

Organizing the Black Community

SNCC 60th Anniversary Conference

October 2021

Speakers include:

Jamel Watkins - Senior Vice President of Strategy and Advancement of the NAACP

DeJuana Thompson - Founding Partner, Think Rubix & Founder, Woke Vote

Nse Ufot - Chief Executive Officer, New Georgia Project

Dominik Whitehead - Vice President of Campaigns, NAACP

This discussion is surrounded by the topic of how to organize the black community for upcoming elections and examines various organizing strategies. The panelists will discuss obstacles that the black community is facing when it comes to accessing the ballot box.

Jamel Watkins: Good afternoon family and welcome. My name is Jamal Watkins, and I proudly serve as the senior vice president of strategy and advancement at the NAACP [National Association of the Advancement of Colored People]. I bring you greetings on behalf of our president and CEO, Mr. Derek Johnson, who helms from the great state of Mississippi, our board chair, Leon Russell, who helms from the great state of Florida, our vice chair, Karen Boykin Towns from the great state of New York. But most importantly from our members, volunteer advocates, and activists all around the country who are doing what it takes to make Black Lives Matter and to achieve racial equity. Now we are here because it is SNCC's[Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] 60th anniversary.

Now I would love to be with you all in the community in person, but I know that we are doing this thing with COVID to stay safe. And so we are having a virtual dialogue and a virtual conversation, but today we are going to hear from some amazing, what I would consider to be activists, leaders, organizers, campaigners, who are going to connect the dots about what it means to win elections, what it meant for us in 2020, what it means for us in 2022.

What does 2024 look like? Now I know some folks are saying, wait a minute, we haven't even gotten to 2022, but we are going to have a conversation to shake things up a little bit, to talk about black politics, [electoral politics](#), direct voter contact. But before we jump in, I want to lift up a few things. I would like to bring up this quote that I found from [Judy Richardson](#), who was SNCC's field secretary from 1963 to 1966. She said in her comments that SNCC was a liberating experience for me in SNCC, that I knew the message was, to do whatever you are big enough to do. I'm going to repeat that again, do whatever you are big enough to do. When we think about that phrase, as it relates to the election, despite the pandemic 2020 election had the largest increase in voting between presidential elections on record.

What that means is that folks showed up and showed out in terms of voting despite the pandemic, and in cases of the black community state by state, we were doing what we were big enough to do by showing up in record numbers, to make sure that our voices were heard. When it came down to the wire, you saw in state after state think Michigan, think Pennsylvania, think Georgia, the black voters showing up, staying in line for those that were brave enough to go vote in person, voting by mail, using drop boxes, early vote, and making sure that our vote and that our voice was counted. What we saw was an unprecedented shift in politics. Now the NAACP is nonpartisan, but we are not blind. It was time for the man in the white house to go but he's still lurking.

I believe our panelists will highlight some of these points. We also recognize the historic voter turnout in places like Georgia, which elected not just one but two Democratic senators, including the Reverend Raphael Warnock. As we engage in this dialogue today, we'll cover all things related to politics and elections. However, let's not forget the backdrop, as we reflect on SNCC, intergenerational leadership, and the connection between young leaders and our elders, we recognize that voting is challenging but it is our currency.

Without further ado, I want to introduce someone extraordinary. If you don't know her, you're missing out on one of the brightest jewels in our nationwide community. Nse Ufot is an activist, a community organizer, and the Chief Executive Officer of the New Georgia Project, a nonprofit organization she co-founded with leader Stacey Abrams in 2013. I could share a long list of her accolades, but at the end of the day, she is an incredible leader, organizer, and human being. I'm proud to call her a friend. And so, without further ado, the next voice you'll hear on this topic is none other than the CEO of the New Georgia Project, Nse Ufot.

Nse Ufot: Hello. First of all, brother, thank you for that wonderful introduction. I won't belabor the point or repeat what's already in my bio, but I will say that I'm very excited to be here. I'm thrilled to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and to continue its legacy of multigenerational organizing. We're pushing toward an America that our families deserve, though we're not quite there yet. I'm proud to be part of that unbroken chain of efforts.

I feel that 2020 if it did anything for me as a leader and for our organizing at the New Georgia Project, brought certain things into absolute clarity. Many of the positions we've taken and theories we've sought to advance such as centering Indigenous leadership and investing in Black electoral organizing as an essential part of issue-based organizing were put to the test.

What we demonstrated, quite frankly, is that we were right: when you trust Black people and those at the center of these issues to develop solutions to the challenges they face, and when you ask twice as many questions as you speak (because you have twice as many ears as mouths), people will guide you. They will give you the direction needed so that we can fight together and win. I'm happy to be here, eager to dive into the conversation, and excited to share my perspective on what we saw in Georgia and across the Deep South in 2020. I'm also looking forward to discussing the gains we've made and what lies ahead as we prepare for 2022 and 2024.

Jamel Watkins: Thank you, Say. And for those of you watching and listening, what's most profound about the work Say has led is this, Georgia didn't happen overnight. If it weren't for brilliant Black women like Nse, we wouldn't be where we are not just in Georgia, but as a nation. I want to emphasize that, as a nation. When you think about the legacy of leaders emerging from Georgia, Nse is part of that continuum driving progress and creating meaningful movement in a real and measured way.

Now, next up is my brother in the movement, Dominik Whitehead, who serves as Vice President of Campaigns at the NAACP. He is a strategist, an operative, and someone who truly understands movement building. And I would argue though he might say it more importantly he is a proud child of HBCUs.

I know Dominik reps HBCUs proudly, especially Bethune-Cookman and Florida A&M. And even though he's from Virginia, you'd think he was a native of the great state of Florida! Dominik Whitehead, through his work with the NAACP, has truly been at the forefront of our transformation. I also want to give a shoutout to someone many of you may know, Mr. Cortland Cox.

He's been a mentor not only to Dominik, me, our president, and CEO but to so many others. He has played a pivotal role in helping us connect the dots and continue building power in new and innovative ways. With that, I'm passing the mic to our brother, friend, and leader, Dominik Whitehead.

Dominik Whitehead: Thank you so much for the introduction. Jamal, you know, I love my HBCUs, Bethune Cookman [University] and FAMU [Florida A&M University], but good afternoon, everyone. Again, Dominik Whitehead, vice president of campaigns here at the NAACP. I will not go into detail in terms of our resume because that's not what we are here for today.

We're here today to go into detail about how we continue the work that we did in 2020. Do we see that work happening in 2022 with all the obstacles that are faced against us? I'm going to take a step back from 2020 some things that Nse even said and inspired 2020 was a tough year for us when I say for us, for black folk. It wasn't any different from 2019, 2018, 2017 to 2016, but what was different in 2020, the world was home.

The world was watching 2020 in a way it hadn't in a very long time, largely due to the circumstances of COVID-19. People were able to witness the social unrest and tragedies like those involving [George Floyd](#) and [Ahmaud Arbery](#), among others. This moment created an opportunity for organizations like the NAACP, the New Georgia Project, and others—such as the one you'll hear from D about shortly—to be innovative and rethink how we organize. It pushed us to focus on building long-term Black political power and connecting the dots to achieve it.

If 2020 taught me anything, it's that we can be innovative. We don't need outside tools or guidance from other progressive groups to tell us how to organize within our communities. We know how to turn out voters and, more importantly, how to address the issues that matter most to us. It's about improving the lives of Black people and strengthening Black communities across the country. That's the energy I'm bringing into 2022. Whether or not we secure voting rights which we absolutely should we will continue doing what we know how to do, organize, and hold people accountable. If those we elect don't fulfill their responsibilities, we'll adapt and persist. In 2022, we'll keep pushing forward, building on the momentum we've been creating over the last several years.

Since 2016, we've witnessed a significant shift. In 2018, young people and communities of color stepped up, voted, and organized nationwide. In 2020, we saw another major shift, followed by the incredible work that led to the victory in Georgia's runoff elections in early 2021. That's the spirit and energy I'm bringing this afternoon. It's the drive and commitment we'll carry as we tackle the work ahead. Thank you again, Jamal. I'm thrilled to be here, representing and supporting the 50th anniversary of SNCC.

Jamel Watkins: Let's talk about the power of shifting. For those of you who grew up in the church, you know there are times when you have to shift the atmosphere. That kind of shift demands doubling down on the real work and engaging directly with communities on the ground. But to make such a shift, strong leadership is essential. Today, we're privileged to highlight another incredible Black woman leader who embodies this work. She is the President and CEO of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the founder of Woke Vote, and a principal at Think Rubix, none other than Dejuana Thompson.

I want to share a quote from Leader Thompson that reflects the challenges and determination of 2020. She said: "I, myself, along with other organizers, activists, mothers, and students, were on the front lines all over this country, asking for and demanding justice from systems we felt were not seeing or hearing us."

Now, I know she probably wears three or four capes, but she also comes ready with gloves on to do the work. It's my honor to pass the floor to my sister, my friend, and a true leader in this movement, Dejuana Thompson. The floor is yours.

Dejuana Thompson: Thank you so much, Brother Jamal. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to be part of this conversation today. It feels like church to me, like home, like family. As I reflect on the incredible work done by so many, including yourself, Dominic, and others, I see a powerful story unfolding. One of the most significant lessons from 2020 and even 2019 was recognizing that the impact we aimed to achieve and the work we needed to do could only

happen through mutual support and collective effort.

We had to support each other in every way imaginable whether it was providing mental and emotional encouragement to help one another stay grounded, sharing financial resources “I’ve got \$2; here’s \$1 for you”, or reallocating organizers strategically “We have three organizers; let’s send one to Georgia, one to Virginia, and one to Florida”. Whatever the moment required, it demanded a deep commitment to the collective whole. That spirit of solidarity is how we’ve made progress, and it’s how we’ll continue to move forward.

I believe one of the significant shifts that occurred from 2016 to 2020 was how work evolved from being somewhat disconnected to becoming more unified. In earlier years, there were many people doing great work, but it often lacked coordination. By 2020, however, we had no choice but to come together and collaborate in new and meaningful ways. That shift allowed leaders like Insights, Dejuana Jamal, and even myself to operate at a higher level of excellence because we had collective support and alignment.

One major lesson I took from 2020 was the power of unity, not necessarily in strategy, as there were multiple strategies and tactics at play, but in having a shared goal. When we are united on what the goal is, we can achieve incredible outcomes. In 2020, that goal was to push the country far enough forward to address deeper, systemic issues like healthcare disparities, educational inequities, gun violence, and criminal justice reform. While voting is a powerful tool for change, it’s just one piece of a larger puzzle. There are still so many challenges we must tackle.

Another key takeaway for me from 2020 was recognizing the importance of adaptability. My background has given me the blessing of working both “in-house” and in the field. But 2020 wasn’t a year for staying indoors, it was a field year. It required being out there, on the ground, connecting directly with communities to make real progress. That’s what 2020 taught us: we thrive when we come together with purpose and a shared commitment to meaningful change.

Proximity to the work was essential—you had to be right there, up close and personal, for it to make the kind of impact we needed. Every single person involved, everyone on this call, was out in the field. They were knocking on doors, connecting directly with people, and doing the work—not just from a CEO level but shoulder-to-shoulder with one another on the ground. That hands-on approach made all the difference.

As we move forward from the lessons of 2020 and focus on the priorities of 2022 and 2024, I’m reminded of the words of [Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth](#). I’m from Birmingham, Alabama, and for those who may not know him, Reverend Shuttlesworth was a remarkable force in the civil rights movement. He once said, “We wanted a confrontation, a non-violent confrontation, but a confrontation nonetheless, to see if it would work not just for Birmingham, but for the nation. We were trying to launch a systematic, wholehearted battle against segregation that would set the pace for the nation and how they could organize against other issues.”

We are in that same moment right now; I feel that same spirit of purpose and determination right now. We are in a similar moment. I'm not shying away from confrontation, I believe it's necessary. In this systematic, wholehearted battle against the challenges we face today, I truly believe we have the leaders, the strength, and the vision to rise to the occasion. I'm excited about the possibilities and what we can achieve as we push forward into 2022 and 2024.

Jamel Watkins: Thank you, Leader Thompson. Now, folks, we're about to engage in a group dialogue with Dominic and Duana. Toward the end of the discussion, you'll have the opportunity to ask questions, but for now, we're bringing everyone together to chat about the pressing issues related to elections. So, without further ado, let's bring everyone to the stage for a dialogue.

Friends, we're living in a pivotal moment in this country. Our communities have been rocked by everything from the devastating impacts of COVID-19 to the tomfoolery of Donald Trump for four years. I want to stir the pot a bit and introduce a controversial topic, one that I think our SNCC veterans and young activists across the country continue to grapple with.

We often hear phrases like, "This is the most important election of our lifetime," or "Voting is our currency." And that people fought and died for the right to vote. But let's be real, how do you navigate voter fatigue in the Black community? How do we navigate the reality that some folks are skeptical, saying, "I don't think voting is the answer," or questioning whether this election is truly the most important of their lifetime? I'm curious to hear from you how you have worked to navigate those realities.

Dejuana Thompson: I'll begin by saying that I didn't use the language of saying that this is the most important election of our time." What made our work effective was our authenticity and honesty about the moment we were in, without presenting it as a cure-all or the single solution to every problem. Voting, in that context, was a necessary tactic and strategy, a step that allowed us to move forward and address larger issues.

That's how I've always approached conversations about voting, and it's how I've heard many of my colleagues approach it as well. Electoral politics is a part of our liberation strategy, but it is not the entire part. That perspective allows us to be real with people, acknowledging that while we may hope for certain outcomes, there's always the possibility that things could turn out differently.

Even so, that doesn't mean the work isn't worth doing. Framing voting as part of a collective effort to save ourselves, rather than as a singular or superhero-like fix, has been key to keeping people engaged. This honesty builds trust and encourages participation without overselling the stakes in a way that could lead to disillusionment. For me, this approach has been vital in mobilizing people and getting them on board.

Nse Ufot: Yep. I agree with everything Dejuana says. That's my answer, I think the only thing that I will add is that at the core of all the work that we do, our messaging, our mobilization, and

tactics is a very bold, very aggressive research agenda, right? Like we have taken the position that our identities alone don't make us experts in the politics of the communities that we come from and the co and the politics of the communities that we organize with. So, we study to show ourselves approved, right?

So, what we tend to lean on are messages that our research has shown us are designed to move people to act. What our research has shown us is that talking about some ancestors, generic ancestors that were martyred, and let's be clear that we're murdered by vigilantes or ignored by the state is powerful with a certain segment of the population.

The key to inspiring people to act is connecting the power of voting to the changes they've expressed wanting to see. You'll often hear me say this, we train our organizers to remember that they have twice as many ears as mouths. Before we even mention voting or the upcoming election, we ask, what do you care about? What are your hopes, dreams, and aspirations for yourself, your family, and your community? What issues keep you awake at night? What can't you stand to see continuing?

Once we understand what matters to them, we connect those concerns to how voting can bring about change. This approach resonates because it's tied to what they already care about. It's not about saying, "Your ancestors died for this." Honestly, no one wakes up thinking, I'm going to die for the right to vote today.

That's not how people act or think, and saying otherwise risks losing credibility with the folks we are organizing with. Number two, why waste time, we have 15 seconds to capture folks' hearts minds, and attention, so you lead with your strongest message and in this moment, we find that leading our ancestors died for this is not our strongest message.

Dominik Whitehead: I think that's right, both what Nse said, and what Dejuana said, the only thing I would add to that is, is two things. We said, it's a lot, Jamal, this at the NAACP, civic engagement is in our DNA. It cannot be September, August through November. We cannot be engaging people from October through November. It can't be, let's do the souls of the polls.

We must get away with that, even though it's a part of our work. But it cannot be the afterthought, it should not be an afterthought in terms of how we organize and both Dejuana and NCAAA just said it a second, said it a second ago. I'm looking at this thing as issues as the way of life. I make everything personal at this point. I think about my youngest brother who does not have a college degree.

Who has been in and out of the judicial and prison system is asking, "Why does voting matter?" Let's consider the issues, situations, and experiences he has faced. Voting matters because it impacts these issues directly. However, it cannot matter to you or me more than how you prioritize taking care of yourself and your family.

Reflecting on the issues Nse mentioned earlier, these matters hold deeper way. Connecting and organizing around them is crucial. This approach moves us beyond the mindset of "this is the most important election of our lives" to a more sustainable and meaningful commitment to community-building, I am over it. Every election is important, but the real question is, how do we foster a sense of community and organize effectively the issues we face in our lives?

We are focusing on self-care, which includes addressing issues that matter to us through research and personal experiences. From there, we take action and engage in true civic work. Part of this process happens at the ballot box, but it doesn't end there. After voting, it's crucial to hold elected officials accountable.

Another important aspect is finding talent within our communities, finding individuals like Nse, Dejuana, Jamal, and Dominic to take on this work, or encouraging the new [Ayanna Pressley](#) to run for office and represent communities that reflect us. Representation matters, and we need leaders who truly understand and embody our lived experiences.

I see civic engagement has to be in our community DNA, in the long term. Civic engagement is a key component of the work that we do. Issues are key to life. And more importantly, it is about intergenerational organizing, connecting the dots with the people behind us that continues this work while finding new leaders. And that is how we move away from This is the most important election of our lifetime message.

Jamel Watkins: No, thank you all for lifting up some of your nuggets, if you will. I'm stuck with the notion Dejuana that there are many pathways to our victory and voting as one of them and say, Nse, I love the framework that we got twice as many ears as we do mouths. I probably need to work on that personally. I would argue that's a good takeaway.

But Dominik you open up a train of the conversation I wanna dig into when you think about SNCC and how as an entity back in the day, it was some college-educated black folks. they were in college, they were in schools, but a lot of us weren't in college. You passed forward to today, the racial wealth divide, and the education gaps in our community.

A lot of our folks are not necessarily flourishing. How do we continue to engage and connect with community folk who are not a part of the black middle class who are not on Zooms and on social media platforms who don't have the luxury of flipping a passport to go to Mexico during the pandemic? What does that mean for us in connecting with our people who are still left behind and connecting the dots to this thing called voting, curious to hear your thoughts, and Dejuana I'm going to pick on you first, because you started something new called Woke Vote that I think probably is getting at that, you know, at the heart of that question,

Dejuana Thompson: I almost felt attacked by the fact that you said for the folks who were flipping their passport because I'll do that too. I will say two things that came to mind, I will

challenge the notion that everybody who was with SNCC were all college-educated. Right, because some of them were 17 years old, 15, and 16 years old. When you look at the children's crusade in Birmingham, those were students who were in the fifth grade up until high school who marched out of those schools and went to jail.

Right, and so I think that the first thing is saying that there has to be a composition that allows for everybody to have a role, right? So, you had those folks who were educated in strategy and policy, some of those other things who were getting that from college, but you also had the raw energy and the commitment and the talent pool from those students.

When MLK[Martin Luther King Jr] came to Birmingham, the parents and the adults started to say, look, we are, we can't lose our jobs for this. We can't do this, they were ready to shut it down for a moment, but it was the children, the young adults who said, no, we are going to pick this up. I think when we talk about it that way, we illuminate history for all of the different people who played a role. Reimagine what those leaders look like and what you know, where they came from, and what they were doing at the time. People can see themselves in some of those different individuals, right? They may see themselves more aligned to listen. I am not going, I can't get out there and go to jail for it, but I can feed everybody when you get out.

That was happening, right? I may not be able to March with you but I can fund the work. Because that was happening. So, it's giving people a framework of how to get in but the last thing I will say to your question is how do we engage folks who are not in a black middle class, part of this is challenging, the traditional mindset of who's worth engaging, right? The work Woke Vote came out of the space of, we felt like the traditional model for engaging, particularly in black communities and in Southern communities was that you only were engaging voters who had a 40 to 70% or 40 to 90% voting record, those who are voting every single time. We're like, well look we have missed out on 50 to 60% of our community who have reasons for not voting right.

Who have been told that if they vote, somebody may come after their family or whatever the trauma may be. So, someone decided that the work to engage them was not the work that needed to be done. And so that's where Woke Vote starts. We start with voters who have, or with non-voters who have either zero propensity score up to 30% and we give them a reason to get involved. That levels the playing field, that's true equity. That's putting the resources in communities that haven't had the resources before.

Our firm Think Rubik, we literally sat down and created a white paper and thought process and strategy and had it, you know, considered by all kinds of different analysts to show and prove that that, that is actually more effective to do that than to go after some of those individuals with the 60 to 70% background. So that's how we are challenging that Jamal, it is starting with legitimizing and validating the need to engage those folk who are not in the black middle class or who are, but do not have the higher propensity traditional voting model.

Dominik Whitehead: Yeah, I would agree with everything Dejuana just said, I would add it and just say, I'm glad you said, propensity model. As much as we say propensity, I hate the word, low propensity voters, it triggers me as much as we all said. But oftentimes I think we, we typically said when it comes to black voters, you hear when you think of white voters that we have to engage. Sometimes we call them working class or we find another word, but we call our votes, low propensity voters.

To that point, I think to your question, Jamal, for me, it really is going to the people in terms of engaging those folks, going into community where they are and where they are. and kind of what's doing, I'm sure Nse what you all are doing at the New Georgia Project, hiring people or painting up organizers, we're doing that the NAACP that honestly look like the communities feel like the communities have the same experience as the communities that we are engaging in.

We're having conversations and we are hoping to move the needle, not just on voting, but engaging them around a larger picture in terms of civic engagement and this being real, when it comes to the black middle class, everyone is not the trusted messenger. Though NAACP is a great messenger to some folks. We might not be the right messenger to some folks. I ain't going to pick on Delta Sigma Theta¹, Nse is sitting right here, Alpha Kappa Alpha [AKA]² might not be the right messenger in some communities. So, finding out who those trusted messengers are in those communities to those communities. So, it might not be a group that's associated with the black middle class, but that does not mean that the NAACP and the links and all these other civic-based organizations work in vain.

Oh no, it doesn't mean that we continue to do the work that we do, but we do it in a more strategic way to point out what Dejuana said earlier, there's a lane for all of us. And so that might not be the lane for you and that community, it may be somebody else to engage in that community, and that is okay. Let's take a step back and do that. The last thing I would say is let people organize. Like when I say, let people organize, don't come in and say, it should be done this way, or I've never seen it like that. The theories that you do, we ain't seen it like that done before. If you've done it, you've been losing for years.

So let people organize around the way they organize and be helpful with resources to get them to where they need to be at scale. But don't tell them how to talk to whomever they're talking to in their community when they're all living the same thing day in and day out and you living somewhere on the beltway or wherever you living across the world and you just learn about a candidate getting in and these people are worried about a way of life. They are worried about keeping the lights on tuition for their children, vacation jobs, food, you name it, whatever they are worried about just for they're worried about, they're not worried about the candidate just at that moment. So let folks organize.

¹ Delta Sigma Theta- Black American woman led sorority found in 1913 at Howard University.

² Alpha Kappa Alpha [AKA]- Black American women-led sorority founded in 1908 at Howard University. It is the oldest Greek organization led by Black American women.

Nse Ufot: I would just say this simply there is no black liberation for some, if it is not for all right. I don't think that being educated in America's post-secondary institutions necessarily prepares you to be the kind of accountable leader that we need to move our people forward. Right. I have acquired multiple degrees from some of this country's finest institutions, I can tell you that everything that I learned about organizing came from church basements from the black sorority meetings, Jamaican independence, day preparations, it's not often found in a classroom that academics are not necessarily the best organizers.

And you're talking about somebody who used to work for a faculty union. So yeah a plan, if you have people serious about liberation for black people. They only imagine a leadership that is reflective of only a slice of that community and they're not serious about us winning, and they're not serious about us getting free. To Dominik's point again, like let people organize that there are people who want to show up who wanna stand tall. Again, some people have politics and who have an analysis, and they don't always look and sound the way that people think that they should, they don't wear hard bottoms and Euro-cut suits. I just don't right. and it doesn't matter because they have a message, and they are authentic leaders and guess what they have followers.

That's what we need at this moment more than anything. We are not claiming any easy victories, and we're not lying to the people. We need everybody to grab a shovel at this moment. And create as many arm ramps as possible for the broadest, most diverse sort of representation of black folks, blackness. I think it's really important. I'm talking about black queer folks. I'm talking about black migrants. I'm talking about black people who don't look black. I'm talking about black people who are currently incarcerated and black people who are formally incarcerated. I think it's super, super important. As we, again, think about what real liberation looks like, that includes us all.

Jamel Watkins: Now, you all know this wasn't rehearsed and I appreciate the candor. And so, when Dejuana sends out a message that says, who is worthy of being organized and engaged, that's a message. I do think to what insight you just lifted up that if we are not talking about all black folks, then we are missing the mark, and, Dominik, you did throw out on the table, let people organize. I think that's another word because it is hard. I think for any community that they're not being supported to actually get in the fight that may not be directly. And I'm saying this from my perspective if we don't make sure that those communities are directly in the driver's seat, then it's a bunch of us trying to come in and tell folks what to do, that doesn't work.

You already know if you come into my mama's kitchen, you're not gonna tell her how to cook. So, when you think about the reality that we're in right now, I appreciate you all for speaking truth to power on this front. Now we are about to slide into the Q & A part of this discussion. One of the questions that has popped up that I want you all to sort of wrestle with and lift up is, what resources are we deploying right now? Think about the Virginia elections. Think about Louisiana, who just got hit with Hurricane Ines, same with New Jersey. What does that mean for 2021? What are we doing right now? And how does that connect us? Getting ready for 2022?

Dominik Whitehead: I can jump in here, given that we are doing some work in real-time in Virginia. One of the things I think that we are focusing on is what we've been doing in terms of research. Just like in 2017 Virginia and these important off-year elections all election cycles are important. So really center us from a big year, like 2020, or a big year, like 2018 to really get us right. In the right direction for what's coming up in 2022, and beyond. But any NAACP right now, as I stated earlier, I think in the opening, we had to be innovative in 2020 and think through, how we were approaching the program and making sure that people were really doing the work in their communities in a different way.

So for us, in terms of resources at the national level, at the NAACP, one of the things that we are doing differently and we've been doing the last few years, we were working directly with our state conference. So all of the units that we have, or our branches in the state of Virginia and our state conference hand in hand, and we are allowing them to help us shape, or they have helped shape the program in terms of what that looks like.

Number two, we are expanding our relational organizing program and how we are spending our relational organizing program for folks to get involved. We have spent time with everyone who volunteered for us last year asking to volunteer in Virginia. This is not just about Virginia, to not all of us. We're saying this is black political power, and we're going to build this, let's use this moment and do the same thing that we did in Georgia in 2020, I mean, 2021, what we did in November of last year, this time in 2020, and let's put that energy there.

So, for us, we're running an aggressive volunteer program in a pay program when it comes to phones, SMS, our no-contact canvass program that we are continuing to expand out to make sure folks are safe, in terms of canvassing, and engaging the black community a deep way. But I won't lie to anyone here, the black community in Virginia right now, they are not enthused about this upcoming election cycle for a lot of different reasons. They're not due to candidates due to lack of candidate engagement due to fatigue, right? Virginia has elections every single year. So due fatigue to what's going on. What we are doing, in terms of NAACP, along with a few other groups, I've shot a few out, got a call in a moment where black voters matter.

There are a few other groups currently coordinating and organizing one message together. We are divided and conquering. So, in areas where any NAACP ain't strong for black vote, we ain't even going there, right? We are going, where we are strong at, and when we can engage at people can really have that, see the impact from the work that we are doing. All of this matters, all of this matters because in 2022, if folks are feeling like this and Virginia right now in 2021, what does that mean for January of next year? When we gotta begin to organize and all of these key states where we got a slew of US Senate races, gubernatorial races, statewide races, local races on the ballot, across the country with a handful of black candidates running, um, in some of these seasons, when you think about Val Demings in Florida, you think about Mandela Barnes who is running over in Wisconsin and other folks across, across the country.

So, for us, it really is using this moment right now to center ourselves and to see where we are in

real-time. But folks can get involved by going to NAACP.org, Real-time can sign the volunteer right now. And I promise you, we have a program where we will send you a list of black voters in Virginia. We have a script, a call center, you name it resources, we'll send it to you. You will have a list of tens and 15 voters to contact and to encourage those folks to vote. We actually have messaging specifically for Virginia for you.

If you're out of state, we want you to say you're out of state, but you're gonna talk with them and say why this election is important for you being out of state and why they want, why you want to see black folk winning Virginia by voting this. So those are some of the things that we are doing right now. And I hope that answers the question in some way around what's happening in Virginia, from the standpoint of any NAACP and how we're looking at the future as well.

Jamel Watkins: And I'm gonna throw it to you Nse and Dejuana, and broaden the question, because somebody just asked, how can they get a job in this work? I know y'all are prepping for 2022. What are some of the things you're doing in Georgia Dejuana, in multiple states, including Alabama to get ready for next year?

Nse Nfot: Well, we are hiring, first of all, so go to our Instagram, go to our Facebook page, and go to our website. We absolutely are hiring. So, see if any organizing openings that we have a³ sort of align with your skill set and your interest. And if there are skills that you have or interests that you have, that you don't see reflected in our online collateral hit us at info@newgeorgia-project.org and be like, listen, I train pigeons.

Here's how I think it's going to contribute, uh, to winning for black folks in Georgia. And we can have a conversation, I'm saying we gonna hire you to train pigeons. I'm just saying if there are skills that you have that you think the movement needs at this moment I definitely wanna hear about it. I would also say that we pay a lot of lip service to municipal elections and local elections.

The truth of the matter is that there are elections every year in Georgia. This year, there are 1600 municipal elections and cities and counties all across the state of Georgia. While a lot of people are waiting until November 22, to see how bad these anti-voting bills are gonna be and what impact they are gonna have on voter suppression or voter turnout that we are not waiting that, you know, Senate bill 202, which is the Georgia trash version of these anti voting bills. These anti-democracy bills have been introduced in 48 out of 50 of the United States.

The unique thing about SB 202 is that it creates five new crimes for voting. Two of them are felonies, and three of them are misdemeanors. So, we currently have about a thousand Georgians that are being investigated by the secretary of state, um, for various, you know, voter violations, voting violations. They absolutely intend to add more to that number with the addition and the

³SB 202 - A senate bill introduced in the state of Georgia in 2021, this bill places limitations on the citizens of Georgia's access to vote.

creation of these five new crimes.

So I think that there's an opportunity for civil disobedience this year. There's an opportunity we're training an extraordinary number of attorneys, right? Not since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, have we needed a criminal defense bar with an expertise in voting crimes that weren't, that has not been a real thing. So if say only 10% of the people that Georgia is currently investigating, actually get charged and have to go to court. That's still a hundred people.

There are not a hundred lawyers in our country who are criminal defense lawyers with an expertise in defending people against voting crimes. That expertise does not exist. And so, we are working to build it right now at this moment with a number of impact litigation outfits and organizations, we're testing messages, right? There's only been one time in history where there will likely be two black men running against each other for the United States Senate, Georgia will have that situation.

Most likely come May 2022 with Herschel Walker being Trump's favorite and Senator Warnock, the incumbent, running as a Democrat there's another opportunity to give America their first black woman governor. So, black people, and black voters are going to be very essential to what's happening in 2022. So, figuring out our program now is gonna be super, super important. And then I'll end with this. The enthusiasm gap is real. We don't rely just on enthusiasm to mobilize people. I feel like that's part of why we've been effective because we just waiting on people to be excited about Democrats, Baby, we'd be waiting for GDO. We'd be waiting all day.

Listen, Joe Biden is the most popular Democrat in Georgia. That's not named [Stacey Abrams](#), right? And we just got back some really disturbing polling numbers. It says that his approval rating has gone from 90% down to 65%, amongst the black electorate in Georgia, and Stacy's [Abrams] is dropped right, is being dragged down by the overall lackluster feelings that people have by Democrats in general.

So I think that there's a real opportunity to test messages, test tactics, and figure out how we mature the electorate so that people are not necessarily voting for somebody that they want to have a beer with. Not necessarily voting for somebody that they like. Right. But we need to make sure that as a part of our overall strategy and plan to win, we are electing people that we can talk to and who are accountable, and that we can put our feet on their necks, should the situation call for it?

We are looking. I think that's what's happening right now in 2021 and we're not waiting for 2022 in order for that to happen. Because the primaries are in May. I also say that there's an election in Atlanta for mayor. And it's messy and it's ugly and we gonna get through it, um, and it's important and at a time where black voters and Georgia voters and voters in Atlanta are at the center of the American political universe, some of this stuff we don't need but we will get through it.

Dejuana Thompson: Whew, my God, I mean I am having a Baptist fit and I'm not even Baptist. I

think part of this is in Nse's point and Dominic's point, we at Woke Vote and Think Rubix looking to hire potentially on all levels. We need executive-level leadership. We need clerks who just have a passion to wanna learn how to do this.

So, for all in between, if you have the desire to do this work right now and move into 2022, please come to wokevote.us or thinkrubiks.com. We'd love to figure out how we can get you involved. A couple of things to answer what we're doing right now. One of the unique things about walk vote is that the way in which we got sort of started is that we were trying to answer or create a solution to an immediate issue, which we had the opportunity.

There was a seat that was vacant for the first time in 25 years, and we felt like we could put somebody different in that role. It really wasn't about Democrats or Republicans. It was about the opportunity. So, we launched, and we did some things because of the opportunity. And so what that did though, was it illuminated what was possible in places like Alabama and Birmingham for the first time in quite a while.

That was able to then allow us to empower people in other states to say now, what is the thing that's I that's possible now that you realize that, you know, we have this power or that you may have forgotten, or you may have not have been resourced or whatever with the proper resources, what can we do? So, what we find is that not only are we having to show up electorally, we are also having to show up for like issues and things of that nature.

So right now, Woke Vote is on the ground for Julius Jones⁴ in Oklahoma, trying to get justice for Julius, we are showing up. We're creating literacy rooms in five different cities that are attached to HBCUs where our fellows attend, and they didn't even have enough black literature on the campuses to teach themselves some more about the strategies once they got out of a fellowship program. We're creating black literacy rooms at five different HBCUs to support that.

We are doing digital support in Virginia because we realized we didn't have as many people on the ground there. We had our counterparts and our partners with Black Voters Matter and others who are physically there and doing the work. How do we support them and give and create capacity for the work that they're already doing?

We've been doing that. We just finished one of our fellowships, which as you all know, or may not know, our fellowship process is that we identify anybody in any city who wants to learn how to do this work. We put them through a 12-week learning opportunity that helps them to start from What is the constitution, how do you get a bill passed? What does it mean to run for office?

There are just certain questions that haven't been taught in our system and haven't been, sort of

⁴ Julius Jones- A black American man who has been convicted for a murder that occurred in 1999, he was sentenced to death but was granted clemency in November 2021.

aligned with why it matters. So, people are coming to terms with those things. So, we just finished graduating, 27 people out of our fellowship from 16 different states. So, getting ready to we align them with the local issues or the local organizations in their community that may be doing the kind of work that's important to them.

So that's how we are working right now. We always use this, what feels like a little bit of a gap, but is not in between the election cycles to research, right? We can't be everywhere. Woke Vote is not trying to be funded. We are not the League of Women Voters or some of these other institutions, we are not the NAACP who has a chapter on every corner.

We are happy for them, but we come in to do a specialized thing in the margins. Right. So, we have to be very strategic about where we can be impactful. So, we have insights plan earlier, we have to do the research on that so that when we do get on the ground, we know that we're impacting change for that electoral process in that area.

So, we are in the process of doing that research and determining where we are gonna be able to be most helpful in 2022, knowing that part of that is in places like Georgia, where the Atlanta election is impacting Birmingham, because, of regional leadership. We already know we're gonna have to be in Florida. We already know we're gonna have to be in North Carolina. We already know we're gonna have to be in Ohio.

So, what does it look like to start, you know, being strategic about that in 2021 and raising the resources to do what Dominik said, which is hire local, engage, local support, local and folk who, who might not be able to get the kind of resources we can get because of our relationships. So being able to put those resources on the ground, once we identify the opportunities,

Jamel Watkins: You all have laid out a lot of richness in answering that question. We heard some things like I heard Nse mention civil disobedience. We are gonna save that for another SNCC panel because that's a whole lot of discussion there for what I find striking and ill. I'll throw this out to you all.

As panelists answer this question, we heard Hershal Walker has been woken up from the dead and now he's showing up, in Georgia. We know that the other side is fired up about critical race theory. Some folks can't even spell critical race there, but they think they know about it. We're also dealing with apathy, meaning black folks. We are a little tired and we looking at Joe [Biden] being like, bro, we elected you, but what has it really changed our community?

So, there's this question that has been raised. Why are we voting in terms of this next cycle? Whatever it is, why are we voting? Why should we be voting in the mayoral race? Why should we be voting if we know it doesn't bring about the structural change that we want? And what are

the things that would motivate our people and our communities, our cousins, our aunties, and our neighbors to get fired up, given what you all have laid out? It seems like it's an uphill battle. So why are we voting? What are the things that we need to be focusing on to get people fired up again?

Nse Ufot: I do think voting is a necessary part of bringing about the structural change that we seek, right? It alone is not gonna get the goods for us, but neither is protesting alone, gonna get the things that we need. Right. It is part of a larger suite of tactics that combined will get us the things that we need. I think even when we don't vote, we are voting right. That our, by virtue of this Republic that we live in the way we choose our leaders, that if we were to let white folks, or let senior citizens make decisions for us, that is in fact still very much a vote. I don't know if we would be happy, with the outcomes and we have to still live and be governed by and subject to the laws that these people make.

Right. So just because we don't vote doesn't mean that we don't have to pay them taxes. It doesn't mean that whatever becomes illegal or becomes criminalized or becomes the law doesn't mean that we are above it. Like I didn't vote for you. So, I don't have to abide by your tax hike. That's not exactly how it works. So, thinking about making sure that we are all involved in all the ways that we can in shaping the public policy, that we are governed by, that we have to live by, I think is really important. That ain't no passive endeavor.

Again, I think that what we are seeing is maturation, because let me remind people that, and I'm gonna stop here. Joe Biden was in fifth place when he got to South Carolina, right? That it was black people that tell the story, black voters, that, that, that gave him a second win, call it the Lazarus campaign. I think that there are tons of black voters in South Carolina that were rocking with the Elizabeth Warren wave, though.

There were tons of people that were rocking the Bernie Sanders wave. There are some, people who were impressed by Pete Buttigieg, but folks made a strategic decision, right? They made a calculated decision about what pieces needed to be on the chess board, to bring about the kind of America that we need. I don't think that people were in love. I think people were relying on assurances that were made.

So even in our demand for accountability now, it's not, people are not threatening to withdraw from the process. That's a real concern, but what I'm actually hearing is pay me what you owe me. Right. Deliver what you said you were gonna deliver. That's the conversation that we're having right now. And that's the real concern, they say you can't fix what you haven't faced. So I want us to face the fact that like, we, some people gonna have to be made to do what they said they was gonna

Dominik Whitehead: That's the whole word, Right. I think honestly said it, uh, that, I mean, that's, that's what it is. That's honestly what it is, uh, at the end of the day. I think we just gotta.

Nse Ufot: Black women gonna vote. They gonna show up, right? They gonna be mad about it. People are gonna hold their noses. People gonna talk trash about you gonna call you everything but a child of God, and still gonna show up and vote, right? Now withdrawal is a real concern. And so having those conversations again with people about your, why, yeah. Now what's happening in the white house is important. It's just, it's not always more important than what's going on in your house.

Jamel Watkins: Well, I, I know that as a collective y'all are dynamic and powerful, and I appreciate the candor that you have brought to this conversation and to this space. As a stand slash fan of you, all three of you, we really are in a critical moment. When we think about SNCC, we think about the intergenerational reality of our elders' training, our parents who have trained us, who are in training the next generation, just that interconnectivity.

So, family, we would love to keep talking all day long because I guarantee you Nse, Dejuana and Dominik have a lot more to give, but we are about to transition, and sort of hear some closing remarks because we know that at the end of the day, as in say, has said, elections are happening everywhere all the time, 1600 in the state of Georgia, that's a lot of elections.

When we start to think about the connectivity of this dialogue, I want to give the floor to each panelist to really give your closing remarks, your thoughts, and also that call to action. I know Courtland and others would fuss at me if we did not give a call to action. Before you do your closing remark, shout out to Monique, Zach, Jasmine, and folks who are watching y'all, don't see them, but they're keeping us going, keeping us organized, and making sure we do what we need to do in this dialogue.

In true form, as we started, we're gonna pass the mic. If you will, I'm gonna mix it up a bit. So, I'm actually gonna start with you Dominik, and then let the phenomenal women close, but Dominic, your closing thoughts. And then we'll go Mr. Whitehead, leader Thompson, and then we'll close with Nse.

Dominik Whitehead: All right. Thank you. Thank you for that, Jamal. Thank you to Dejuana, Nse, and Jamal for this conversation. I think conversations like this are needed for our community. I think really connects the dots around intergenerational organizing, true community organizing, and the work that we do day in and day out. I think for me and, and I'll say it with this, I think about Courtland who is like on me all day, every day, as I'm sure he's on Nse and Dejuana all day, every day.

I know my first transition from the progressive space, if you will, was working on labor unions and political campaigns and candidates. But I made a conscious decision when I switched out to come work for the National Association for the Advancement of Color people coming here to the NAACP.

One of the first people I had the opportunity to meet was Courtland and a man named Dr. Albert Yates, and [Courtland Cox](#), two giants in the movement in their own way. Courtland just celebrated his 80th birthday. I think earlier this year, we were all at Dr. Yates's celebrated, I think the 81st, maybe a couple of weeks ago, but no one knows about it.

I was really working with both of them and understanding and connecting the dots of all of this stuff is full circle, right? It is full circle in a way, some of it shouldn't be full circle. Some of the stuff that we are fighting for day in and day, not day in and day out, doesn't make sense while we are fighting for today in 2021 while we are fighting for voting, we are literally fighting for voting rights.

Right now, they are debating whether to put a vote on the floor next week to pass voting rights. This doesn't seem logical to me, considering the efforts of major organizations like SNCC. Organizations like this have shaped my understanding of the work, allowing people like Jamal and me to engage with it on a deeper level and form genuine connections.

This work ties directly back to elections. As someone said, organizing and issues go hand in hand with elections. The efforts of people like Dejuana, who train young individuals to engage in their communities, align seamlessly with the daily work of over 2,600 NAACP branches across the country.

When I reflect on the tasks ahead—not just in November 2021 but in November 2022, 2023, 2024, and beyond—I see the necessity of fostering intergenerational organizing. It's this connection that sustains and advances the work for meaningful change. There has to be a connection to where people are in real time. As I said earlier, civic engagement is in our DNA. All of it—everything we do—has to connect.

It's important to understand that it's okay if you're not the trusted messenger for a particular community. It's also okay if you *are* the trusted messenger for that community. It's okay if they organize differently than you do. As long as it's strategic, coordinated, and aligned with our common goal, we can make progress. We can move the needle for success in our communities and truly build Black political power.

So, my call to action is simple: right now, we've got elections in Virginia. But I'm not just saying go to Virginia. My call to action is to get involved—starting now. Get involved today. If you're already involved, go tell your friends, tell your family, go tell the neighbors. I hate this word, relational organizing because we've been doing this since the beginning of time in terms of black folks and organizing, but involved in this moment in real-time, right now. Voting rights are at state, the filibuster is at state police accountability.

We couldn't pass that back in the summer with the George Floyd Act ⁵at state. It is literally at state democracy is at state. So get involved, get involved with your NAACP locally, get involved. Those jobs that Nse talked about, get involved right now with Woke Vote, find some young people right now who are ready to do the work with Dejuana across this country, across these states, and do the work NAACP .org. Follow us on all of our platforms. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, go to NAACP.org. All our information is there. But right now get involved. That's the call to action because democracy is not only for this country but for the soul of this country, which is black folk is literally at state.

Dejuana Thompson: Dominik just said everything that needed to be said—that pastor reached deep inside himself. I just want to remind everyone of something specific: narrative matters. The March on Washington in 1963 wasn't just a march; it was the March on Washington for Jobs and Justice.

So, when you ask me what we're doing right now, I'll tell you—it's about economic justice. It's about changing opportunities and addressing disparities. We have to ask ourselves three essential questions: What are we fighting for? What are we trying to build? And what are we willing to sacrifice?

If you can answer those questions, it will align you with your purpose and the people you need to work with—whether that's Woke Vote, the NAACP, or all of us together. My call to you is simple, answer those questions. What is worth fighting for? What are you trying to build? What are you willing to sacrifice?

Let's get to work together. Thank you all so much. I'm honored to have shared this space with each of you today, and I'm deeply thankful for the work of SNCC and how they continue to uplift the next generation.

Nse Ufot: I am part of a long, unbroken chain of freedom fighters, and I feel deeply honored to learn, teach, and ensure that the vision of America and the world our ancestors fought for remains alive. I am here to carry and pass the baton forward. There are so many opportunities for us to lead in this moment and to build upon the foundation laid by our SNCC veterans. Together, we are constructing a house that will shelter our ambitions, hopes, and dreams for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

I subscribe to the "gospel choir" theory of organizing: the reason a choir can hold a note so long and so powerfully is that each individual vocalist contributes what they can, when they can, doing their part.

To everyone listening, I encourage you to find your movement home find the people who share your values, who are ready to fight for the same issues you care about. Let's get to work. This way, when personal or professional obligations require one individual to step back, the work

⁵George Floyd Justice in Policing Act: This bill was introduced in 2021; This bill addresses a wide range of policies and issues regarding policing practices and law enforcement accountability. It increases accountability for law enforcement misconduct, restricts the use of certain policing practices, enhances transparency and data collection, and establishes best practices and training requirements.

continues. We need each other.

I am proud to be part of this multigenerational effort to free our people and restore faith, justice, and humanity in this country. So, my call to action is this, find your political home, find your movement home, and get to work.

There have been times in my life when I've had more time than resources, and times when it was the opposite. Whether you have time, talent, or treasure to contribute, I ask you to use it to help us all achieve freedom. Take care.

Jamel Watkins: As we think about it, we are done, great conversation, blessings, and love to SNCC 60th, keep leading, because we still need you. But to say, DeJuana, Dominik, Nse, you all keep leading because we know that if we are in your hands, we are in good hands. Thank you all. And God bless.