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# A Guide for Building Cross-Sector Collaborations to Strengthen Democracy

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Cross-sector networks require flexibility and adaptability.
- Cross-sector networks need a clear purpose with engaged partners that reflect the communities served.
- Cross-sector networks should hold themselves accountable for defining priority work with a lens toward diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Cross-sector networks should articulate expectations for participating in the network and establish practices for productive meetings.
- Cross-sector networks should formalize leadership, track progress, monitor collaboration, and celebrate success for long-term health.

*All views expressed in this report are the author's views and do not reflect the position of any other agency or organization.*

## Introduction

The U.S. experienced historic voter turnout in the 2020 Presidential General Election, however, the misinformation and disinformation campaigns in the months preceding and following the election confused voters and weakened public trust. Additionally, the proliferation of legislative proposals that created barriers to voting furthered distrust and undermined the principles of this nation. While democratic institutions proved resilient, the work to rebuild confidence in elections and battle restrictive voting laws requires new partnerships. Cross-sector collaborations are needed today more than ever to provide public education, build inclusive policies, and increase confidence in our democracy.

A cross-sector network brings together groups from two or more segments of society, including government, nonprofit, business, academia, labor, faith-based organizations, or civic groups to work toward shared goals. This report provides an initial approach for building cross-sector collaboration in election administration with the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The practices in this report are informed by the experience of Future of California Elections (FoCE) from 2011 to 2020, as it became a leading network in California.<sup>1</sup> Part 1 provides an overview of the benefits of cross-sector networks and the FoCE experience, part 2 provides the elements of a successful network, and part 3 concludes with strategies for maintaining a network. Building a cross-sector network requires time, flexibility, and adaptability. There are no shortcuts to building the trusting partnerships required for strong networks. This guide is for leaders who are ready to invest, learn, and grow from collaboration in multisector partnerships.

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<sup>1</sup> This report focuses on the timeline of the author's direct engagement with Future of California Elections. The success of FoCE belongs to many. A special acknowledgement is deserved to those that had the vision of forming this collaboration and those who continue the work today, as a volunteer led effort, through the newly named Future of California Elections Network.

# I. The Benefits of Cross-Sector Collaborations and the Experience of Future of California Elections

Studies have shown that cross-sector collaborations are effective strategies for addressing complex social problems because “[they] require solutions that build on the capacity of multi-sector collaboration to yield positive community change...” (Brown, Rizzuto, & Singh, 2019) Complex social problems cut across sectors and require coordinated solutions.

The benefits of working in a cross-sector collaboration include leveraging the strengths of network partners, increasing knowledge sharing, and greater efficiency and productivity of limited resources.

The Water Forum in Sacramento and the Rapid City Collective Impact in South Dakota are two examples of cross-sector networks which overcame seemingly impossible challenges that individual organizations simply could not address alone. The Water Forum convened over 40 partners to address the constant litigation that characterized the effort to preserve the ecological habitat and water supply of the region. The network brought together government officials, activists, business owners, agricultural leaders, and civic groups. After six years of discussing challenges and solutions, the group developed an agreement which guides the member organizations today. (Community Partners, 2011) Similarly, the Rapid City Collective Impact leveraged a network model to improve the quality of life for the most underserved in Rapid City. The network participants invested \$30 million to develop social service centers, one which would be operated for the first time by a partnership between Native and Non-Native leaders. This collaboration helped to overcome the history of mistrust between these two communities. (Linderman, 2019) The success in Rapid City resulted in the evolution of the network into several collective impact initiatives now called the Collective Impact Black Hills. (Collective Impact Black Hills, 2021) The examples of the Water Forum and the Rapid City Collective Impact demonstrate the potential of networks for change when sectors combine effort, knowledge, and coordinate resources to achieve shared goals.

While building cross-sector collaborations has been a long-standing practice in other fields, they have not been widely used in election administration. Yet, election administration is a field that can benefit from cross-sector engagement because of the nature of the public services it provides to voters. A cross-sector network built with the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion provides a proactive approach to make sure election policies and practices serve all voters. Network partnerships can be used to review existing policies and practices, inform new policies with the lived experiences of diverse communities, and lift the best election administration practices across jurisdictions.

The Future of California Elections partners leveraged collaboration in the election administration field to advance reforms that modernized elections and expanded participation for all voters. Launched in 2011, FoCE brought together over 20 organizations, including groups that had sued each other in the past, to identify shared goals and priorities. The group included election officials, reform advocates, civil rights, and civic engagement organizations. The network went through various stages over the years, from a network led by consensus, to one led by a backbone organization managing multiple initiatives, to the self-managed network today, led by a core group of participating organizations.<sup>2</sup> Consistent through each transition were the shared principles and values that united the partners. The experience of FoCE provides an example of how networks can be used in election administration to build trust and advance policies that serve a diverse electorate.

Below are the Mission Statement and Inclusion Statement which guide the Future of California Elections Network today:

## FUTURE OF CALIFORNIA ELECTIONS NETWORK, 2021

**Mission:** *The Future of California Elections Network is a nonpartisan network of election officials, reform advocates, civil rights organizations, and civic engagement groups collaborating to advance effective and inclusive election policies and practices.*

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<sup>2</sup> The work of Future of California Elections was supported by a small backbone organization, which was a fiscally sponsored project of Community Partners. The backbone organization was responsible for convening the partners and leading network initiatives. The backbone organization closed in January 2021. The collaboration continues today as volunteer led effort and was renamed Future of California Elections Network.

***Inclusion Statement:*** *The Future of California Elections Network participants work to advance election policies and practices that ensure access to our democracy for all voters regardless of demographics, including race/ethnicity, disability, language, age, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, political preference, or religion. Furthermore, the Network holds itself accountable to ensuring full diversity, equity, and inclusion in its own structure and activities.*

Future of California Elections is credited for successfully strengthening cross-sector partnerships to accelerate election reforms in California. Through its first decade, FoCE successfully moved forward online voter registration, same-day registration, California's Motor Voter Act, established state advisory committees on accessibility and language access, and supported implementation of California's Voter's Choice Act. Future of California Elections also improved election administration practices of mail-ballot envelope design and advanced the use of plain language in election materials, especially in voter guides. FoCE participants expressed appreciation for having a space to work through differences in a cross-sector setting and outside of committee hearing rooms or courtrooms. This sentiment was also shared by legislative policy committee staff who stated how FoCE helped to transform committee hearings with more productive and effective policy discussions among advocates from different sectors.

FoCE worked internally and externally to build collaboration and advance its mission. The FoCE backbone organization convened nonpartisan policy table discussions and workgroups to build understanding of the benefits and challenges of potential election reforms as well as existing laws. The conversations engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including policy experts, researchers, community organizations, election officials, staff from the Office of the California Secretary of State and staff from state legislative policy committees. The goal of conversations was not always to secure agreement from the group around specific proposals but instead conversations focused on developing understanding of the policy implications for election administration and for the voter experience of California's diverse electorate. Given the range of partners that engaged in the discussions, conflict occasionally arose. At times, the organizations had different urgencies to contend with and these differences created tension in the group. To address conflict, FoCE staff invited partners to express concerns and encouraged participants to ask questions and listen actively, instead of advocating for a specific position. FoCE itself did not take policy positions, to prioritize learning and foster trust across the sectors. This allowed participants to adopt FoCE as a neutral space to troubleshoot legislative ideas and even brainstorm solutions with their potential opposition. An example of FoCE's policy work is when the group first discussed the concept of vote centers. FoCE staff invited Colorado nonprofits and Denver's election official to share their experience developing and implementing the vote center model in their state. The FoCE partners discussed the different aspects of vote centers over several meetings and FoCE staff developed a summary document of the discussion. The FoCE summary document later served as a guide to inform policy conversations outside of the FoCE space many months later.

FoCE also hosted public events to build cross-sector collaboration and support for its policy priorities within the broader elections field in California. The events were important opportunities to connect with high-level government officials, such as the California Secretary of State, state legislators, and to highlight the effective cross-sector partnerships that were advancing election policies and practices. Its flagship event, the annual conference, convened nearly 300 election stakeholders each year. FoCE also hosted webinars and workshops, archived on the network's website, and include "Designing for Democracy", "California Online Voter Registration", "The California Voter's Choice Act: Research and Lessons Learned", and "How does COVID-19 change voter engagement?" FoCE's events were valuable learning and networking opportunities for the field because they created a cross-sector elections community by focused advancing policies and practices that served California's diverse electorate. FoCE events facilitated introductions, formed partnerships, and helped share current California election policy developments.

Future of California Elections' success was not without challenges. The tasks the network had to surmount in its early years were to develop true partnerships and ownership of the collaboration. FoCE was founded and funded generously by the James Irvine Foundation. The Foundation selected the initial participants and grantees, worked with them to establish a backbone organization, and engaged expert facilitators to ensure the network developed the characteristics of the collective impact model it was inspired after. FoCE formed "...a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication..." (Kania & Kramer, 2011) When the network began there were few pre-existing relationships across the sectors. Additionally, there was external tension from organizations that had not been invited to participate in the new network. It took time for the participating organizations to develop their own relationships and form true partnerships. As the organizations experienced the success of working together, the participants felt a deeper commitment and ownership of the cross-sector collaboration, and the network became more respected in California elections.

Another important moment for FoCE's development was in its fifth year with the implementation of the Voter's Choice Act. The rigorous legislative proceedings, which found FoCE partners on both sides of the issues, strained relationships within the network, even though FoCE did not engage in advocacy. Once the law passed, however, the partners agreed to move beyond disagreements to collaborate on implementation. The focus of the implementation work required local partnerships with jurisdictions adopting the new law. Since FoCE had previously struggled with adding new partners, a new initiative was launched to create space for new organizations and long-term partners to form collaboration. These new partners brought different perspectives and fresh energy to the network and became trusted allies in future work.

In its sixth year, the network made a significant structural shift to plan for its own long-term sustainability and adopted governance principles to elect an Advisory Board. Whereas previously, the Advisory Board members were appointed by the executive directors, the new Advisory Board would be chosen by its peers and would oversee FoCE's management.<sup>3</sup> There were two main factors that motivated the network partners to formalize the Advisory Board. The first factor was that there was a change in the funding environment for election work in California. FoCE's largest funder, the James Irvine Foundation, adopted a new strategy for its work and culminated the program area that funded election administration projects. (Howard, 2019) The Foundation provided partners with generous final grants to support the transition. As such the network had a time limited window to plan for its future. The second factor that influenced the network to take more control of its structure was that for the backbone organization had been without an executive director for several months. With the support of an interim executive director, the partners adopted principles and elected their first Advisory Board. The new five-member Board needed to reflect the diversity of the network, including geographic diversity, racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the range of the network groups, which consisted of election officials, reform organizations, civil rights organizations, and organizations representing underserved populations and populations with special needs. The Board members were nominated by the existing network partners and served two-year terms. The FoCE Advisory Board worked in partnership with the incoming executive director to manage the network's transition and ensure the collaboration was well positioned to accomplish its goals through the 2020 election cycle. Establishing the FoCE Advisory Board was important groundwork for the network to prepare for the self-led structure it has today.

In its most recent reorganization, the FoCE Advisory Board closed the backbone organization, and the network adopted a self-governance structure, establishing the new Future of California Elections Network. As of this writing, the participating organizations lead the group. The Future of California Elections Network is focused on retaining a collaborative cross-sector space for discussions on democracy issues. Partners are united by the mission and inclusion statements and hold themselves accountable for leading and activating the network around shared issues.

FoCE's structural shifts were prompted by a changing environment to which the participating organizations responded by creating a more genuine collaboration defined by them and for them. FoCE's evolution is consistent with the latest research on collective impact which encourages networks to "Have authentic community engagement instead of continuous communication, create shared aspirations instead of a common agenda, adopt strategic learning over shared measurement, focus on high leverage and loose-tight working relationships over mutually reinforcing activities and create container for change instead of establishing backbone supports." (Mayan, Pauchulo, Gillespie, Dragana, & Mejia, 2020)

The case studies reviewed show that networks can thrive in different fields and through different structures to address complex issues. What is consistent across networks is that collaboration builds trust and leverages the strengths and expertise of participating organizations to increase impact. Networks are not static and there is not a single approach for building cross-sector partnerships. Forming a network is messy and at times ambiguous. Each network's development is the result of the unique set of circumstances in its environment. Regardless of its structure, a network must remain flexible to meet the needs of its partners and the communities they serve.

Although the best practices for cross-sector networks continue to emerge, some consistent elements are important to consider, including:

- Ensuring partners represent all sectors and diverse communities.
- Defining clear purpose and values for the network with a lens for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Identifying network priorities with a timeline and deliverables.
- Articulating expectations for participating in the network.
- Adopting shared practices for managing the network.

## II. Elements for Building a Cross-Sector Network

There are many factors which contribute to a successful cross-sector collaboration. Future of California Elections staff focused on five core elements to build the network in its first decade. Future of California Elections worked to engage partners from different sectors and organizations that represented the communities served, defined shared purpose and values that unified the network, clarified expectations about how to collaborate, set annual priorities to move closer to the network's mission and purpose, and adopted practices for managing productive meetings. These elements provide an initial approach for building cross-sector networks in election administration.

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<sup>3</sup> As a fiscally sponsored project of Community Partners, the FoCE Advisory Board did not have fiduciary duties.

## INCLUDE PARTNERS THAT ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE DIFFERENT SECTORS AND COMMUNITIES SERVED

It is essential to start a cross-sector network in elections with an inclusive group that represents the different sectors and organizations that reflect the communities that the network will serve.

**A range of partners provide networks with a breadth of expertise, resources, and credibility to the collaborative work.**

Working with election officials from different sized jurisdictions and regions provides insights into the complexities of election administration laws and regulations for different areas of a state. Engaging a variety of nonprofits will provide expertise on the voting experience of diverse communities and inform how to best serve all voters. Networks may also want to consider including additional sectors to support network goals. The business and faith-based sectors may be good partners for voter education efforts because they have the potential to reach a range of voters. While it may take more effort to engage a larger group, the network will have greater success and credibility if there is buy-in from all stakeholders from the beginning.

Nonprofits and election officials starting cross-sector networks may not always have the relationships needed to identify the right partner organizations. Organizations should therefore begin conversations with key stakeholders to share the vision of the network's potential impact. A good place to start connecting with election officials may be state associations if the work is expected to be statewide. To connect with nonprofit organizations, reach out to organizations that are already working with election offices and working in the communities the network is trying to serve. Nonprofit organizations are more decentralized, and it may take several calls to find the right partners. New networks should use several strategies to find potential partners and ask widely for recommendations of prospective organizations. A strategy for connecting with high-level officials, like a secretary of state or elected officials, is to identify constituents to reach out to those offices. Elected officials may be more motivated to connect with organizations that operate in their districts.

The network should select partners that have a deep knowledge of the communities they serve and are willing to share their expertise. The network should also remain vigilant that partners' expertise is aligned with key initiatives and that the participating organizations reflect the diversity of the populations being served. Networks need multiple organizations representing people with disabilities, the Black community, the Latino community, the Asian community, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other historically excluded groups to avoid the trap of tokenism. Engaging multiple organizations representing a community ensures no group is left out, especially if the network adopts a consensus voting model. Ultimately, the composition of the partnerships should always adapt to reflect the communities being served.

An important aspect of building a strong network and robust relationships with new partners is to invite the leadership of the organizations. The representatives from the organizations should be empowered to make decisions in network discussions. Having decision-makers at the table will facilitate efficient and realistic strategic planning sessions. FoCE initial planning sessions began with the executive directors of the nonprofit organizations and the officers of the California Association Clerks and Election Officials. This group of executives laid the foundation for the network, ensured meetings were productive, and moved the network visioning forward.

New networks should consider starting conversations with a group of 10 to 20 decision-makers that will be important partners to the network. If a larger group is selected, hiring an outside facilitator who is skilled in leading groups towards outcomes will help ensure productive and focused conversations. Working with too large of a group can be a challenge if the network does not have pre-existing relationships or expert facilitation.

When an established network adds partners, there should be a thoughtful plan for engaging and onboarding new organizations—growing too quickly as a network may strain relationships. In FoCE, new partners joined issue-specific workgroups and the original partners continued to guide the strategic direction of the overall network. This approach allowed FoCE to grow its expertise and meet the needs of its growing portfolio of initiatives. Additionally, participation in FoCE expanded from the executive level to include the program directors, managers, and coordinators of the participating organizations. However, the network retained the expectation that the organization's representatives were empowered to make decisions on behalf of their organization, with minimal oversight.

Selecting the right partners is critical to the success of a network. Potential partner organizations should have a history of working collaboratively and should be willing to contribute their resources and expertise to a cross-sector effort. Collaborating in a cross-sector network requires blending the distinct work cultures of each sector, learning how to work together in a new way,

and contributing resources to accomplish a shared purpose. The reality is that not every organization will want to engage in collaborative work because it is defined by compromises, negotiations, providing resources, and sharing credit.

Finally, while the active partner organizations are central to the network's success, it is also important to consider connecting with additional allies who can support the collaboration but may not have capacity to engage in the day-to-day work. Since its inception, FoCE collaborated with the California Secretary of State, Legislative Committee staff, and several academic researchers to inform and advance its nonpartisan mission.

Below are some questions to consider for identifying the right partners:

- Who are the organizations representing the communities touched by the issue(s) the network will discuss and evaluate?
- Is the leadership of the prospective partner organization willing to participate or empower a representative to collaborate in the network?
- Are network participants willing to work collaboratively with partners of a different sector?
- Are network participants willing to commit time and resources to accomplish network goals?
- Are there other allies who would support the collaboration?

## ARTICULATE EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE NETWORK

Articulating clear expectations for how to participate in the network is key to developing productive cross-sector partnerships. The network's participants will each bring different cultures, backgrounds, and norms.

**Network collaboration requires understanding how to contribute to the network and how to engage with partners from different sectors and backgrounds.**

The expectations for network participation will vary, but some considerations are how partners can contribute to the network, how network participation will be funded, and how to maintain respect for different cultures and backgrounds.

There are many ways organizations can contribute to their network. Participants may give their time, funding, expertise, or leadership. A network is only as strong as the contributions of its participants, and it is important to state these expectations. A danger of not clarifying expectations, is that a network may develop too many passive actors, resulting in inefficiencies and lack of impact. Additionally, highly active participants may become resentful of less active partners resulting in strained relationships.

In the experience of Future of California Elections, involvement in the network required partner organizations to contribute significant time of their senior staff. Participating organizations understood that their involvement in the network required the expertise of senior level staff to move goals forward. Partners had to attend planning calls at least once per month, or several times a month, depending on the issue. If partners did not have capacity to contribute the time of senior staff, they typically stepped out of the network. Adhering to this expectation resulted in a highly active network which was critical for the success of initiatives.

Another expectation in FoCE was independent funding. The backbone organization and the partners were each expected to raise their own funding to participate in the network. In FoCE's early years, the James Irvine Foundation was the primary funder for both the backbone organization and the network partners, but each was still expected to secure their own grants. Later, the FoCE backbone organization raised funds for specific network initiatives and provided small pass-through grants, however, the organizations remained largely responsible for funding their staff participation in the network. Despite its decade-long record of success, fundraising for the FoCE backbone organization was challenging and the network decided to close the backbone organization but continue with the collaboration in a new volunteer structure. If funding is an expectation for an emerging network, they should assess the funding environment in their state. Potential funding sources may include private foundations, individual donors, and government grants. If resources are limited, networks should articulate their expectations for funding the collaboration such as establishing a volunteer structure or setting networks dues to support a backbone organization or network initiatives.

Cross-sector networks navigate different organizational and ethnic cultures as well as engage groups with different backgrounds. Articulating the expectations of respectful engagement is critical for successful collaboration. A network must remain mindful of the tensions that may arise from navigating a cross-sector environment. There are significant differences in the organizational cultures of the government sector and the nonprofit sector. Government culture may be defined by bureaucracy and steadiness, while nonprofit culture may experience more fluctuation in funding and staffing. Cross-sector partners should consider the different organizational cultures that their colleagues must navigate to move forward a cross-sector initiative. Additionally, a network will engage groups with different backgrounds. Cross-sector networks must be mindful of important ethnic cultural

holidays, dates for religious observation, or any special needs that a community may have, to support maximum participation from all.

Future of California Elections worked to create a culture of respect by learning from its partners. An important example is how the partner organizations who worked with voters with disabilities taught the network how to use person first language, which puts the person before the diagnosis of their disability. The partners shared resources and led workshops on how to best serve voters with disabilities. FoCE extended its new knowledge of serving people with disabilities by working to create accessible spaces for all its efforts including in-person network gatherings. These changes were significant in demonstrating to the network partners that they were respected and set the tone for productive collaboration.

All networks should discuss expectations for organizations participating in a cross-sector collaboration. In addition, to the expectations discussed, Future of California Elections also held the expectation of an informal community agreement. In this agreement, partners understood they needed to attend meetings regularly to ensure continuity of conversations as well as maintain confidentiality for what was discussed within the group. The FoCE backbone organization was responsible for reminding partners of these norms at meetings and even through private conversations when expectations were not being met.

There is no single list of expectations a network should have for partner engagement. Each network should consider the factors that will create the strongest collaboration for its participants.

Below are some questions to help define network expectations:

- Are participants committed to being active contributors to the work of the network by sharing their time, expertise, and resources?
- Are participants willing to engage in respectful and professional dialogue even through disagreements?
- Is confidentiality of network conversations important?
- Are there specific needs that should be considered to support successful engagement from all those involved in the network?

## DEFINE A CLEAR PURPOSE AND SHARED VALUES FOR THE NETWORK

All networks must have a purpose and shared values. Often the purpose and values are summarized in a mission statement. Regardless of whether a network adopts a mission statement it should spend time considering what it stands for. A purpose unifies the network around a shared vision of the future. Values inspire the approach to collaboration.

Expressing the network purpose and values strengthens the network's identity.

To find its purpose, a network can explore the issues that motivate collaboration. Urgent issues incentivize cooperation because there is a critical challenge, and the partners can see a better solution than the status quo. To understand its values, the network can explore what they are working toward and who should be the beneficiaries of improvements or changes made. Future of California Elections kept an annual practice of reflecting on its purpose and values and summarized the purpose and values in its mission statement.

FoCE partners first convened to address several urgent issues. When the network began, California had a deteriorating voting system, and the electorate did not reflect the population. Election officials, reform advocates, and civil rights organizations were working on the same issues but usually with peer organizations, in competition, or alone. Efforts to move forward reforms like online voter registration and same-day registration failed or were stalled through legislative or administrative challenges. The partners all felt that more could be done for California voters if they worked together.

To first define its purpose and values, the network had honest exchanges about the alignment of urgencies. Bringing together nearly two dozen leaders representing election officials, civil rights firms, advocates for transparency, groups representing voters with disabilities, limited English proficient voters, and other historically excluded groups resulted in a long list of critical issues to address, but a shared vision of the future. The participants decided that its priority work needed to cut across the needs of all the groups.

*Figure 1* below presents a visual of how the FoCE found alignment across the sectors. The three circles represent the different groups of partners in Future of California Elections, which included election officials, reform advocates and civil rights and civic engagement groups. Each circle symbolizes how each group holds its own space and its own agenda. However, the diagram also shows that the circles overlap at the triangle in the center. This intersection represents where the groups connect at some level despite differences and symbolizes the alignment of shared aspirations. The purpose that emerged for FoCE was to improve both election administration and the voter experience because it served the interests of all groups.



Figure 1. The Venn diagram illustrates the point of alignment where interests intersected for the different groups of partners in Future of California Elections.

Improving the voter experience for all was essential in a state as diverse as California. Advancing the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion was a defining element of FoCE’s approach to delineating its purpose. As a nonpartisan network, participants believed that all eligible current and future voters had a right to access and cast a secure, independent, and successful ballot. The network was guided by the needs of California’s large and complex electorate.<sup>4</sup> The network was committed to discussing policy solutions that served voters with disabilities, limited English proficient voters, traditionally underserved voters, historically excluded voters, rural voters, urban voters, voters with low-literacy, and more. FoCE intentionally began conversations by addressing the needs of California’s diverse electorate at the front of policy deliberations and never at the end. For many years, FoCE had an implicit practice for diversity, equity, and inclusion to guide all its work. Today the Future of California Elections Network has proactively adopted an Inclusion Statement to reflect its values which is posted on the network website.

The online voter registration initiative is one example of how FoCE advanced its purpose and values. The initiative was selected because it improved both election administration and the voter experience. Despite past efforts, online voter registration had died in legislative sessions. FoCE convened discussions to understand what the challenges were for election administrators and for advocates. The network shared knowledge and grew their expertise on key issues around online voter registration by inviting external experts to the discussion. Network partners learned about the digital divide in traditionally underrepresented communities, the need for translation and accessibility, and the complexities of website security. Once the partners had built their understanding of these important issues, they worked with other coalitions outside of the FoCE to build support and continued to share updates on the bill progress at FoCE meetings. Ultimately, the combined efforts inside and outside of FoCE resulted in passing online voter registration.

Once online voter registration became law, the FoCE network wanted to ensure the new law was consistent with its values to serve all voters. The FoCE partners worked with the California Secretary of State to ensure that the online website was well designed, accessible, and in plain language. Additionally, FoCE partners worked to ensure the website was also translated and available in a total of 10 languages. As one of the earliest states to implement online voter registration, California provided a model for others to replicate.

Networks should have honest conversations about their purpose and their values to provide clarity for partner engagement. There are many ways to define the purpose and values of a network. While FoCE had several urgent reasons to come together as a network, it could have easily been just one issue. Other networks may be motivated to unify around a single time-limited issue or see the need to form a long-term network to collaborate on interconnected issues. Regardless of what a network decides, having a

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<sup>4</sup> When FoCE launched, the California Statement of the Vote recorded 23.5 million eligible voters for the most recent 2010 General Election by the 2020 General Election this had grown to 25 million eligible voters.



clearly stated purpose and shared values will signal to the participating organizations and the public what the network is about and more importantly what it is not about.

Below are some questions to consider for finding the network's purpose and values:

- What pressing policy issue(s) or practice(s) should be addressed to ensure election administrators succeed each election cycle?
- What pressing policy issue(s) or practice(s) should be addressed to ensure all voters can cast a successful ballot?
- Who are the beneficiaries of the policy issue(s) or practice(s) identified?
- Are partners willing to hold themselves accountable to shared values of diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- What additional value should the network uphold?

## IDENTIFY NETWORK PRIORITIES

The work of election administration is broad and dynamic. Setting priorities will keep the network focused on progress toward its purpose and values. Priorities are the issues the participants agree to collaborate on to advance the network's mission.

**Priorities should be time limited and priority setting should be done with the broadest set of partners.**

Future of California Elections kept a practice of setting annual priorities. The partners submitted a range of potential issues in advance and then voted on the priorities using specific criteria. FoCE priorities needed to cut across the interests of all the partners, advance the network's mission, serve all voters, and be realistic within a specific time frame. The network held itself accountable to the priorities by posting them publicly on the website and by announcing them at the annual conference.

Below are a few examples of the range of issues the network collaborated on over the years.

- Supporting more registration opportunities to encourage youth voter engagement.
- Improving access to voting, polling places and election materials for voters with disabilities.
- Reducing voter confusion of the vote-by-mail process through dissemination of best practices and improved design of vote-by-mail envelopes.
- Supporting implementation of the Voter's Choice Act.
- Convening stakeholders and partners to promote cross-sector collaboration.

The specificity of a priority will vary for each network. A network with a lot of structure may want to assign priorities to partners and detail activities with measurable outcomes. A looser network may allow the participating organizations to align efforts and define their own activities to advance the priority. Regardless of how detailed a priority is articulated, partners should identify a timeline and understand the goal of the priority. A timeline sets a specific period to coordinate pressure from multiple partners on a single issue which causes a ripple effect for increased impact. A goal is the outcome that the network is looking to achieve. A goal can be quantitative, qualitative, or both but it defines what success looks like, so the network knows what to work toward and how to evaluate its progress. Progress on priority issues should be reviewed every year so priorities can be refined as needed.

The priority setting process will vary from network to network, but there are a few general steps that a network can take. The first step for selecting priorities is to invite the widest set of partners. All stakeholders must be present for these defining conversations. Engaging in discussions with government and nonprofit organizations as well as the representatives of diverse communities will ensure that final priorities truly represent the network. If possible, proactively invite key stakeholders and require registration to help identify and address gaps in representation prior to discussions. If gaps in representation are identified once a meeting is underway, the network should make a note that important voices were missing from the discussion and make commitment to getting input before moving initiatives forward. In addition to greater representation, working with several partners to define priorities helps identify resources for accomplishing the priorities and aligns the work of the network with the capacity of individual partners. Having alignment between priorities and partner resources is a crucial step if the network does not have dedicated funding.

The next step after assessing representation is to agree on the criteria used to select the priority issues. The network should discuss what factors need to exist for an issue to be identified as a priority. The right criteria will be the list that the entire network feels are fair for everyone. Criteria should reflect the mission and values of the network. FoCE did not have formal written criteria, but there was a general understanding from partners what issues became a FoCE priority.

Once a network has agreed on criteria, the next step is to solicit a list of potential priorities from all the network participants. It may feel overwhelming to develop a list with the full network, however, this practice is an essential step because it ensures that all

perspectives are being considered. It is important to monitor that all network partners submit ideas to ensure the full network truly develops the final list. An additional benefit of full participation is that it may introduce an innovative solution or strategy the network had not considered. Once all the ideas are collected and vetted against the criteria, the priorities will emerge. Networks can choose to identify long-term and short-term priorities from their final list. The criteria are essential to help quickly narrow a potentially long list of ideas. The final priority issues selected should advance the network's purpose and serve the interests of all the network participants.

Developing priorities is well invested time for a network and prevents scope creep. Having articulated priorities allowed the FoCE backbone organization to manage network resources efficiently and to move the network mission forward in a purposeful way. While many critical issues emerged each year, the network focused on FoCE priority issues. However, these other critical issues were not ignored. Due to the strong partnerships that the network formed across groups, the partners still convened on their own to collaborate.

Below are some questions to consider for setting priorities:

- Do priority-setting discussions include all representatives for the communities touched by the issue(s)?
- What criteria will be used to select priority issues?
- What are the top three to five issues that cut across the interests of network partners, government, and the nonprofit sector?
- What is the window of opportunity for each issue? Can it move in a year or is it a longer-term issue?
- What resources are partners willing to bring to each priority? Are there champions that are willing to lead that issue?

## ADOPT PRACTICES FOR PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

Regular meetings are important when a network is launching because they help build relationships and the network's cross sector culture. A few important management practices to consider are determining when and how the group will meet, setting an agenda for the meeting, adopting ground rules to ensure all voices are heard, and asking partner commitment on follow-up items.

**Adopting practices for productive meetings is essential for partners to feel their engagement in the network is constructive.**

The network should decide if meetings are to be in-person or remote and when meetings require full network participation. In-person meetings are recommended to facilitate important strategic discussions and decision-making. In-person meetings should also include an option to participate remotely so partners who cannot travel can still participate. Remote meetings are good options for general updates, workgroups or learning opportunities. They can include the full network or a smaller committee working on a specific issue. A best practice is to set a consistent day and time for future meetings and request that partners hold the date.

All meetings, whether in-person or remote, need an agenda. Agendas may include discussion topics or questions that can be shared in advance. While the network facilitator or backbone organization can make suggestions, content for meetings should come from the network partners. It is important for network participants from all sectors to contribute agenda items. Agenda items should focus on the priorities, purpose, and values of the network. Soliciting topics and questions from the network will ensure the meeting is relevant to all sectors.

A final practice for managing successful meetings is to maintain ground rules. Ground rules for meetings create a respectful and professional environment. Future of California Elections meetings required confidentiality, self-awareness of participation, and volunteering for follow-up items. FoCE staff routinely reminded meeting participants of the ground rules. Identifying volunteers for follow-up items was an important step to ensure work moved forward. It also helped to assess the network's capacity or prioritization of that issue. If the issue did not have a volunteer to act on a follow up item repeatedly then the issue was removed as a priority. Adopting practices to manage productive meetings helps a network manage capacity and set boundaries for what can be accomplished with existing time and resources.

Below are some questions to consider for managing meetings:

- How often and when will the group meet in-person? Remotely?
- Can the group identify a consistent time and date for meetings?
- How will meeting agendas be crafted? Who will collect agenda items before the meeting? Who will facilitate the meeting?
- Who will volunteer for action items and follow up to ensure items are completed before the next meeting?

## III. Maintain the Network

Networks require maintenance to ensure cross-sector partnerships remain productive and collaborative for the long-term. Network maintenance includes formalizing leadership, tracking progress, monitoring collaboration, evaluating diversity of partners, and celebrating success.

### FORMALIZE NETWORK LEADERSHIP

A network that plans to collaborate for several years should formalize its leadership. Network leadership is different from other leadership because its focus is internal. A network leader is not necessarily the spokesperson for the network, instead a leader or leaders are responsible for monitoring progress and fostering collaboration. Formalizing leadership will ensure the network's wellbeing. The leaders of a network should reflect the different sectors and emerge organically from the partners who are active and well respected inside and outside the network. Additionally, leadership should reflect the diversity of the communities served. A network may decide to adopt an informal committee of leaders or to structure a governance board, or even a backbone organization. Regardless of structure, the network should proactively identify its leaders within its first few years.

### TRACK PROGRESS

Tracking progress to demonstrate success is an important part of maintaining the network engaged. Tracking progress is evidence to partners that their time and resources are well spent. Partners choose to collaborate in a network because the collaboration adds value to their work and accelerates progress on core issues. To measure progress, the network should discuss what success looks like and what indicators should be tracked across the network. Participants should use both quantitative and qualitative data to measure impact. Qualitative data is important to evaluate improvements made to the voter experience of the communities being served that may not be accurately captured in quantitative data. Tracking progress helps a network know when it is advancing its purpose and values or when it needs to recalibrate.

### MONITOR COLLABORATION

Productive collaboration is key to a strong network and should be monitored. Monitoring collaboration provides a way to observe if network participants are engaged and feeling fulfilled with their involvement in the network. Network leaders should watch for partners that are not engaged, are overextended, or find themselves often in conflict. Leaders should also observe patterns across sector engagement. Any dips in collaboration may indicate a need to proactively identify problems and connect with partners. Partners who are overextended may need support from other organizations to carry out their commitments. Partners who are in constant conflict may need a reminder of network expectations or may not be a good fit for the network. By proactively monitoring collaborations in the network ensures that partners are feeling supported and can focus on advancing the mission.

### EVALUATE DIVERSITY OF PARTNERS

Networks need to periodically evaluate the diversity of the participating organizations. Over time, changes in partners is normal. Organizations leave because they identify other strategic priorities, have staffing changes, lack resources, or they find that cross-sector collaboration is not a good fit for their organization. A network that is mindful of its composition of partners will have better policy discussions and outcomes because diverse partners result in better deliberations and decisions on issues. Additionally, the diversity of a network strengthens the credibility of the network. If there are gaps in representation, the network should identify new partners to join the collaboration.

### CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Celebrating success is a valuable step to building a network's identity. Network leaders should elevate key milestones as they track the progress of priorities and empower partners to acknowledge each other. Celebrations can be as big as coming together for a meal or as small as a social hour. Live connections, whether in-person or remote, are important because they provide a moment to acknowledge the collective efforts and shared success of the network.

## Conclusion

The 2020 Presidential General Election showed the vulnerability of American democracy and demonstrated that while our democratic institutions are resilient, they are not indestructible. We are all the beneficiaries of a strong republic and caring for our election administration system is the responsibility of all sectors in our society. Cross-sector networks provide an approach to bolster the work of election administrators across this nation and keep our democracy strong.

The experience of Future of California Elections shows how cross-sector collaboration can be used to increase public education and create election policies and practices that serve every voter in our diverse nation. FoCE partners advanced their shared vision for California elections by adapting and learning together through the years. Today, FoCE is credited for transforming how government and election stakeholders work together in California. The longevity of the network is due to the leadership and commitment of partners who strategically leveraged cross-sector collaboration to accelerate changes that improved California's election administration.

There is no one size fits all model for election administration networks. Collaboration will evolve based on the unique environment, shared goals, and partnerships in each state. What is consistent across all networks is that cross-sector collaboration builds trust, leverages the strengths of diverse partners, and increases impact. Networks take time and investment, but the benefits are worth the effort. Regardless of how a network is formed it will have influence and success if it is supported by committed and active partners who seek out opportunities to work beyond differences to strengthen democracy.

*For additional guidance see the supplemental resource, "Key Questions for Building Cross-Sector Collaborations to Strengthen Democracy," which outlines key questions for practitioners to consider in the planning and implementation stages.*

# Endnotes

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Currently, Astrid serves on the California Secretary of State's Voter's Choice Act Taskforce, on the Board of Directors for the League of Women Voters of California, and on the National Advisory Committee for the Center for Inclusive Democracy at USC Sol Price School of Public Policy. Astrid is past Co-Chair of the California Language Accessibility Advisory Committee and past member of the California Secretary of State November 2020 Taskforce.

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