels attacked. That's caused divisions amongst ourselves—even spiritual ones. That's why we avoid the topic inside the church at all costs. But outside the congregation, we do talk about it more freely. Sometimes politics divides us as a Latino community, because we don't all think the same.

I know that my members, while maybe not at church, need spaces where we can talk about these things respectfully, without it separating us. It's a separate space that we need."

Our participants, relatedly, made clear that tapping into cultural spaces and practices are one of the most powerful tools we have to pull people in. They explained that people are more likely to participate when the work is tied to something familiar, celebratory, or joyful. *“It’s not that our people don’t care about the cause or content itself, it’s that our communities know how to bring joy and connection alongside struggle. Celebration is survival, too. We are joyous as a people. We’re loud and we dance, we gravitate towards joy. The topics are too heavy”.*

Music, food, and shared traditions were cited as ways to both honor where people come from and anchor them in the belief that they deserve to shape the future together. **A 60 year old Colombian participant** illustrated this by describing how their organization uses chiva events to connect cultural celebration with civic action:

“At Florida Rising, we use Colombian chiva. We’ve gone to lots of events with the chivas, showing up with music, with our salsa. I remember that many times even those who were on the opposite side of the political divide – Cubans, Venezuelans — would join our group. That has been key to getting people out, combining the joyful culture of the chiva with civic action. We would take them to vote on the chivas. When we share our stories through these cultural bridges that we haven’t been exposed to, sometimes we lose our fear, and that inspires other people, even those without papers, to raise their voices.”

Our survey shows that when asked what cultural practices could make civic spaces feel more welcoming, people chose celebrations, shared meals, and storytelling above all else. One of our affiliates in Arizona, Fuerte Arts Movement, is an artist-led multi-issue civic-engagement community organization who moves people to collective action for voting rights, housing justice, environmental justice, and other issues through art and culture. Every year, they host a Noche de Arte, featuring young BIPOC artists, a pop-up market with local artisans, delicious free food, and live music, while showcasing Fuerte’s activism and advocacy work. Other affiliates of ours, like PCUN, COPAL, and our Make the Road organizations, have found a variety of ways to incorporate these practices.

When survey respondents were asked to choose their top three engagement practices that would increase the likelihood of Latino immigrants in their community showing up to movement spaces, the results showed that:

- **53% want celebration of holidays and traditions that reflect the community.**
- **46% want Spanish-language or bilingual storytelling and testimonies.**
- **45% want potluck-style meals.**

Participants noted that social trust and cultural familiarity make civic participation more accessible and appealing. They emphasized that when organizing is rooted in practices the community already values, people feel invited to bring their full selves, including sharing culture and homeland stories into advocacy work that often relies on storytelling, testimonials, and lived experiences.

MOVEMENT FINDINGS

In the preceding sections, we examined how Latino immigrants define democracy and how their layered identities shape participation in civic life in the United States. When the conversation turned to movement work – meaning community organizing, campaigns, and other sustained collective efforts – participants described even greater challenges. Organizing asks people to see themselves not only as individuals but as part of a collective. They highlighted tensions between personal safety and collective risk, between gratitude for opportunities and disillusionment with political systems, and between the pull of home-country loyalties and the demands of civic life in the U.S.

The group emphasized that they are not passive recipients of information or outreach, but carry expertise drawn from their own lived experiences. In the focus group discussions, they named barriers, fears, and histories that shape how they approach civic life and, in some cases, prevent those closest to them from participating at all.

Entering organizing spaces was often framed as both an opportunity and a risk, requiring courage and trust. Decisions about whether to participate were influenced not only by strategy or the availability of community spaces, but by the weight of each person's history, and by whether they felt the space would be safe, respectful, and truly inclusive.

We started by asking: How do you define democracy?

“To me, democracy means being taken into account—regardless of where we come from—and being respected. And also that we, ourselves, take others into account and respect them.”

“Democracy is being able to help your neighbor. To extend your hand to someone who is just arriving and trying to start over. But I feel like that freedom no longer exists. Before, we looked out for each other. Now, we can only take care of ourselves. That frustrates me.”

“I see democracy as something that has to do with access—right? Access to education, to healthcare, to justice. But many of us don’t have access to those things. So, are we really living in a democracy? I’m confused by that.”

“Democracy, to me, is being able to speak without fear. Being able to say what you think without feeling like you’ll be punished or judged. But here, there’s fear too. It’s different from the fear we had in our countries—but it’s still fear.”

“We don’t know what democracy is; we have always lacked resources. We’re not interested because we’ve never experienced it”.



PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.

In discussing democracy, several participants emphasized the sense of relief they felt upon first arriving in the United States (which notably, can and likely changes over time). For them, democracy was first experienced not through formal institutions, but through everyday dignities they had been denied at home: personal safety, respect, and the freedom to speak without fear. One participant from El Salvador, reflecting on their arrival in 2000, described democracy as the ability to express oneself openly and to belong to community organizations without the threat of violence or repression.

“Well, when I came here from my country, El Salvador, back in 2000, we were living through a very difficult time of confusion, gangs, theft, extortion, and so many things. Coming to this country, I felt very relieved because the situation was different. I was respected as a person. Back then, I was respected as a person and, even though I didn’t know the language, people were... there wasn’t as much racism as there is now. So for me, what democracy is, is freedom — freedom of expression, freedom of thought. I can belong to an organization for my people, for the Hispanic community. We should use that fact, that here we have that right to be a part of something, of a group, to tell people to not waste their opportunity”.

While some participants described relief and gratitude upon arriving in the United States, they also acknowledged that this sense of possibility felt fragile. Civic participation was often seen not as a normal part of daily life, but as an opportunity that could be lost if not carefully protected.

But the group was fragmented on how they saw entering the U.S., with other participants describing a divergent experience that emphasized feelings of political disillusionment. For them, entering civic life in the U.S. was compared to stepping into a house that did not fully belong to them. The systems felt confusing, the power imbalances familiar from their home countries, and the structures too rigid to change. This made it difficult to see themselves as having a rightful place in civic spaces, particularly when their first instinct was gratitude for simply being included at all. **Our 58 year old Bolivian participant mentioned:**

“In my country, five families control everything... When I arrived in the U.S., I felt like a guest in someone else’s home. I still do. Like I shouldn’t even try to be in certain rooms because it wasn’t mine. That’s how I felt about politics here. But once I got involved, I started to understand how complex it really is... Many people work so much that they don’t have the energy to figure it out. Or they feel that even if they vote, they still won’t be represented. That’s why many don’t engage.”

Here, the unique insight, from the author’s point of view, is not just that U.S. political systems are confusing. It’s that confusion interacts with an **internalized sense of exclusion**. Disengagement is not simply about lacking time or information, but about carrying a belief that civic life was not intended for them. Several participants suggested that what might appear as “apathy” from the outside can, in fact, be understood as a response shaped by long histories of exclusion.

THE 'FOREIGN HEART': CONTINUED ATTACHMENT TO HOME-COUNTRY POLITICS

"Democrats are targeting low-information voters, and a lot of them are coming from south of the border." - **Tucker Carlson, Fox News**



"A lot of these people don't understand our system, and they don't really want to." - **The Ingraham Angle**

Participants emphasized that Latino immigrants are often mischaracterized within U.S. political narratives, seen as “low information” voters or as indifferent to politics. As the author interprets this, these claims reflect a short-sighted perspective, forgetting to account for how Latino immigrants remain engaged with politics in their home countries, often feeling more in tune with those politics than that of the United States. Even when participants spoke critically of corruption in their home-country politics, those systems were often seen as more navigable because participants understood the history and power dynamics that shaped them. In the United States, participants described encountering a complex and layered political system, where authority is distributed across federal, state, and local levels and an unfamiliar history, making it difficult to know where exactly decisions are made, by whom, and how to intervene.

Participants also noted that engaging in civic life in the United States requires more than casting a ballot or attending a protest. It involves redirecting an emotional investment toward new political contexts. Several described the psychological costs of this shift, including guilt about loosening ties to their countries of origin, fear that participation in the U.S. might be unsafe, or the ongoing tension between establishing roots in a new place and holding onto the hope of eventual return.

Our 60 year old Colombian participant, who migrated on a work visa from what he described as an economically stable position, echoed this sentiment. When asked about barriers in getting Latino immigrants to engage in political and civic action, he noted:

“I think the gap I see from people here trying to get us to take action, to care, is that they don’t understand our foreign heart. I see it so often. Our bodies are here, in the U.S.. We’re physically here, but our heart was left far away. Our soul and heart was left back home. What we care about, what we pay attention to, what we prioritize, it’s far, far away”.

This perspective underscores the challenge of carrying multiple worlds at once: working and building lives in the U.S., trying to make sense of new systems in new languages, while remaining emotionally tied to the rhythms and politics of home. What may appear as “disinterest” in U.S. politics is more accurately the difficulty of holding belonging and loyalty in two vastly distinct places. The ties to home countries, while sometimes associated with pain or disappointment, may feel safer than the cold distance they feel toward local politics here, where trust is fragile and the rules are foreign.

“That question we asked in the survey about whether there’s more interest in the political issues of our home countries caught my attention. This is very, very real, in everything we do. Even the radio people listen to is from their country, they stay up to date. They understand it, they know the history and feel emotionally invested. Many know more about politics back there than about what’s happening here. It is just more comfortable and, weirdly, a way we don’t lose our connection to home”

Their reflections suggest an important consideration for organizers seeking to build long-term, issue-based movements: U.S. civic life can feel more distant and alienating than the familiar, if imperfect, politics of home countries. Every effort to engage, whether through meetings, outreach, or mobilizations, must intentionally contend with this pull toward elsewhere. Without acknowledging this reality, the overall movement risks overlooking the depth of what participants are weighing when they decide to engage. Their choice involves far more than attending an event; it requires trusting that this new political home is worth a recommitment.

INDIVIDUAL STATUS CHANGES AND SHIFTING PARTICIPATION

One reality that cannot be ignored is how deeply immigration status shapes someone’s ability and willingness to stay in civic engagement advocacy work. The group described how changes in laws, policies, or individual legal proceedings can consume their energy, attention, and sense of safety. DACA has been subject to repeated court challenges, partial rescissions, and shifting eligibility rules since 2017, creating prolonged periods of legal uncertainty for recipients (Pew Research Center, 2022). During this time, renewals have been delayed or limited, new applications have been halted, and court decisions have left the program’s future unclear. Scholars and policy analysts link this ongoing instability to heightened stress, fear of losing protection, and difficulty making long-term plans, conditions that can disrupt sustained civic and community engagement even among individuals who remain formally protected (Gonzales & Terriquez, 2013).

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is a humanitarian immigration designation that allows nationals of certain countries experiencing armed conflict, environmental disaster, or extraordinary conditions to live and work legally in the United States for a period of time. TPS does not provide a pathway to permanent residency, but it offers temporary protection from deportation and authorization to work, often allowing recipients to stabilize their lives, support their families, and participate more fully in their communities. TPS terminations for countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have created widespread fear, litigation, and instability, with documented effects on work, family life, and community engagement (American Immigration Council 2019; 2021). The removal of TPS protections illustrates the destabilizing effects participants described. Venezuela, for instance, was originally designated for TPS due to ongoing political repression, economic collapse, and a humanitarian crisis. When TPS protections were terminated in 2025 for Venezuelans, thousands of people who had been legally authorized to live and work in the United States were stripped of legal work authorization and protection from deportation, forcing families back into legal and economic uncertainty, disrupted employment, and heightened fear around everyday activities. In such tumultuous conditions, energy that might otherwise have been directed toward long-term community engagement was instead consumed by legal concerns, employment instability, and fear of enforcement. For our participants, in this context, organizing was a lifeline, given community work closely tied to immediate needs for protection, information, and collective defense.

Participants also described how this relationship to organizing changes once legal stability is secured. When protection is no longer under constant threat, the urgency that once structured their engagement begins to ease. Several participants said this shift felt like permission to turn inward and “hit play” on parts of life that had been suspended for years, such as focusing on education, health, or family stability. They framed this pause as a response to prolonged survival mode and the delayed opportunity to invest in themselves.

Our Honduran participant shared how they saw this up close with a friend and longtime activist:

“A colleague of mine who was very involved in the movement, fighting for many years, very committed to everything... but when she got her residency, well, within two weeks she had totally changed, not in the sense of being against it, but like she was finally giving herself the chance to pursue her dreams. Everything that residency allowed her to do: to start studying, she cared more about media, she started doing that. And honestly, she’s left it behind completely. On the surface, it can look like she abandoned us. Got her status and stopped caring. But its not that simple. People are held in chains for decades, unable to move. What else do you expect them to do once they can but live?”

Participants described how personal needs and community demands can sometimes feel in tension. When individuals reach a measure of stability or security, even temporarily, they often redirect their attention toward personal goals that were deferred during periods of uncertainty. Participants emphasized that this shift should not be interpreted as disloyalty or disengagement, but as a natural response to relief after prolonged survival. To honor this reality, organizing spaces must be designed not only as entry points into civic life, but as places that recognize fluctuating capacity as part of participation in democracy. Programs that maintain connection during periods of reduced involvement – through regular check-ins, flexible roles, and clearly defined pathways for re-engagement – allow people to step back when needed without their changing circumstances signaling the end of their involvement.

Marshall Ganz reminds us that leadership is about creating “conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty” (Ganz, 2010). In practice, this means reframing participation as cyclical rather than a linear, upward trajectory. Where people can pause to breathe, regroup, or heal, and then return with renewed purpose, without losing connection. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence offer a similar lesson: movements that treat members’ labor and stories as endlessly extractable reproduce the very harms they seek to undo (Rojas, 2007, as cited in INCITE!, 2007). Paula X. Rojas warns that without intentional culture change, we risk our own community members reproducing “the cops in our heads and hearts,” where internalized judgment drives people away from one another.

Affiliates across the Popular Democracy Network are already showing what this can look like: providing material support during crises so members stay connected even when they cannot participate fully, creating multiple on-ramps for re-engagement, and centering care and reciprocity in leadership development. These practices affirm that relief, rest, and return are not interruptions to organizing, but rather a part of how long-term civic power is sustained.

As our participants named, these tensions often surface when long-time residents judge newcomers, or vice versa, because they navigate legal systems and social trust differently. Survey respondents were spread across less than 1 year to 30+ years — with large clusters in the 5–10 and 10–20 year ranges.

When survey respondents were asked what in their perspective are the top three things that might prevent Latino immigrants from engaging civically in the U.S., **1 in 3 respondents** named:

“Divisions within the community (e.g., differences in immigration status, mixed-status families, disagreements by country of origin)” as a real barrier to participation, alongside fear of the government.



This context is critical to bring into organizing spaces. Changes in immigration status or life circumstances often unfold unevenly. Some immigrant members gain stability quickly, while others wait years or decades. These differences can generate frustration that is more easily projected onto each other than onto the systems responsible, fueling judgments about who is “more deserving”. Such dynamics weaken trust and make it harder for people to feel they belong in the same room. The implication for programs is clear: unspoken resentments must be surfaced and addressed directly. Organizing spaces should foster shared understanding of each other’s journeys and create containers where people feel safe admitting what they don’t know. Building unity cannot rely on pushing people toward agreement alone; it requires designing spaces that spark genuine curiosity and conversation about one another’s paths.

When someone gains legal stability, their ability to participate, speak publicly, or take on visible leadership often changes. They may feel safer taking risks that others still cannot. At the same time, those who remain undocumented or in limbo may continue navigating daily fear and restriction. These differences can shape who volunteers for certain roles, who is asked to represent the group, and whose voice carries more weight in strategic conversations. If not named openly, these patterns can unintentionally concentrate visibility and leadership among those with greater stability. Being attentive to how status shapes capacity and access allows organizations to intentionally structure participation in ways that distribute opportunity, protect those still at risk, and maintain solidarity across different stages of the immigration journey.

One young Mexican participant’s story makes these uneven timelines and shifts in immigration status painfully concrete. Her experience illustrates how legal precarity is not experienced only as paperwork or policy, but as silence at the dinner table, prolonged absence, and unanswered questions that shape a child’s understanding of authority and power. Through her reflection, we see how belonging, fear, and political possibility are first negotiated inside the home — long before anyone encounters an organizing space. In her case, advocacy was not introduced through formal civic education, but through witnessing a parent confront the state directly, revealing how early family experiences quietly lay the foundation for how democracy and action are later understood.



Mexican, 25 year old living in Minnesota

"I've been reflecting a lot now that we're in this space. I was born here. My parents are immigrants from Mexico. And when I was born, my mom had already become a citizen. And my dad was undocumented at the time. He had been deported several times during my childhood.

And I barely remember, but when I was around 11 or 12 years old. My brother was maybe 9 or 10. That's when my dad made the decision to deport himself. I didn't fully understand everything. But I had to understand—whether I liked it or not—that my dad was going to be gone for a while. And there was no way to know how long I wouldn't see him. And to this day, I haven't really asked why.

And little by little... he left. He deported himself. And I didn't see him for a few years. So I grew up not knowing much... not knowing much about my dad's story, or my family's. I grew up with a lot of questions. A lot of mystery. And the only explanation I was given was that I had to trust my parents, trust the decisions they were making. And I think about how my mom and my brother handled things when my dad wasn't there. My brother and my mom... well, all of us. We fell into a depression. But it was a very frustrating kind of depression. Because my mom was alone. And she was there, of course—she was with us the whole time. But it was like she wasn't really with us. Because she turned into a ghost. It was like living with a ghost. She wouldn't talk to us. She fed us, took us to school, went to work, picked us up, we went home... but everything was in silence. Everything. Just silence. For years.

I would get so frustrated because I'd say, 'Mom, I need you. But you're not here.' And more than anything, I felt so much anger at the situation. We chose this life. We chose to come here. And my dad had chosen to leave. And I didn't understand why. And my mom... a ghost. Without knowing why, or what was going on. Just the same question: 'Where are you, Mom?' Until one day, I saw my mom again. She went to the Capitol. She went... and she made her fuss, saying: 'I want to talk to the senator!' Later, she told me in detail—but at the time, she told herself, 'The worst that can happen is they throw me out.' But she said, 'I have my husband's case. And that's it. No one is helping me. And I want to talk to the senator. I want to talk to someone who's going to help me.' She went in demanding that someone listen to her. She showed up and decided, 'They're going to listen to me.' She doesn't usually get involved in politics or laws. But she didn't care. What mattered was: 'They're going to listen to me.' One way or another, they're going to listen. And I don't know what happened. I don't know how. I honestly don't know how she did it. But they processed my dad's case. And within a month, he was here with me, standing there as though none of it had ever happened.

And that—seeing that—changed everything for me. The miracle wasn't just my dad's presence. It was that she did something, and something actually came from it. In this country, my family could've been reunited at any point—if the people in power had wanted it to happen. It was always possible. And that fills me with rage.

think what motivates me most right now is that rage and that pain I've carried since childhood—of not having my dad in my life.

We live in one of the most powerful countries in the world. So rich. And yet it doesn't know how to share. It won't offer opportunity. Even knowing the history—how this country has exploited and caused so much harm in our countries. It's helped cause the very circumstances we're fleeing. So in a way, this country owes us the rights it claims to offer, because of all the damage it's done to us.

That's what motivates me now. Seeing my parents finally living in a different time. A totally different life. They're happy. They have their home. They have their little ranch. They named it 'Their Wish'—or 'El Deseo.' Because they miss Mexico so much, they bought a little ranch that reminds them of it. In a way, they're living their dream now. That's the dream. I want to live in a world where everyone gets to do that. Where everyone gets that opportunity—that chance. That's what I wanted to share. So thank you, everyone."



Early experiences with separation, fear, and political trauma often shape how people later understand government and collective action. For many participants, experiences like this one, as well as the stories shared by our Cuban and Bolivian participants, shaped how they approached civic spaces—with urgency, caution, or a strong awareness of risk. While moments of civic action can be transformative, the ways people enter this work can often be rooted in deep personal loss and institutional harm. These experiences help explain why trust does not begin on neutral ground, and why they shape what people are willing to share, how they assess risk, and the conditions they need in order to participate at all.

EXTRACTION, TRAUMA, AND THE CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

Building on these stories, participants described trust as something shaped by lived experience rather than simple motivation or interest. Many explained that they entered civic and organizing spaces carrying the weight of having been hurt, ignored, or placed at risk before, both in their countries of origin and in the United States. In this section, participants pointed to three reasons engagement often felt difficult: concern about being asked to share without care or follow-up, unresolved trauma that made sustained participation hard, and the absence of clear practices that would help them feel safe. Together, these experiences help explain why engagement can feel costly and what participants said they would need in order to stay involved.

FEAR OF EXTRACTION

Participants described fear of extraction as the concern that their stories, labor, or presence would be taken without care and reciprocity. This fear made many cautious about speaking,

particularly when they were unsure how their words would be received, shared, or used. Several participants explained that this hesitation was shaped by past experiences in which their stories were invalidated, challenged, or ignored. In those contexts, trust in civic spaces was described as something that had to be built slowly through consistent practices that made people feel seen, believed, and respected, an approach participants noted many of their respective affiliates were already prioritizing and practicing.

After sharing the personal story of her family's experiences with the U.S. immigration system, our **57 year old Mexican participant** also shared:

“It’s a little... for me, it’s a little difficult because I’ve never liked telling my story. And specifically because of that [fear] — because honestly, a lot of people either hate you, don’t really care about you. Your life. They’re just using you. I think we’re scared to come into lots of spaces out of fear of feeling used, because we’re always used. And it’s a bit weird because we crave belonging so bad that we do the opposite. Retract into selfishness like a survival tactic, to look out only for yourself even though they come from immigrant roots. And we’re all doing it at the same time, so nobody trusts each other and nobody even tries to.”

This tension between wanting to belong and fearing exploitation underscores why storytelling cannot be treated as inherently ‘empowering’ in our organizing spaces. It can be, but only when people trust that they won’t be left exposed, misunderstood, or discarded once their story has served its purpose. Programs must build real guardrails for care, reciprocity, and long-term relationships so sharing doesn’t feel like risk without return. Research on Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) offers a model for addressing this tension. PNI emphasizes not only telling stories but also collectively interpreting and making meaning of them, so that stories remain in the control of those who tell them.

As Cynthia Kurtz explains, “PNI is about people making sense of complex situations together by telling stories, listening to them, and reflecting on them in structured ways” (Kurtz, 2014). In practice, this means building structured story circles where participants co-interpret their stories together, moving away from extractive sharing toward mutual understanding participants co-interpret their stories together, deciding together how their narratives are understood and applied to collective strategy.

MENTAL HEALTH AND HEALING

Participants emphasized that true spaces of care also require addressing the mental health needs that shape whether people feel ready to share at all. Many from the core group specifically named mental health support, and explicit efforts to demystify that support within the community, as essential. Our 50 year old Puerto Rican participant noted:

“If we really think about it, the lack of mental health support goes hand in hand with fear. That fear comes from years of repression in our home countries. We’ve never fully healed from that trauma. And when we don’t heal it, we don’t speak up — not for ourselves or for others. But when we begin to heal, we feel empowered.

The trauma stops controlling us. New doors open. Though there's also fear of mental health itself, because working on it means facing a lot of deep issues rooted in machismo. If we don't face it, we won't be able to fight."

Participants repeatedly emphasized that fear is a constant undercurrent shaping community life and decisions about civic participation. They described how it shows up differently depending on a person's stage in the immigration process or how much trust they feel they can extend to those around them. Unlike tangible barriers such as transportation or child care, participants explained that fear cannot be resolved with a bus pass or stipend. It is internal, shaped by personal experience, yet widely shared across families and communities through memories and cautionary stories meant to keep people safe.

Participants noted that this fear often reappears at the moment of deciding whether a meeting, room, or action is truly safe for themselves and their loved ones. Our **69 year old Cuban participant** explained that this cycle of fear can prevent people from engaging even when they care deeply:

"People don't get involved because they're afraid. They're afraid of... well, of being thrown in jail or being deported quite frankly. Or they're afraid of being criticized by their neighbors who they are already hoping to be accepted by. So they stay quiet out of fear of what might happen if they express their opinion, or align themselves with spaces that are too vocal. That's what I think. You can only understand the fear if you have it yourself."

CREATING SAFETY

If fear is this persistent, then it matters deeply what we do to quell the fear in any and all of the rooms we invite people into. Oftentimes, movement programs focus on what we're up against and what people need to do, but what the group noted was that people are just as concerned with how they'll be supported if and when they do it. The antidote to fear is trust built on empathy. One participant named this need with powerful clarity and insight for movement organizers:

"I think empathy is fundamental between facilitators and among members. I really need our training workshops to talk about safety, and to feel like I am being received with empathy for what I've been through. I don't want to be talked down to, I already feel like that happens to me enough at work. The empathy from the leader can be the example for others in the room that are resentful of one another because of each other's immigration journey or status. Just because something hasn't happened to you doesn't mean it couldn't happen.

And that could get us to care about all the other issues we talk about. Sometimes someone tells me something hard and I think, 'Even if it's not my issue, I still need to support it.' If someone comes to me, it's because they need a word of support or a contact—something. They don't need another problem. They need a solution, or at least someone who can help them look for one. I want to feel like I always leave with a solution"

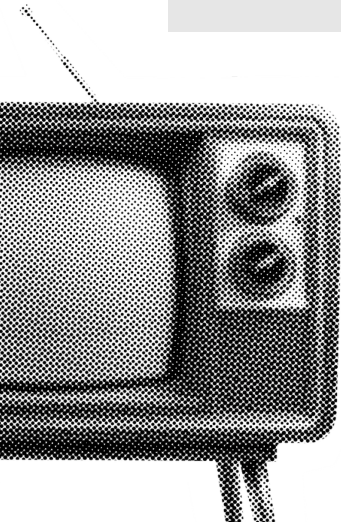
What we also heard is that even when people feel ready to move through fear, they want clear, honest information about what that risk really looks like. Building trust means letting people decide what they're ready for.

“I think one of the recommendations we could make is that our organizations be more direct about the ways someone can get involved. For example, explain the levels of risk — red, yellow, green. That way, people with such internalized fear, like me can make better decisions. Because over there, anything can turn you into a political prisoner. That’s just how it is.”

ADDITIONAL SURVEY DATA OF NOTE

90 additional affiliate members who responded to the survey were asked to consider which political or civic topics they think are most unfamiliar to Latino immigrants in their community in order to rank how important a community training on each topic would be. They were given the option to rank on a spectrum anywhere from ‘not at all important’ to ‘essential’. Here’s what we heard:

Topic	% Not Important	% Moderately Important	% Very Important	% Essential	Weighted Avg
How to talk to others about issues and policies that affect us	3.17%	6.35%	41.27%	49.21%	3.37
History of Latino activism and political influence in the U.S.	3.39%	8.47%	44.07%	44.07%	3.29
How local and state governments function	1.67%	6.67%	48.33%	43.33%	3.33
Where to find reliable political news/information	0%	6.90%	39.66%	53.45%	3.47
How U.S. policies impact our home countries	3.28%	13.11%	32.79%	50.82%	3.31
Influence of wealth/money in U.S. politics and society	5.00%	10.00%	36.67%	48.33%	3.28



1) Cutting through misinformation is a frontline need, not an afterthought

When “Where to find reliable political news/information” scored the highest on the ‘essential’ end (53.45%), it was about both program content and trust. Misinformation, rumors, and partisan spin actively shape whether people feel the civic arena is worth stepping into at all. As AI-generated disinformation and racist memes from X spread through our WhatsApp groups, many people don’t even know they should question it, or where else to look if they do.

trustworthy sources within their own circles. It's not enough to hand out information — people need support in recognizing misinformation and becoming trusted messengers themselves. They need to know how to check, where to check, and how to bring others along in a way that feels safe and effective.

2) “Basic civics” is still a major gap members are craving orientation on

When more than 91% of respondents said that understanding how local and state governments function is ‘Very Important’ or ‘Essential’, they were pointing to something many of us know but don’t always act on: people want to connect the dots between the big issues they care about and the systems that decide what happens next.

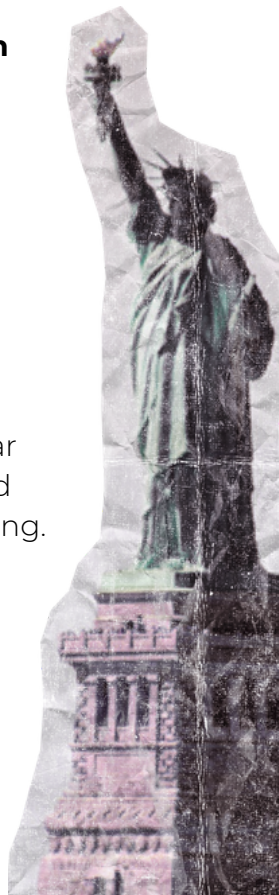
Our network does a strong job connecting people to the big picture in our training content, like why immigration policy matters or why we fight for housing justice. Nonetheless, members indicated they still feel unclear about what happens in between: who sits on committees, who sets the agenda, how budgets actually get decided, or how local councils and state legislatures really shape everyday life.

In a time when public education is under attack and disinformation is everywhere, our spaces can't just be places to mobilize people, they also have to be places where community members come to learn together, repeatedly and practically with a constant flow of new civic education content. This means doubling down on real civic education. Beyond one-time trainings, ongoing learning spaces that explicitly demystify things like the electoral college, the role of committee chairs, and how money flows through budget cycles. The more we break these pieces down, the more confidence and urgency our communities will have to navigate them. Our affiliate, COPAL in Minnesota, provides extensive popular education programming and leadership development, with an emphasis on content that builds knowledge on basic civics.

3) The component of courage to talk to others is not automatic. It has to be built in methodically.

Nearly half of respondents marked “How to talk to others about issues and policies that affect us” as ‘Essential’. For many from our focus groups, the barrier isn’t just whether they’ll show up to vote or join a campaign, it’s whether they feel ready to have honest, sometimes tense conversations in the spaces that matter most: at home, at church, with neighbors, and within their closest circles.

This goes beyond learning how to create a script, but rather unlearning the fear that saying the wrong thing could cost you relationships, respect, or safety. For many, the fear isn’t even about the government or police. Our participants spoke about being shunned by the people closest to them, the ones they might rely on for daily survival and belonging. Network trainings offer an opportunity to help people build real muscle for these moments. Beyond messaging for a campaign, we need to hold space for people to practice what it feels like to disagree with a loved one or navigate conflict at church. Role-playing real family scenarios, naming the emotions that come up, and practicing how to navigate pushback or judgment can make the idea of “talking politics” and how to assess when to have such conversations feel less intimidating.



Survey respondents were also asked what exactly would make political education and leadership trainings feel more engaging and relevant to their communities. Heres what they said:

- Having facilitators with similar lived experiences — 53%
- Centering discussions on issues that impact daily life — 47%
- Using real-life stories/testimonies instead of academic explanations — 45%
- Creating explicit intergenerational spaces (elders & youth learn together) — 29%
- Explaining connections between U.S. and Latin American politics — 29%
- More information on how to navigate fears related to immigration status when organizing — 14%

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Trust and shared experience. More than half of respondents (53%) said they prefer facilitators with lived experience similar to their own, who share personal stories. This indicates that who delivers the training and how they open up their own lived experiences matters as much as the content. Participants stressed that facilitators who share their struggles and survival are more likely to be trusted when discussing systems, risks, and civic action.

Relevance to daily life. Nearly half of respondents (47%) want training to focus on the direct, everyday impacts of civic life on a small scale first in order to slowly make connections to broader, more complex topics. They pointed to issues such as household expenses, schools, and neighborhood safety as areas where civic engagement feels tangible. Participants indicated that if connections to daily life are not clear, with more complex topics taken step by step, continued participation is less likely.

Shared storytelling. Forty-five percent of respondents said they learn best through real-life stories and testimonies from one another to feel better connected to larger lessons. Testimonies, such as a neighbor standing up to a landlord or a parent advocating at a city budget hearing, were described as examples that make civic engagement concrete and motivating. Some respondents, similar to our core participants' sentiments, wrote in that talking through personal experiences also helps them process things they have gone through in order to build trust amongst one another and make connections to broader **issues**.

Intergenerational learning. About 30% of respondents want explicitly intentional spaces where elders and youth learn together. Participants highlighted the need to break down siloed learning and create family-based models of civic participation where different age groups can challenge stereotypes about one another. One participant recommended structuring trainings more like an intergenerational school: offering different levels for those who are just beginning and those with more experience, dedicating sessions to specific civic education topics that build on the broader political theory currently packed into trainings, and creating opportunities for experienced participants to facilitate. They also suggested incorporating interactive activities, involving older children, and building in active participation rather than relying only on lecture-style formats.

“Some people already know a lot, and others are just starting out. It should be like a version of school—you don’t put an advanced student with someone who’s just learning. We should do something similar in meetings, maybe separate by level. Some folks with more experience could be trusted to lead the sessions. Sometimes its [trainings] just full of information thats important, but only gives us small bits of more topics we want to learn. We need something that feels like we’re gaining knowledge, something we we can work towards and feel proud of accomplishing.”

ORGANIZING RECOMMENDATIONS AND AUTHOR'S REFLECTIONS



This project was birthed, like all other things in my life, out of both the unrelenting need to survive and unconditional love. As a Venezuelan, first generation immigrant who arrived in the U.S. at the age of two, I've found this project to be deeply healing for my own reflections and traumas. My purpose in a career and life dedicated to pro-democracy work is in direct response to my lived experiences with democratic decay, forced displacement, state sanctioned violence, and authoritarianism. My journey is of both being separated from my place of birth and navigating the world as a systematically oppressed immigrant who, as a result, is in a relentless pursuit of creating a truly representative and reparative democracy. The relationship I have with the concept of democracy and what a better world could be is undoubtedly shaped by where I come from and where I grew up. I thought, then, that it is only fair to explore how other Latino immigrants' conditions and experiences across ages, and nations and race changed the way they experience and see democracy. How those experiences may be similar, and even more importantly, how they might be entirely distinct.

Throughout my time in the movement, the constant has been to organize our Black and brown neighbors, those who have been strategically excluded from democracy and all of its avenues of participation. There is, in my opinion, a gap in how we organize. Beyond "Black and brown", beyond the need to mobilize, there is a culture to reimagine. That reimagining is specific, uncomfortable and catered to the unique experiences and identities of every person we organize. Latino immigrants come from vastly different cultures, continents, migration pathways, ages, generations. They also come from different traumas, tensions with government and democracy itself. The way we organize must be true, articulate and detailed to not only our shared experiences as Latino immigrants in this country, but just as much to our differences.

To me, participatory action research and organizing are—and must be—intertwined, working in bold, beautiful synchronization toward our collective liberation through the people's knowledge.

Here's what that knowledge yielded:

1. Voice Fears, Make Safety Tangible

Participants consistently emphasized that fear shapes how they decide whether to take action, especially for those who come from contexts marked by political violence, repression, or state retaliation. Programs should make this visible by integrating discussions of risk into political education. One recommended approach is a "red, yellow, green" framework that outlines levels of risk so participants can make informed choices about involvement. Trainings should also create space for people to name what they are afraid of and learn from each other's strategies for survival. Participants stressed that safety is not only about the absence of threats but also about building trust.

2. Treat Healing as Part of Political Education

Participants described trauma as a major barrier to sharing stories and staying engaged. They

emphasized that without healing, urgency fades and action is difficult to sustain. Programs should therefore weave healing practices into political education, such as story circles facilitated with care, demystifying mental health support, and collective reflection that recognizes grief alongside strategy. Participants pointed to empathy and care as essential to fostering leadership.

3. Build Leaders as Trusted Messengers

Participants explained that information by itself cannot counter misinformation or apathy. They stressed that people are more likely to believe information when it comes from trusted sources. Programs should focus on training community leaders to serve as truth-tellers and rumor-challengers within their networks. This includes equipping them with tools to verify information, respond to questions, and encourage curiosity without judgment. Participants noted that credibility comes from shared experience and humility, not expertise alone.

4. Anchor Programs in Cultural Joy, Faith, and Familiarity

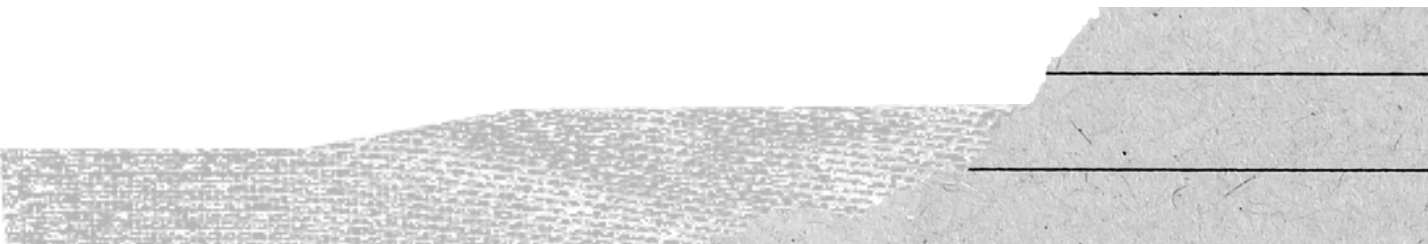
Participants highlighted that community members often gather around food, music, and faith before they gather around a policy agenda. They recommended that trainings reflect this reality by incorporating cultural practices and community traditions into program design. Examples include hosting sessions as potlucks, inviting participants to bring cultural clothing or music, and encouraging them to share training opportunities with their church members. Participants stressed that incorporating joy and celebration is itself a strategy for sustaining engagement.

5. Bridge Internal Divisions by Naming and Working Through the Bigger Picture

Participants acknowledged unspoken hierarchies within immigrant communities, including differences related to immigration status, generation, nationality, and colorism. They emphasized that encouraging unity without naming these realities does little to address them. At the same time, participants were clear that naming divisions alone is not enough to bridge them.

Trust is often built through shared work, particularly when people are engaged together in concrete campaigns or collective efforts. Working side by side toward a common goal allowed participants to move beyond assumptions, develop relationships through action, and see one another as collaborators rather than categories. Co-creating campaigns and actions create space for differences to surface naturally, while grounding people in a shared purpose.

Efforts to address internal divisions must consistently return to the broader systems that create and profit from fragmentation. There is importance in situating personal tensions within a larger analysis of policies, institutions, and political actors that benefit from keeping immigrant communities divided. Many pointed throughout our conversations examples of several Popular Democracy programs already integrating this approach by pairing dialogue with political education and collective action, helping participants understand that these divisions are shaped by structural forces rather than individual failure. Expanding and embedding these practices more holistically across programs was described as essential for building trust, sustaining solidarity, and supporting long-term collective action. They emphasized that solidarity should not be assumed.



6. Teach Civic Life Like We Teach Language: Layered and Ongoing

One training does not uproot a lifetime of disillusionment. Expand basic civics beyond components weaved into larger programs. Similar to the network's membership flow, a 'ladder of civic fluency' that mirrors how people actually learn with consistent practice and a steady drumbeat of topic by topic. Weaving in real-life stories, it's important to teach civic basics: who sets budgets, who controls committees, what redistricting is (and the history of redlining in the U.S., etc.) so that people can see democracy beyond an abstract theory but rather as real as their own neighborhood. The order of the content must be as intentional as possible, leaning into the basics of history and civic education through a steady topic progression. Learning flow should also not stop at understanding how systems work, but should create clear opportunities to apply that knowledge through campaigns, advocacy efforts, or collective decision-making as members move through topics. From the participants' perspectives, going from learning into action helps reinforce civic knowledge, builds confidence, and makes participation feel purposeful.

As a participant shared candidly:

"Some people already know a lot, and others are just starting out. It should be like a version of school—you don't put an advanced student with someone who's just learning. We should do something similar in meetings, maybe separate by level. Some folks with more experience could be trusted to lead the sessions. Sometimes its [trainings] just full of information thats important, but only gives us small bits of more topics we want to learn. We need something that feels like we're gaining knowledge, something we we can work towards and feel proud of accomplishing."

This reflection points to a gap participants experienced across the network's learning spaces: repetition was not only about content, but about a lack of progression. The participant described attending multiple programs and encountering the same modules and stories, which made it difficult to feel that returning would lead to new learning. She did not specify which lessons were repeated, but she clearly described overlap across programs that cover political and popular education that contributed to attrition among her peers.

Her critique reinforces the need for civic education to function as a sequenced, cumulative pathway, where foundational concepts are not restarted each time but built upon in ways that recognize participants' growth. In a cumulative model, trainings could be reflected as sequenced classes, where someone who has already learned about power mapping would next learn how budgets move through committees; someone who understands redlining history would next examine how present-day zoning or redistricting decisions shape their neighborhood. This structure signals growth and respects participants' time, while still allowing newcomers to enter at clear starting points. For participants balancing work and other responsibilities, engagement depends on whether trainings feel like a continuation that adds value. **When survey respondents were asked what they feel least to most confident talking to others in their community about:**

A majority of respondents showed they feel least confident talking to others about local and state government processes, even though 91% said understanding them is essential. Many feel hesitant talking about how to verify political information, which lines up with the 53% who said knowing where to find reliable information is essential. About half said they feel the least confident having conversations about issues and policies that affect us all, even with loved ones.

7. Make Political Education a Family Affair

Disengagement often starts at home. Create spaces made to explicitly help parents become messengers to their kids; help youth bring civic life back to their elders. Organizers can create workshops where parents and youth learn side by side, with structured dialogue that allows older generations to name their fears and younger participants to share their understanding of civic systems. These spaces should not frame one generation as more informed than the other, but as holding different forms of political knowledge shaped by migration history, legal status, and lived experience.

Participants also suggested that families need concrete tools; trainings can provide shared language for discussing topics like immigration policy, voting, enforcement, and local decision-making. Role plays, guided reflection prompts, and take-home conversation guides can help participants practice how to navigate difficult dinner table conversations.

8. Honor Transnational Attachment Without Treating It as Disengagement

Throughout the focus groups, people described feeling emotionally and practically tethered to their countries of origin even after years in the United States. “Our bodies are here, but our hearts are still back home”. For many, “back home” meant family members they support through remittances, loved ones living under instability, and a constant sense of worry tied to violence, repression, economic crisis, or displacement. It also meant remaining psychologically embedded in home-country political realities, including distrust of government, fear of retaliation, and memories of political harm that continue to influence how safe civic participation feels.

Participants challenged societal interpretations of inconsistent engagement as apathy or lack of commitment. They suggested a different framing: transnational attachment is part of how many immigrants survive and stay grounded. In practice, this means organizers should make participation in U.S. civic life feel compatible with and in service of that attachment. Doing so requires moving beyond a solely U.S.-focused lens in political education and expanding the historical and global context offered in trainings so participants can see how U.S. policy, economic systems, and foreign interventions connect to the realities they or their families have experienced abroad.

This shift has concrete implications. Connecting local fights in the United States to broader forces that shape migration and displacement, such as labor exploitation, foreign policy, economic extraction, and racialized enforcement, helps participants situate their engagement within a larger political story they already understand. Naming these international dynamics early on grounds civic education in lived experience and makes participation feel relevant rather than detached from the conditions that shaped their migration. Expanding that context also creates space to examine shared struggles within the United States, including the fight for Black freedom, Indigenous sovereignty, and workers’ rights. Understanding how these movements have confronted systems of racial and economic inequality can help participants recognize common structures of power and see their own experiences as part of a broader continuum of resistance.

9. Protect People From Their Fears of Extraction

People will not share their deepest truths because of previous experiences of feeling extracted from or used. Every testimony must be met with reciprocity: resources, connection, or a tangible way forward. Our stories should not be currency for campaigns alone. They are a dialogue amongst one another; seeds for collective healing and strategy. Teach members the art of the story of self and the

power of sharing that story at an action, at a meeting, or even at home with those closest to them. An explicit effort to help Latinos break cycles of silence and “holding things in” from their very own family and friends can start with us.

10. Celebrate Small Acts of Agency

Finally, do not measure leadership only by who takes the mic or canvasses the block. Celebrate the auntie who brings an extra neighbor to a meeting. The young person who translates a ballot for their parents. The mother who votes for the first time after decades of silence, and the quiet high schooler who hesitantly came to a training with their parents. These small acts, multiplied, are how we will build the democracy our people deserve. Create tangible goals for people to feel they’re working towards and feel accomplished in achieving.

These learnings are only possible by the work, care, and dedication of every organizer who has built the organizing infrastructure that exists. While the information presents evaluation and recommendations for evolution, its existence in itself is in honor of the work that has come before us, and deep respect for what our movement has built. In the parts each of us have played in this work, there is comfort in knowing we all already understand that the truest work of democracy is not to pull people into our rooms, but to walk with them into their own power — rooted in the full complexity of who they are, where they came from, and the future they have already begun to imagine for all of us.

As the author and researcher that helped guide our members to lead this body of work, believe social and political consciousness to be a spectrum. I've heard it in terms of a ‘ladder of thinking’, not one that has superior or inferior levels of intellect, but as I prefer to put it, more a winding path of political thought that people begin walking at different times. To embark on the much harder path of paying attention to the history and current manifestations of systems of violence in this world is painful. This journey as an individual person is difficult enough, let alone the seemingly insurmountable task of building a collective, morally aligned consciousness. But each of us committing to these individual and collective journeys of consciousness is absolutely necessary; it's the responsibility we owe one another for living and breathing on this earth together. We are all we have.

Instead of being intimidated by the varying timing this group of individuals might be on their own paths, it was instead designed to lean into these differences to guide our inquiry. It is their similarities and differences — the tensions, contradictions, and lessons born of multiple identities and histories — that make organizing and advocacy all the more complicated, but that much more real. It's what I consider to be the key, the missing piece to help us all get a little closer to answering our sensemaking questions. These testimonies are gifts, reminders that consciousness, solidarity, and identity are not fixed. They are made and remade in every conversation, every question, and every risk we take together. Don't listen to me, listen to them. The voices of those who, despite it all, still believe *que todo va a estar bien*.

Perhaps it's not too late for that to be true.

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