

Building Black Power & Preserving Democracy

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Wisconsin Elections Report



Presented by
**Center for Racial
and Gender Equity**

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Campaign Overview

The prevalent political anti-blackness and consistent attacks on democracy across the country have grounded our work to engage and mobilize Black voters in the state of Wisconsin which has some of the worst disparities for Black people in the country. Given all that has transpired over the past two years, from the insurrection on January 6th to Republican-controlled states rigging the system through gerrymandering and voter suppression to remain in power permanently, efforts to mobilize and turn out Black voters are vital. In addition, despite Wisconsin being a 50/50 split state, Republicans have a near-supermajority in both legislative chambers and a solid hold on the congressional delegation.

Our work is more critical than ever. Who controls the Supreme Court after the general election determines the fate of voting rights, abortion, and the fate of our Democracy as a whole and is based on how well movement organizations like ours are able to motivate and mobilize our bases to the polls.

In 2020, CRGE ran our largest Black voter engagement program to date, reaching 200K voters in Wisconsin. We helped Wisconsin voters successfully cast their ballots in spite of the widespread voter suppression tactics used there, a once in a century pandemic and secured Biden a 20,682-vote lead. In 2022, CRGE was proud to work in coalition with dozens of organizations at the America Votes table to help secure victory for democratic incumbent Tony Evers in the heavily contested governor's race and now in 2023, we have built a robust civic engagement program in preventing anti-Democratic ideologies from gaining control of the Wisconsin Supreme Court.



2023 Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Race and Ballot Initiatives

Over a 6-week period, CRGE ran a civic engagement program to complement our ongoing organizing and power-building work in the state. Like in Chicago, the stakes were high for these elections. Control of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which will determine the fate of reproductive justice and the state's gerrymandered political districts, was at stake. CRGE also fought against two racialized ballot initiatives that would continue to demonize and criminalize Black people in the state. Starting in February we worked to engage and mobilize Black voters to support the liberal County Judge, Janet Protasiewicz, and vote NO on two ballot initiatives in an effort to preserve, strengthen and expand our democracy. CRGE focused its voter mobilization efforts in Milwaukee, a county with a high population of high turnout Black voters.

Our advocacy included:

Cash Bail Ballot Initiative- The constitutional amendment to implement cash bail would allow judges to consider more factors when imposing bail for offenders before a conviction. This tough-on-crime initiative would disproportionately target Black and Brown communities and criminalize people for not being able to afford bail.



2023 Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Race and Ballot Initiatives Continued...

Welfare Ballot Initiative - The advisory referendum on welfare asked voters whether they believe adults without disability and without children should be required to look for work in order to receive public benefits. Welfare reform became an effective dog whistle in the 60s and 70s after communities of color began getting access to public benefit. This policy in fact removes low-income White, Black, and Brown communities from the aid they need and serves as a tactic to get anti-Black voters to the polls

Janet Protasiewicz- Janet Protasiewicz, a liberal Milwaukee County Judge received 47% of the vote in the primary election on February 22, securing her a spot in the head-to-head runoff in the general election against Daniel Kelly, a conservative former Wisconsin Supreme Court justice.



Campaign Highlights

CRGE's voter engagement work included the following:



Phone Banking

CRGE made over 2,000 calls to voters encouraging Black voter turnout, sharing information about voting options and educating voting on the ballot initiatives and supporting Janet Protasiewi.



The Hard Knock Life

CRGE knocked on nearly 12,000 doors in less than 6 weeks.



Key Victories in Wisconsin

CRGE's robust field campaign helped play a critical role in protecting, preserving and strengthening our democracy. CRGE helped secure victory for , liberal.Janet Protasiewicz, shifting judicial power to progressive democrats in Wisconsin.

CRGE also identified and engaged over 1,500 new members who have committed to advancing Black liberation by working on our three pillars of justice. We hosted our first open house of the year and mobilized 50 members during GOTV to talk to Black voters about turning out to vote.

Takeaways and Key Learnings

Early Bird (Money) Gets the Worm- It is imperative that we secure funding for our electoral campaigns before the work begins. CRGE launched its civic engagement program 2 weeks before the primary election and 6 weeks before the general election knocking on over 12,000 doors within such a short time frame. In 2022, we learned that we have to take a position early in order to secure a victory in the state of Wisconsin. When funding comes earlier we are able to immediately have boots on the ground and reach more voters leading up to the election.

Wisconsin Remains a Split State- Despite our wins in the state, We continue to lose in at least 1 initiative. Tony Evers won Governor and Mandela Barnes lost the Mayoral seat. Similarly, Janet won the Supreme Court seat while the republican ballot initiatives were still passed. Unless we have boots on the ground year ground and build power between Black, Brown, immigrant and progressive White communities, we will continue to move 1 step forward, 1 step back and remain a battleground state.

Year-Round Base Building and Voter Engagement is Key- For the past 3 years, we have historically worked in Milwaukee and Rock County where turnout is significantly low. We are extremely disappointed in low turnout and that the ballot initiatives lost in every single county. Black counties' need early investment to yield results and it is essential that the entire progressive movement of the State engages in education around these initiatives

What's Ahead?

The truth is that Wisconsin still remains a split state. As we celebrate our victories, we acknowledge that there is still a lot of work to be done. Republican racialized ballot initiatives passed in every county and we will continue to lose battle if we don't control battle around them. **This includes building power among diverse communities who share similar values.**

Black and Immigrant voters of Wisconsin have an unprecedented opportunity to wield power in the electoral sphere. By bringing together groups organizing in Black and Immigrant communities, we can create a powerful force that will help stem the growing wave of authoritarianism and bigotry sweeping the country.

In planning our messaging, we are working with the Othering & Belonging Institute out of UC Berkeley. We will be working with OBI to develop and test messaging that is “bridging” rather than “breaking,” under the umbrella of a larger OBI initiative:

Bridging is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines and is an essential tool for building belonging. To bridge involves two or more individuals or groups coming together across acknowledged lines of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities, and allows for a new, more expansive identity. Bridging addresses tensions or “breaking” dynamics that sustain division, in order to develop a new “we” that is not only more inclusive, but cohesive, durable, and consistent with bringing about belonging and greater social justice.
(<https://belonging.berkeley.edu/bridging-belonging>)

Because the Black population of Wisconsin is relatively small, we will need to take an approach to our messaging that both emphasizes issues that will benefit Black communities, and also resonates with voters from other demographics. While mobilizing Black voters will be WCRJ/CRGE priority, we will also include other voters of color, as well as white voters whose racial resentment scores in the voter file are low.

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