The Future of Political Persuasion is Decentralized: A Case Study

Outdated campaign strategies and assets don’t mobilize the low-income people of color, women, and young voters we need to win.
For decades, staffers on political campaigns have looked the same and their roles have been centralized and predictable.

Campaigns have mostly been run by a small number of decision makers who often don't represent the diversity of our voters. The lack of diversity in leadership roles on campaigns has translated to a lack of diversity in tactics, particularly when it comes to digital content creation, mobilization and persuasion. Community Change Action, a social justice organization that builds power with low-income people of color, and Social Currant, a Gen-Z-led digital marketing firm, embarked on an exercise to test what would happen if we decentralized power on digital persuasion and mobilization campaign, with the young and diverse Gen-Z as our target.

Traditionally, campaigns spent most of their persuasion budgets on television and radio. In recent years, they've increased spending on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, digital display and video ads that run before content across the web, and search engines. A common and comfortable thread in these tactics is central control: experienced industry veterans can create content that appeals to the highest number of people at once. While these strategies are relatable to some, our tests indicate this is not the strategy to mobilize low income people of color, women and young voters needed to win on progressive priorities.
Very few progressive organizations and consultants are devoting significant portions of their budget to this space when trying to reach younger voters – despite an industry-wide understanding that Gen Z does not live on platforms like Facebook.

Similarly, these same groups continue to rely on creative assets for platforms that are not made or even vetted by the audience they are targeting. Together, these tactics negatively impact engagement rates and result in programs that don’t meet goals. It’s a copy-paste strategy that fails to reach the voters we need to win.

In order to achieve different results, we set out to see what would happen if we supplemented existing programmatic persuasion and mobilization work with investments in new production tactics and relinquished control to the audience we hoped to move.
For our first experiment, Social Currant built, tracked, and monitored a creator-first social media campaign that would elevate an important policy issue to young voters: the expanded Child Tax Credit.

We took a subject like parental tax policy (not traditionally a trending topic on music and video platforms) and invited the creators to enter the conversation from their own perspective.

The young influencers proved that even though they didn’t look or speak like most people in power, and regardless of whether they themselves were even parents, they could speak about how Child Tax Credit impacted them and their communities.

And they proved that young creators could add their voice to the conversation on tax policy on their own turf and on their own terms.

We knew this effort was best suited for influencers who over-index on TikTok for one simple reason – it’s where Gen Z lives. Forty percent of Gen Z spends at least three hours a day on TikTok, and every week the platform keeps edging out its competitors, so we know these influencers could have the best potential impact. We ran this exercise in June 2021 as a single-day test in sync with a White House day of action on the Child Tax Credit to see if we could earn 100,000 views on videos about this issue.
We engaged 15 influencers to create 20 pieces of content with their only creative guardrails being the facts.

Over the course of 48 hours, our campaign's content far exceeded our goals, generating 400,000 views, 42.1k engagements and 1,000 clicks onto the Child Tax Credit resource. From celebrity parody accounts to make-up influencers, the creators were chosen because of their unique ability to connect with their audiences and create content in a TikTok native way.

To check our work we used Grow Progress, a rapid testing platform, to target each influencers’ estimated audience demographic. In this case, we randomly assigned a targeted audience of 18-34-year-old women, balanced on race, to view either Georgia-based creator @Mochipssss's video or a placebo video.
While their content outperformed the placebo in nearly all demographics, we saw significant gains among the niche of people we were trying to reach: Black viewers, those making less than $49,000 per year, and low propensity voters.

The results included a +23 percentage point (pp) gain among Black viewers, and a +13 pp gain among people making less than $49,000 who said they had a very favorable opinion of the Child Tax Credit.

Notably, these results pale in comparison to the effect the messages have on influencer’s followers. As an influencer parses out information to their existing audience, the information becomes even more influential and trusted.
Our experiment in allowing outside voices into the conversation and decentralizing the creative process had a clear result: Stronger engagement that moved our targets in a significant way.

The positive results WERE SHOCKING – campaigns around complex and wonky issues rarely resonate with audiences outside the Beltway. We successfully executed this campaign by taking an entirely different approach to the content production process and centering values and facts.

This campaign has proven to us that progressives have a path to accomplish our goals in mobilizing a typically underperforming portion of the electorate. Investments in tactics that rely on diverse trusted messengers, armed with the freedom to create on their own terms, can quickly and efficiently yield results with younger voters.