

2022 Electoral Justice Report
Highlander Center
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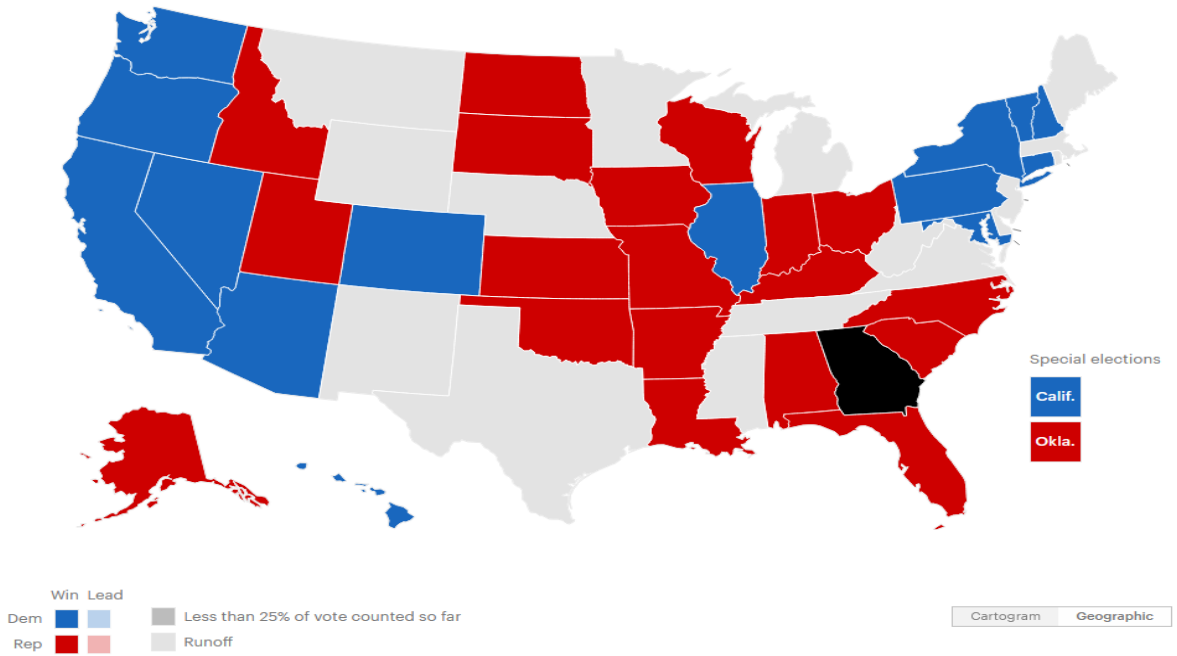
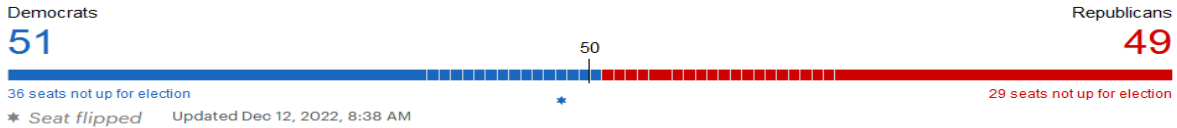


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2021-2022 Electoral Justice Report

You can find the Electoral Justice Report for 2021 [here](#)



Executive Summary of 2022 Electoral Justice

Work

The purpose of Highlander's Electoral Justice work (proposed, designed, and executed by Electoral Justice Researcher & Educator, Denzel Caldwell) in 2022 was three prong:

- ***To establish a 2022 workshop intervention where Southern organizers were equipped to learn Election Protection, Civics, and Building Post-Election Power via Solidarity Economy prior to Midterm elections***
- ***To gather data from Southern grassroots organizations to determine what Electoral Justice/Community Governance learning needs exist***
- ***To develop and field test an Electoral Justice curriculum developed for a grassroots organization engaged in Electoral Justice Work***

In the midst of the 2022 midterm elections, Denzel was able to create and co-facilitate the People Practicing Power series, conduct field research via the Community Governance Mapping Project, authored an article on building grassroots democracy in Truthout, and field test an Electoral Justice curriculum on a grassroots organization engaged in Electoral Justice work. The People Practicing Power workshop series engaged over 100 Southern organizers in all 13 Southern states before their state's primary elections in Election Protection, Civics 101, and Building Post-Election Power via Solidarity Economy. The Community Governance Mapping Project was a field research project to determine the learning needs of 13 Southern grassroots organizations with respect to Electoral Justice/Community Governance work. The Truthout article, "How Can We Rebuild Democracy in the South—in Electoral Politics and Beyond?" captured the larger Southern movement to build leftwing populism and Highlander's role in it. Finally, Denzel designed an Electoral Justice curriculum for the Black Nashville Assembly, a Black participatory democracy project, to offer newer members a grounding in Civics from a leftist lens. From the work conducted in 2022, Denzel recommends Electoral Justice work at Highlander for 2023 focus on developing a 21st century Citizenship School that seeks to further catalyze a leftwing populist movement for political power in the US South.

People Practicing Power Workshop Series

Announcements



Denzel, Highlander's Electoral Justice Researcher and Educator, led a Community Governance Mapping Project and co-facilitated an Electoral Justice workshop series, "People Practicing Power" this year as we advance our work to protect and defend democracy in community governance. The series closed out Oct. 29 with a final session focused on Louisiana. "People Practicing Power" convened 100 grassroots organizers from the states of MO, TN, FL, MS, NC, SC, GA, AL, AR, KY, WV, VA, OK, TX, and LA over the last six months to ensure our folks were equipped to protect themselves during this year's election season, know who is running and what's at stake, and begin experimenting with ways to build power between election cycles. This work helped organizers share and develop strategies to protect voters from fascist violence and voter suppression efforts, advance local policy platforms, and build Get Out the Vote campaigns across the South.

Participation Summary

Over the course of 8 months in 2022, nearly 100 people registered and participated in the People Practicing Power workshop series.

Reaction Summary

The feedback following the People Practicing Power series was indicative of a desire to be a part of a learning space where people can deepen their learning around civics, policy organizing, and community governance beyond the electoral cycles. The following link is a recording of the April 30th PPP Workshop

[AL GA KY MO WV PPP workshop](#)

Follow Up Email

Following participation in the PPP Workshop series, participants would receive a follow up email like the following

[PPP Follow Up Email](#)



Community Governance Mapping Project

Announcement

For the Community Governance Mapping Project, Southern grassroots organizations doing Electoral Justice work will be interviewed to both gain a deeper understanding of their landscape and work, as well as build a Highlander ecosystem of Southern formations dedicated to learning and practicing Community Governance. If your organization is interested in being interviewed, [please complete the CG Interview Interest Form here](#).

Method of Research

To gather information from Southern grassroots organizations about their landscape and learning needs, I invited them to [complete the CG Interview Interest Form](#). After receiving their completed form, I would reach out via email to set up an interview. During this interview, I would ask for their consent to record and a series of questions I developed on my [Community Governance Mapping Project Interview Questionnaire](#). Following the interview, I would thank them for participation and encourage them to participate in upcoming Highlander events via [email](#).

Data Collected

Between July and August, 13 Southern grassroots organizations were interviewed for the Community Governance Mapping Project. The scale of each organization varied, from local organizations to statewide entities. With one exception, all organizations interviewed engage in some form of Electoral Justice work, ranging from policy advocacy to building statewide pipelines for leftwing candidates to get into office and be accountable to the community. The time for each interview ranged from 1 hour to 1.5 hours. Squadship consultant Jess Bowman transcribed each recorded interview for subsequent analysis of the responses. The data (interviews, transcripts) can be found [here](#) for each organization.

Results

Though the responses from each organization varied, there was a trending desire among some interviewees for Highlander to develop a Civics curriculum that could ground participants in a fundamental understanding of how branches of government work. One organization expressed interest in learning how to develop political education courses for their members and base. Another expressed interest in tools that could teach organizers how to leverage social media in the fight to build political power.

Conclusion

It is evident from these interviews that there is a desire for Highlander to produce learning tools to ground more Southern organizers, organizations, and communities in Civics. Between 2022 and 2024, there is an opportunity for Highlander to establish a learning space for Southerners to become more targeted in their electoral campaigns, policy advocacy, and office acquisition.

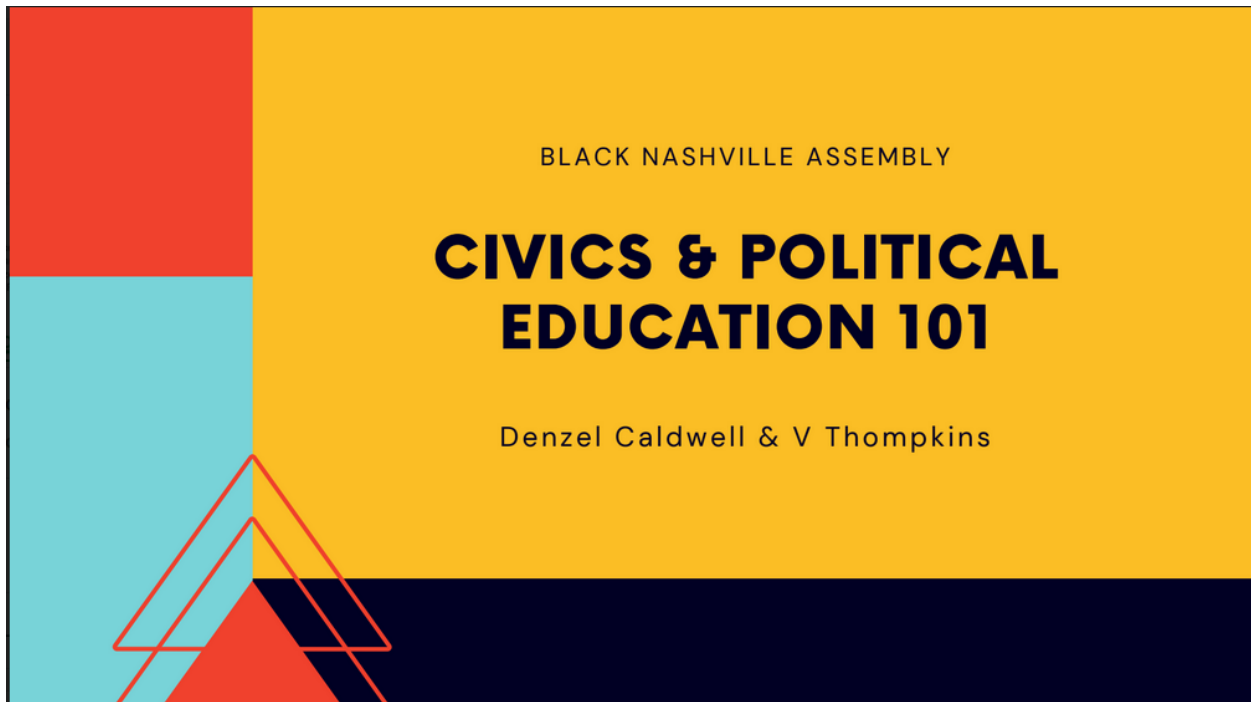
Field Test: Electoral Justice Curriculum- Black Nashville Assembly

Purpose of the Curriculum

The purpose of the curriculum is to ground newer members of the [Black Nashville Assembly](#) in local civics informed by the organization's politics (Pan-Africanism, Solidarity Economy, Black Queer Feminism, Prison Abolition). Given that Denzel's local organizing home is the Black Nashville Assembly, and they also participated in the Community Governance Mapping Project, he wanted to test out an introductory Electoral Justice Curriculum tailored to the political landscape of Metro Nashville.

Curriculum: Civics and Political Education 101

The full curriculum can be found [here](#).



Covered were the legal foundations of chattel slavery in the United States and its legacy over time, the need to distinguish between reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms, an ideological vision of the world the BNA seeks to build and how we must currently engage the current power structure,

and a breakdown of the three branches of government on the local, state and national level.

Reflections

Participants were thrilled to have a resource that not only explained in straightforward detail each branch of the US government (local, state, national), but also the historical context under which the Black Nashville Assembly understands the nature of the US empire. A standing ovation was given immediately after presenting the following representation, because (according to participants) “this slide helps me interrogate any bill that I come across”.

Putting Our Values into Practice
When we study laws that exist or being passed, we have to answer these questions:

- How does this law/program impact Black people here in Nashville and beyond the city?
(Pan-Africanism)
- How does this law help corporations or the wealthy profit from Black lives/suffering and prevent the creation of Black cooperative economies?
(Solidarity Economy/Anti-Capitalism)
- How does this law create or worsen threats towards Black people based on their sexual or gender identities?
(Black Queer Feminism)
- How does this law expand or create more dependence on cops, courts, and cages?
(Abolition)

The intent is to build a 201, 301 and more that will eventually help them to get a deeper understanding of national and international politics.

Truthout Article

Link

In honor of International Day of Democracy [September 15th], Denzel was invited to submit an article surrounding the threats against democracy here in the United States. With technical support from Comms team member Elizabeth Wright, Denzel was able to produce an article discussing the Southern liberation movement's efforts to build grassroots democracies in the midst of fascism and Highlander's role in this fight. In this he not only mentioned his Electoral work (PPP series, Community Governance Mapping Project), but also referenced the work of the Southern Movement Assembly, of which he is a Governance Council member. You can find the link to the TruthOut Article [here](#).

Article Content

The myth of U.S. democracy is on the verge of shattering.

In the region where cotton was king and prisons have succeeded the throne, this myth's falseness is particularly evident in the U.S. South, the epicenter of the nation's plantation and chattel slavery economy where the majority of Black/African-descended people still exist today. This region is also the land where Jim Crow law/segregation law once ruled and whose specter determines how resources are still allocated today. It's also the region in which workers are least unionized and often hyper-exploited, with community members disproportionately subject to state violence such as incarceration or deportation.

Given these deathly conditions, the seats of power in our region are filled by those who benefit from these systems and uphold them, oppressing Southerners both historically and presently. In response, Southern freedom fighters have been fighting to build a grassroots democracy that is directly informed by the needs of our region, beginning at the local level. In so many ways, the efforts of Southern freedom fighters are an extension of freedom fighters in the Global South who share experiences of exploitation in the workplace, state violence and increased rates of incarceration, and have led organizing fights that inform strategies in the U.S. South. Formations like the Southern Movement Assembly are uniting U.S. Southern grassroots organizations with comrades across the Global South, particularly Central and South America, to develop a people's democracy across colonial borders.

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The Highlander Research and Education Center, where I work, is a Southern movement school, building democratic participation in the U.S. South and Appalachia through grassroots organizing, leadership development, and movement building. Highlander, which was established 90 years ago, has helped fuel the Southern fight for liberation against white supremacist capitalism.

Highlander supported the integration of labor unions in the 1930s and 40s, was a meeting place for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1950s and held trainings for civil rights activists during the sit-ins of the 1960s, and Highlander's Education Director Septima Clark initiated the Citizenship Schools that expanded access to voting rights for Black people.

Although Highlander may be best known as the place where Rosa Parks trained before the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and where Martin Luther King, Jr. attended workshops that contributed to being red-baited as part of the FBI's COINTELPRO program, we know that many of the same issues these freedom fighters battled continue to face our communities today.

My work as Highlander's electoral justice researcher and educator seeks to build capacity for today's Southern freedom fighters and their communities to govern themselves as we move toward building a truly democratic world beyond capitalism and white supremacy.

This work goes beyond maximizing participation in the U.S. electoral system. This work seeks to build Southern communities' capacity to collectively define their problems, learn and understand current power structures as they exist, and develop collective solutions based on the experiences and abilities of each community member.

There is strategic value in engaging elections, but strategies for grassroots democracy must extend far beyond Election Day. While we understand that participating in this U.S. electoral system is presently inevitable, we also understand it is equally, if not more, vital to build parallel systems that are truly democratic and accountable to every community member.

This work is reflected when we see People's Movement Assemblies being utilized to build political power in cities such as Nashville, Tennessee; Jackson, Mississippi; Lexington, Kentucky; and so many more Southern cities.

People's Movement Assemblies are grassroots, democratic gatherings inspired by the World Social Forum in 2003, where collective decision-making spaces facilitated action

plans that sparked international protests, leading to the Global Day of Action that year with millions of people worldwide taking to the streets to speak out against the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. These assemblies are used by communities to collectively assess their problems, determine their strategies, assess who has the power to materially change their conditions, and create grassroots solutions to bring their vision for a life-affirming world into reality. The Southern Movement Assembly, a regional formation that has been seeking to build grassroots democratic power across the South for 10 years with Southern freedom fighters and their communities, is inviting Southern community organizations to utilize People's Movement Assemblies in their work throughout Summer 2022 to build collective power, community governance and action plans for organizing throughout the Global South.

In the midst of the 2022 U.S. midterm elections for gubernatorial and legislative seats, Highlander has developed the People Practicing Power workshop intervention. During this workshop series, organizers and their community members are learning methods for self-protection during Election Day from racialized, fascist terrorism; the process for developing a policy demand into a law; and creating or joining efforts to build democratic institutions rooted in solidarity economy principles.

"Solidarity economy" is an umbrella term for institutions and practices that are grounded in mutualism, cooperation, democracy, pluralism and building a world beyond racial capitalism.

Examples of this include [worker-owned cooperatives](#), [time banks](#), [participatory budgeting](#) and [community land trusts](#) that place decision-making power and ownership directly in the hands of workers and communities that have been historically stripped of agency under white supremacist capitalism.

The U.S. South is often seen by those outside the region as a right-wing stronghold and a recipient of charity. Our practice of rooting our work in the creation of solidarity economies acknowledges Southerners' long history of not only surviving under white supremacist capitalism, but leading the charge to develop people-centered democracies and economies within the U.S.

We invite anyone who is interested to plug into the [workshops Highlander offers around solidarity economies](#), [join us at our annual Homecoming event September 30-October 2, 2022](#), where we will celebrate 90 years of Southern movement building, and [follow Highlander online](#) for updates on upcoming workshops and learning spaces where Southern freedom fighters will build strong relationships and learn with each other to build a true democracy rooted in community governance throughout the U.S. South.

The U.S. empire is crumbling due to the destruction created by capitalism. As this empire takes its last breaths, it doubles down on its centuries-old fascist violence domestically and abroad. From the ashes of this empire's burning, people are using tools of community governance and solidarity economies to build a world beyond colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism. There is a new world coming, we're building it together, and the time is here to usher it in.

Post-Article Meetings with CELDF and CASA

Following the release of the Truthout article, Denzel was contacted by Kai Huschke, the Northwest/Hawaii organizer for the [Community Legal Defense Fund](#) to discuss Highlander's Electoral Justice work. He was particularly interested in the portions of the Truthout article that discussed Southern efforts to build systems parallel to the electoral structure that are democratic and accountable to every community member. Following the introductory meeting, he expressed interest in building cross-regional relationships within the US to determine how to build decolonial democracies within our regions. Denzel was also contacted by David Whitehead, the Director of Leadership Programs for [CASA](#), who expressed similar interests in encouraging Latinx community members to build grassroots democracies via target electoral engagement.

2023 Electoral Justice Program

Recommendations

After completing the various Electoral Justice projects for 2022, it is undeniably clear that Highlander has a key role in fostering leftwing populism in the Southern electorate and shifts toward decolonial democracies in the South. This work will require the development of a 21st century Citizenship School, where Southern organizers and community members can be grounded in not only a civics education that can be applied to their area (local, state, national), but also a set of tools to build their muscles in developing policy and governance from the ground. Part of this can include re-gathering participants from the Community Governance Mapping Project to offer reflections on the 2022 Midterm Elections in their states and share strategies for their work between election cycles. 2023 would be a critical year to expand the People Practicing Power series in a way that invites people to deepen their knowledge of their state's legislative and executive branch in a way where they can learn to create more effective policy campaigns and direct actions. This expanded program could include a policy building workshop from Jordan Seaberry, who works for the US Department of Arts and Culture, as well as workshops on Direct Action Safety with regional partners to prepare Southern organizers for the reality of fascist, white supremacist backlash. This expanded program could be the basis for a 2024 variation that is Federally oriented, so that Southern organizers and their communities can be versed in how to make demands achievable by the White House and their executive agencies.