



# VOTING WITH CONVICTION

Engaging an Invisible  
Voting Bloc

2017 ELECTION DEBRIEF

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*\*To view a online version of this report, go to [www.ccjrc.org/making -change/](http://www.ccjrc.org/making-change/).The online version contains an appendix which includes the voter questionnaire forms and the list of organizations interviewed and their responses as part of the landscape scan. It can be downloaded at <http://www.ccjrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2017-civic-engagement-landscape-scan-responses.pdf>*

## Background

Founded in 1999, the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition (CCJRC) is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization whose mission is to eliminate the overuse of the criminal justice system and advance community health and safety. We are people convicted of crime, survivors of crime, and the families and allies of both. We advocate and organize for public safety strategies that are more holistic, effective and just. We are also committed to building political power with people and communities most impacted by crime, over-policing and mass incarceration.

For over a decade, CCJRC has run our *Voting with Conviction* campaign specifically targeting people with a criminal record. Colorado does not have permanent disenfranchisement and, in fact, most people that are currently involved in the justice system are eligible to vote. However, this is not widely known. In addition to typical “Know Your Rights” strategies, we also offer free trainings and educational materials to the broader civic engagement field and candidates in Colorado that too often have perpetuated this myth from their own lack of knowledge.

In 2016, we expanded our campaign to include the first voter registration drive at both jails in Denver and produced a voting video that played frequently on the inmate education channel. While we have made progress, an honest reflection after the 2016 election brought us to the uncomfortable conclusion that we needed to do more. So, we went back to the drawing board.

## THE URGENCY AND THE OPPORTUNITY!

In the 2016 election, Colorado’s overall voter turnout rate of 71% was significantly higher than the national average of 58%. However, African American turnout among active registered voters was at 50% overall (22 points lower than white and 9 points lower than Latino/a voters). Only 39% of African American millennials voted (16 points lower than white and 8 points lower than Latino/a voters).

Obviously, many factors influence African American voter turnout. CCJRC’s curiosity focused on wanting to better understand:

- what civic engagement infrastructure was active in 2016 in Colorado that was focused on African American voter participation;
- what influenced African Americans in their decision whether to vote or not in the 2016 election;
- how prevalent is the myth of permanent disenfranchisement among African Americans and does this have a chilling effect on voter participation; and
- how to design and implement a GOTV field campaign that could effectively increase voter turnout among African American voters in the 2017 Aurora municipals election.

Given the era of mass incarceration, people with criminal records are not an insubstantial voting bloc, particularly among people of color. National data from The Sentencing Project estimates that over 100 million adults in the US have a criminal record. Even though only a handful of states prohibit people with a criminal conviction from voting, this is not widely known. Even in those handfuls of states there are nuances in their voter eligibility law which can lead to voter confusion.

There are numerous elections on the horizon that will have profound implications for Colorado. These include the Gubernatorial, Attorney General, and state House and Senate races in 2018 followed by the election of District Attorneys across the state in 2020. Tapping this invisible voting bloc is critical to advancing the justice and equality agenda that is important to so many of us.

This report highlights our growth, lessons learned, and key results from our efforts since the 2016 election. CCJRC conducted a civic engagement landscape scan, surveyed 500 African Americans on their voting patterns, and launched our first GOTV field campaign during the 2017 municipal elections in Aurora, Colorado that focused specifically on increasing black voter turnout.

## Denver Metro Area Civic Engagement Landscape Scan

**Description:** CCJRC conducted a landscape scan of 501 c3, c4 and c5 organizations involved in voter registration and Get out the Vote (GOTV) efforts during the 2016 election in the Denver metro area. Our goal was to better understand what organizational capacity, strategies and resources were being committed to increasing African American voter turnout, in general, and particularly the strength of those efforts that were indigenous to the African American community.

**Target Audience:** Participants included nonprofit organizations (of various sizes), community groups political parties, candidate campaigns, faith-based voter initiatives, and unions had some degree of African American voter turnout in their program work.

**Method:** CCJRC developed a questionnaire consisting of (51) nonpartisan questions. The questionnaire was distributed to 29 organizations that completed the survey, from January – February 2017. Each participating organization was also interviewed for 45 minutes by CCJRC staff to discuss the responses and/or complete the questionnaire.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Overall, the majority of organizations surveyed focused on civic engagement on some level in the 2016 election. Only 29% of respondents reported doing work specifically on African-American voter turnout.
- The majority of organizations surveyed (62%) focused their efforts in the City and County of Denver. About a third (34%) focused on Arapahoe County, which includes Aurora and only one organization focused efforts in Colorado Springs. Denver, Aurora and Colorado Springs are the three communities that have the highest concentration of African American residents in Colorado.
- Of the organizations that were focused on African American turnout, their programs were all small in scale. The majority of the programs had small staff, relied heavily on volunteers and had limited resources committed to VRD and GOTV efforts. When asked “What would you do differently to increase African American turnout?” respondents emphasized: starting campaigns early, raising more money for infrastructure, recruiting more volunteers and members of their organizations to have a more robust program.
- Those voter programs that were focused on African American voter turnout appeared to be pretty isolated. 55% of respondents said they were not aware of organizations focused on African American voter turnout and 44% said they were aware but didn’t feel confident in their knowledge of what those organizations were doing.

*\*(please see appendix for the list of groups identified for VRD and GOTV engagement of African American voters)*

## African American Voter Questionnaire

**Description:** The purpose of this questionnaire was to better understand what factors played a role in the decision of African Americans to either vote or not in the 2016 election, including: (1) how important voting was to them; (2) what messages or dynamics inspired them or dissuaded them from voting; (3) what contact that had with any VRD/GOTV efforts and whether it was effective; and (4) whether they believed that people with a criminal record could vote in Colorado. For those that did not vote, we also asked a specific question about what, if anything, could be done to gain their participation in the future.

**Population selection:** 98% of people who filled out this survey identified as African, African American, or mixed race. In addition to more traditional outreach efforts, we intentionally included people experiencing homelessness, former and active gang members, people with a history of drug use, and formerly incarcerated people.

**Methodology:** CCJRC developed a survey instrument for those who did vote and a second survey for those who did not vote. A total of 500 African Americans in the Denver metro area participated, 250 in each category. The majority of the surveys were done in-person using paper versions of the questionnaires by two of CCJRC's staff members, our civic engagement consultant, and roughly 5 volunteers. Electronic versions of the questionnaire were developed using Survey Monkey and a link was distributed via email and social media. The survey was administered May – June, 2017.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Overwhelmingly, (87%) of African Americans who voted and almost half (46%) of those who did not vote in 2016 felt voting was important. Only 17% of total participants felt voting was not important.
- Close to half (49%) of total participants believed that people with a criminal record could not vote in Colorado. This was significantly higher at 60% for African Americans who did not vote.
- Of the African Americans who did vote in 2016, 71% said that they voted “because the issues impact my family,” the most prevalent reason given. The second most prevalent reason that motivated voters 69% of voters was to “exercise my civic rights.” Additional reasons included: feeling like the county is going in the wrong direction and to honor those who fought for my right to vote. It was very clear that the legacy and struggle of the civil rights movement engendered a strong commitment to voting for many African Americans. .
- For those that did not vote, the primary reasons that influenced them included: people did not like the candidates running (59%); participants did not feel their vote counted (35%); participants did not receive a ballot (20%); and they did not believe the issues would impact them or their families (13%).
- Both groups reported a strong emphasis on candidates running for office reflecting the interest and values of African Americans. The ability to identify or not with candidates was a key component to encouraging them to vote. For example, of those who did vote, more than half 52% voted against a candidate they did not like in 2016.

- When African Americans were asked “*what would encourage more African American people to vote*”? Their response was “more information on candidates” and that VRD and GOTV programs should make more of an effort to build stronger relationships with the African American community. They emphasized the importance of having information on voting in Colorado for people with a criminal background, and having more information on candidates and ballot measures during elections.
- During the survey, both groups were provided a list of messages design to encourage African American turnout. The two top messages that resonated with both groups were “Your Community, Your Voice, Your Vote”; and “Black Votes Matter”.
- African Americans – who did and did not vote, where provided a list of options of traditional and non-traditional VRD and GOTV efforts that engaged them about voting. When asked the question “*did any of the following groups influence their decision to vote*”? An average of 60% of those who voted said no and 69% of those who did not vote said no.

## 2017 Aurora Civic Engagement Effort

**Description:** In 2017 CCJRC launched our first GOTV door-to-door field canvass that ran for nine weeks that targeted Ward III in Aurora, Colorado, during the municipal election. The CCJRC staff that led the campaign are both African American men and we hired three canvassers who were also all African American millennials, one of whom couldn't herself vote because she was still on parole. CCJRC also recruited volunteers who were passionate about civic engagement to support with this effort.

**Voter Selection:** CCJRC is part of the Colorado State Voices Roundtable and was able to access the Voter Access Network (VAN) data to identify target precincts in Ward III in Aurora with a higher African American population for our canvas efforts. CCJRC focused on reaching African American voters who were less likely to vote or who have never voted in midterm municipal elections, but voted in 2016. CCJRC piloted our GOTV canvass in Aurora because it had a relatively high-profile election for city council and numerous precincts with a high density of the voters mentioned above.

**Method:** CCJRC's main tactic was knocking on doors to talk face-to-face with voters. The canvassers were trained on high-level information to have detailed conversations with voters and encourage them to vote. We developed multiple educational materials to give to voters including: (1) a candidate survey that included the responses from all the candidates running for City Council in Ward III and the at-large seats; (2) a door-hanger that provided information on the date of the election and instructions for both mail-in or ballot drop-off locations; and (3) a Can I Vote? postcard that summarized voter eligibility (or ineligibility) for people with a criminal record depending on their status. Prior to the election, we also developed and distributed "pledge to vote" cards that were collected and then mailed to voters as a reminder to vote.

CCJRC also conducted a small phone banking effort. To reinforce conversations at the doors, CCJRC developed and paid for two different ads with get-out-the-vote messages specifically targeting African Americans and those with a criminal record who did not think they could vote. The ads were placed at 22 bus shelter across the Denver metro area for the month of October. The bus shelters the ads ran on were strategically selected to be near high traffic area bus lines and 8 bus shelter ads specifically in Ward III. When the ads went up, CCJRC called a press conference and were covered by both local print and TV.

### KEY OUTCOMES

- CCJRC's door-to-door canvas reached 4,000 doors with 1,033 actual conversations with African American voters at the door
- CCJRC's contact rate (conversations at the door) of 27% significantly exceeded the average of (18-21%) for GOTV canvas. In fact, the State Voices Roundtable reported that CCJRC had the highest door and phone contact/canvass rates out of the entire Colorado State Voices network and these rates were higher than what is typically seen in a municipal election.
- Ward III, where most of CCJRC's efforts were focused, had the highest African American voter turnout than any other Ward in Aurora.
- Ward III had an 18% African American voter turnout, which was a 2% increase in comparison to other off year elections. Citywide, turnout was 27%.

## Summary and Conclusion

Since 2006, CCJRC has been focused on increasing voter engagement for people with criminal records. In 2017, we decided to do a deeper dive specifically related to African American voter turnout due to the lower than average turnout in the 2016 election in Colorado and the fact that the African American community is the most impacted by over-criminalization.

This deeper dive had four components: (1) conducting a civic engagement landscape scan in the Denver metro area to determine the strength of the civic engagement infrastructure that was either focused on black voter turnout or indigenous to the black community (or both); (2) surveying 500 African Americans with a split sample of voters and nonvoters to better understand their decision in the 2016 election; (3) running a GOTV field campaign in the 2017 Aurora municipal election specifically focused on Ward III which has a high African American population; and (4) developing an ad campaign to test two different messages to encourage voter turnout among African Americans and people who may not think they can vote due to a criminal record.

Overall, the information compiled from both the landscape scan and the African American Voter Questionnaire suggests there is not adequate civic engagement infrastructure that is focused on African American voter turnout in the Denver Metro Area. There are a number of African-American focused organizations that have elements of civic engagement programming but who lack the resources to run a full and comprehensive VRD/GOTV program. Neither did it seem like plans were being developed within these organizations to increase African American voter turnout in 2018 through voter education, voter registration, GOTV, and building the relationships with black voters that is essential to increasing turnout.

Understanding African American voting behavior is vitally important for increasing African American voter turnout. Perspectives shared from those who did and did not vote demonstrated an underlying belief of the importance of the historical civil rights movement regarding the right to vote in the present day. They expressed interest in being engaged earlier in elections by folks conducting voter turnout was equally important as well. In addition, the misbelief regarding voting rights and eligibility for people with criminal backgrounds permeated throughout the survey and the Aurora GOTV canvass.

The 2017 pilot project demonstrated key lessons in developing strategies to increase voter turnout in the African American community. A primary lesson learned was the importance of the field canvassers and staff's race and ethnicity that reflected the community being canvassed. This contributed significantly to stronger engagement at the door which was vitally important for voter education and GOTV messaging. In addition, our canvassers intentionally spent additional time at the door as a primary strategy for building the relationship with the voter and learning the community. This was extremely valuable in building trust with voters.

The project also reinforced the importance of public education with regard to voting rights and eligibility for people with criminal backgrounds. CCJRC staff and canvassers had multiple conversations while collecting surveys and during door-to-door canvassing, with people regarding what the law is in Colorado. Unfortunately, but not to our surprise, people were not informed or were misinformed which underscores the importance and value of designing a canvass to allow for having one-on-one conversations with people about their voting rights.



## Looking Forward

CCJRC is more committed and inspired than ever to build on our learning and grow our civic engagement efforts in 2018. People with criminal records, especially among African Americans, are a powerful yet largely untapped voting bloc in Colorado and across the country. We have found tactics that work and look forward to scaling them up in 2018. CCJRC will be adding a new Voter Registration Dive component that focuses on justice-involved people, including jail-based voting. In addition to strategies on the ground, CCJRC is also working in coalition with other civic engagement organizations on legislation for the 2018 election.

The legislation would require criminal justice agencies to be more proactive in advising people of their right to vote and require jail administrators and local election officials to develop a protocol to ensure that eligible voters in jail have a meaningful opportunity to exercise that right. Every election is consequential but the 2020 election is already on our radar as voters will determine who will be the elected District Attorney in all twenty-two judicial districts in the state.

Despite District Attorneys being the most powerful people in the criminal justice system, District Attorney races tend to be very low-profile elections. CCJRC is hoping to help change that. Our ambition is to take our new knowledge and our ongoing experience to help strengthen the larger civic engagement field in order to build and mobilize political power with people most impacted by the overuse of the criminal justice system. To achieve long-lasting and structural reform of the criminal justice system, it is also essential to better educate and engage voters in District Attorney and Attorney General Elections so that prosecutors are more transparent and accountable to the diverse communities they are entrusted to serve.

We also look forward to continuing to work with other organizations in order to better engage the invisible voting bloc of African Americans and people with criminal backgrounds so that they are seen, they are heard and they vote.

*Media coverage of CCJRC's Aurora "Black Votes Matter" 2017 municipal election pilot campaign project*

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlvSkQw6tXI> Juston and Anne Trujillo
- <http://denver.cbslocal.com/2017/10/16/aurora-African-American-voter-turnout/>
- <http://www.denverpost.com/2017/10/16/African-American-votes-matter-campaign-aurora-city-council/>



## Appendices

### Appendix A - Landscape Scan:

Landscape Scan Report: <http://www.ccjrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2017-civic-engagement-landscape-scan-responses.pdf>

## Appendix B - Black Voter Questionnaire – Did Vote & Did Not Vote

Did Not Vote: <https://tinyurl.com/y8grmovn>

Did Vote: <https://tinyurl.com/ycmd3gc9>