



**Building Political Power for an Inclusive Democracy:
Transforming the democracy reform field into a
Movement for Racial Justice and Democracy**

April 2015

Dēmos is a public policy organization working for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal chance in our economy. After more than a decade of leadership in the voting rights and economic justice fields, we expanded our policy agenda to prioritize a proactive approach to addressing the role that big money in politics plays in racial and economic justice.

The outsized influence of money in our political system undermines our democracy and perpetuates a dangerous interplay between political and economic inequality, compounding the impacts of structural racism. A small group of wealthy donors and corporate interests increasingly determine who runs for office, who wins elections, and which issues policymakers address. The deleterious effect this has on our democracy is compounded by multiple barriers to voter registration and civic engagement, which disproportionately skews the electorate older and whiter than America’s true demographics. The people who are kept out of the political process by registration and voting barriers are primarily low-income, young, and people of color.

Our analysis and methodology reframes money in politics by demonstrating how it impedes public policy outcomes that would advance economic and racial equity and exacerbates underrepresentation of people of color, women, and the working class. A key objective is to create a framework to drive outrage about racial inequality and the dominance of “the one percent” into public demand for structural reforms that act as “democracy accelerators.” These reforms facilitate our ability to move an economic and racial justice policy agenda and increase inclusive and representative democracy. Advancing robust voting rights and public financing reforms is essential to developing the infrastructure critical for building the scale of political power needed to fulfill the promise of a multiracial democracy.

Deeper alignment is needed across the field to connect the need for structural reforms to the strategies and infrastructure working to build the political power of communities of color and a multi-issue agenda for economic justice, racial, and gender equity. As a key vehicle to building that alignment, Dēmos is launching a new strategic partner initiative.

A Strategic Partnership Initiative to Drive Alignment and Build Power

Building the political power of working class, Black, Latina, immigrant, and other communities of color requires structural reforms that decrease the influence of big money in politics. Winning and effectively implementing these structural reforms requires an intervention to drive alignment across siloed fields within the progressive infrastructure. The traditional field of electoral reform advocates is predominantly white, centered around national litigation and research organizations, and siloed from the racial and economic justice movements. Dēmos is uniquely positioned¹ to pilot a multi-pronged partnership initiative that will create vehicles for a set of key interventions to expand and re-center the democracy field. The objectives of this initiative are to:

- Reframe money in politics through a racial, economic, and gender justice lens.
- In five to seven states, build and integrate public demand for structural election and campaign finance reforms – such as public financing of elections – within a broader inclusive democracy agenda connected to state-led strategies for building independent political power.
- Convene and nurture a cohort of leaders of color who represent organizations with membership bases in communities of color and play key roles within state-based infrastructure.
- Collaborate with national community and faith-based organizing networks to best determine how to scale this alignment and support their efforts to expand their democracy reform work.

Theory of Change and Program Design

Fostering deep alignment while adding and building capacity will require three synergistic tracks:

1. Convening a majority person-of-color cohort of state-based leaders:

This cohort will include 12-16 state and local organizations anchored by five to seven of the leading state-based organizations doing full-cycle integrated voter engagement work. Participants will be leaders who are intentionally building membership bases in communities of color, including key local partners leading racial justice community organizing. This cohort will elevate a model body of work that demonstrates the power of values-based campaigns, driven by cross-sector infrastructure, to build alignment on a

¹ Dēmos has a longstanding history of work and relationships in the traditional field as well as key advocacy and campaign staff with a track record of partnership work with racial and economic justice organizations, national community organizing networks, and state-based organizations.

multi-issue agenda that aligns racial justice, voting rights, and gender and economic justice work into an expanded democracy agenda. In this way, this cohort will serve as a vehicle for demonstrating the collaboration, multi-issue agenda, and infrastructure necessary to build sufficient public demand and political power to accelerate and win proactive state and municipal democracy reforms. The cohort will have two layers of participation and programming:

- A multi-racial, majority person of color “Movement Makers” leadership development/fellowship program: The focus of this work will include strategy and narrative training to integrate a racial justice lens and analysis of money in politics into the full multi-issue agendas in their states, enabling these leaders to play key roles in their state infrastructure and supporting their long-term leadership in our movement.
- The creation of a learning community and series of convenings for the executive staff currently playing lead roles in the state c3/c4 infrastructure. The programmatic focus will include leveraging their leadership in the state infrastructure to promote alignment on a multi-issue democracy agenda that includes integrating public financing of elections into strategic sequencing of policy fights, organizing models, and candidate development strategies. It will be an opportunity to create deep trans-local partnerships between organizations who are members of the different national community, faith-based, and workers’ center networks, and a vehicle for moving this analysis within those networks. As the cohort develops a model body of work and establishes an effective mode of collaboration across fields and sectors, we will develop a fundraising and donor engagement strategy to resource these organizations to continue the work.

2. Strengthening infrastructure to move multi-issue inclusive democracy agendas at the state level:

Dēmos will provide in-depth policy, research, and litigation support to the state infrastructure of 5 states where we have state-anchor organizations. We have confirmed the following anchor organizations: Faith in Florida (the Florida PICO affiliate); Missouri Jobs With Justice (with participation from the Missouri Organizing Collaborative); Take Action Minnesota; SWOP and Olé in New Mexico; and Washington Community Action Network (WA-CAN!). We are also working with organizations in Massachusetts, Maryland, Washington D.C. and New Jersey. Goals for this work will include: aligning and broadening the field’s advocacy agenda to include a more robust multi-issue democracy agenda² and utilizing collaborative development of this agenda to break down silos across the democracy, economic justice, and racial justice fields, as well as across the policy and community organizing sectors. Dēmos’ support will include:

² Based on initial landscaping, an expanded agenda would likely include policy solutions that integrate outcomes to improve worker control, corporate accountability, gender equity, reinvestment in public infrastructure, and long-term debt reduction; support work to win full inclusion for formally incarcerated people and work to dismantle the prison industrial complex; and advance innovative affirmative voting rights and structural reforms of our election system.

- Developing policy handles and advancing state and municipal campaigns for public financing and other campaign finance reforms with a framework that supports their integration with other issue campaigns and sequencing with other legislative priorities.
 - Developing policy handles for an expanded affirmative voting rights agenda, including felon re-enfranchisement, automatic/universal voter registration, Same-Day Registration reform (a signature Dēmos issue) and other pro-voter reforms.
 - Elevating and accelerating campaign work that demonstrates how base-building around an agenda with a racial justice impact analysis can build power to change our campaign finance system.
 - Advancing alignment around a new jurisprudence for regulating money in politics.
 - Narrative development, message integration, and impact litigation trainings.
3. **Providing technical assistance and strategic campaign support to executive and campaign staff of national community-based organizing and workers' center networks.**
- We will aim to support efforts to expand and frame their democracy work and move this framework through their affiliate networks. These collaborations will help to amplify our impact in communities of color in a wide range of advocacy campaigns.

Conclusion

Dēmos can play a critical and unique role in bringing previously siloed stakeholders together around strategies to build power to win structural democracy reforms. Together, these tracks of work will build the leadership and alignment needed to transform the siloed democracy and money in politics fields into a robust, geographically and racially diverse movement. A key impact of that transformation will be an expanded and aligned field connected to other fields in the progressive movement. And one with the infrastructure necessary to generate a groundswell of public support for structural reforms, such as public financing of elections and affirmative voting rights, which act as accelerators for advancing an expanded democracy, economic, and racial justice agenda.