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Leveraging Ethnic Studies to Inspire Resistance in the Electoral Arena: Lessons from California's Conservative Central Valley

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Abstract

During the first Trump administration, young members of nonprofit youth organizing groups helped increase midterm turnout among young voters in California's historically conservative, largely agricultural Central Valley. In this article, we draw on survey, interview, and other data from this region to demonstrate the importance of ethnic studies curricula for young people in youth organizing groups seeking to get out the vote among a primarily non-white, young electorate. We also feature the work of Loud For Tomorrow in Delano, California, to illustrate how one specific youth organizing group is leveraging such curricula to prepare members to get out the vote in advance of the 2026 midterm elections during the second Trump presidency. We argue that exposure to ethnic studies can fuel electoral engagement and political resistance by deepening young people's understanding of local racial dynamics and encouraging solidarity. Ethnic studies curricula—when coupled with intensive training to get out the vote and other youth development programming—can enhance non-partisan, youth-led voter outreach efforts and help restructure power relations in the pursuit of a more just, multiracial democracy.

Between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections, voter turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds in California's Central Valley increased by 262% (Terriquez et al., 2019). This dramatic surge in youth electoral participation occurred in a historically conservative, largely agricultural region where racial justice and immigrant rights efforts have long faced opposition. Nonprofit youth organizing groups were crucial to this increase. Integrating ethnic studies curricula into their regular programming, these groups prepared their young members to register and effectively mobilize voters for the midterm elections during the first Trump presidency.

In this article, we draw on data from Central Valley youth organizing groups to show how nonpartisan organizations incorporate ethnic studies into their work and why this matters for their adolescent and young adult members. We spotlight one organization, Loud for Tomorrow, to provide an illustrative example of how youth organizing groups are building on the experience gained since the first Trump administration to sustain young voters' engagement. We contend that

exposure to ethnic studies enables young people to understand racial histories and dynamics while priming them to forge solidarity across differences. Ethnic studies curricula—alongside other forms of training and support—can bolster youth's capacities to restructure power dynamics through democratic processes.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating the connection between ethnic studies curricula and voter mobilization efforts. Focusing on youth organizing in California's Central Valley, we show how community-based ethnic studies programming addresses critical knowledge gaps often found in conventional K–12 schooling. Through interactive workshops and other activities, youth organizing groups foster ethnic pride and cultivate multiracial solidarity as members engage in voter education and grassroots campaigns. In this way, community-based ethnic studies programs can equip young people to challenge white supremacist and right-wing political agendas.

Ethnic Studies and Political Resistance

Ethnic studies introduces young people to the histories and experiences of historically marginalized racial groups, providing them with tools to critically examine how white supremacy contributes to persistent social inequalities (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Curricula not only help students understand the contemporary forces that sustain racial hierarchies, but also highlight histories of resistance and strategies for social change. By countering negative stereotypes and erasure, ethnic studies can foster students' pride in their identities and deepen their connection to their communities' histories (de los Ríos, 2017; Lee et al., 2020; Nojan, 2020).

Bivanna Camacho has been active in getting out the vote since she was a high school participant in the 2018 Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project. Photo credit: Loud for Tomorrow, Delano

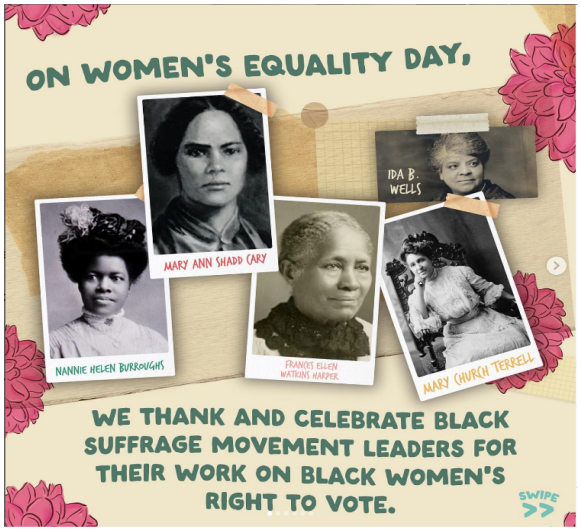
Ethnic studies curricula can thus also cultivate a racial consciousness—the awareness of shared cultural characteristics and political and economic interests with members of one's racial or ethnic group (de los Ríos et al., 2015). This racial consciousness, in turn, can motivate collective political action (Frasure-Yokley, 2016; Junn & Masuoka, 2008). Importantly, approaches to ethnic studies that are inclusive of multiple communities can help individuals recognize both similarities and differences across racialized groups (Freer & Lopez, 2011). Such recognition has been shown to facilitate cross-racial solidarity, particularly when young people identify common challenges and struggles (Hope, 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Terriquez & Milkman, 2021).

Because such curricula can instill pride and solidarity in young people, scholars have suggested that ethnic studies could motivate them to engage in civic and political activities (Cammarota, 2016; de los Ríos, 2017; Flanagan et al., 2009; Ginwright, 2009). Indeed, ethnic studies has previously been shown to spur political resistance, specifically participation in social movements and protests (Bañales & Lee-Oliver, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2013; Flores, 2001). This article extends

the literature by demonstrating the link between ethnic studies and voter mobilization campaigns. While often considered a "mainstream" political activity, non-partisan voter education can also be understood as a form of resistance, especially in regions where marginalized groups have historically been disenfranchised. Accordingly, increases in turnout among well-informed young people of color can change the political landscape and weaken white supremacist policies and practices. In these contexts, non-profit youth organizing groups are important civic sites, as their ethnic studies programming helps fuel voter engagement efforts that seek to restructure unequal power relationships.

Non-profit Youth Organizing

In the 1980s and 1990s, growing concerns over gang violence, racial conflict, and the crack epidemic spurred civil rights and youth leaders to establish a growing number of non-profit youth organizing groups. Combining the strategies of grassroots community organizing groups with those of youth leadership and service programs, these nonpartisan organizations engaged their members in campaigns to address the everyday challenges members experience in their schools and communities (Braxton, 2016; Hosang, 2006).



Source: Loud for Tomorrow

Typically staffed by young organizers, these nonprofits have served as spaces for young people to collectively pressure government agencies to enact policy reforms. In the 1990s and 2000s, youth organizing groups often tackled K-12 education, higher education access, policing, environmental and climate justice, immigrant rights, and other issues (Braxton et al., 2013). As they grew in political power and sophistication throughout the 2010s, they increasingly engaged their members in non-partisan voter education and outreach campaigns. In 2019, when the last national census of these groups occurred, youth organizing numbered over 310 across the United States. In this census, 37% of groups reported taking the lead on engaging young people in voter outreach, and another 38% said that they worked with other organizations to connect their young members to voter outreach efforts (Valladares et al., 2021).

Youth organizing groups tend to be located in low-income, non-white, and immigrant communities. Initially, these groups emerged in large urban areas (Braxton et al., 2013). However, throughout the 2010s, their presence expanded outside of central cities and into more conservative rural and semi-rural regions. High school educators in these areas may disproportionately avoid discussing racial issues for fear of backlash from parents or other community members (Pollock et al., 2022). This is where youth organizing groups in California's Central Valley and other similar regions step in to fill gaps in youth's understanding of historical and contemporary racial dynamics.

The Central Valley Context

California's Central Valley region is the ancestral home of the Maidu, Miwok, and Yokuts tribes. These Indigenous communities endured genocide and displacement, first at the hands of Spanish colonizers and later Mexican authorities and American settlers. In the late 19th century, the Valley became a destination for white Southerners, Midwesterners, and European immigrants—including those from Portugal, Sweden, Armenia, and the Basque Country—who arrived in growing numbers and played a key role in transforming the region into a hub for agriculture and related industries (Parsons, 1986).

The Central Valley is known for its deeply entrenched racial and political conservatism (Essinger, 2011; Monreal et al., 2023; Pastor, 2018). Transplants from the South and Midwest brought with them deeply rooted racist ideologies that shaped local politics and social hierarchies. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan established a foothold in several counties, influencing both law enforcement practices and local governance (Humes, 1999). The influx of poor white Dust Bowl migrants in the 1930s reinforced a racial labor hierarchy that placed whites above nonwhites, even as the white migrants themselves faced economic hardship. Many white migrants and their descendants eventually aligned politically with the region's growers, strengthening the Central Valley's conservative culture (Weber, 1994). In the years after World War II, segregation and redlining policies systematically excluded people of color from housing and employment opportunities (Walker, 2004). Over time, white-led conservative agribusiness and oil interests came to dominate the region's political discourse. Furthermore, the state constructed 10 local prisons since the 1980s, earning the region the nickname "Prison Alley" and reflecting a carceral surge that reinforced racial and economic hierarchies while fueling conservative, law-and-order politics (Gilmore, 2007).

Although conservative whites have historically dominated the region's political trajectory, the Central Valley has also long been home to a sizeable non-white population. African Americans began settling in the area in the 1860s, with greater numbers arriving during the Southern Exodus (Gregory, 2005; Kirby, 1983). Asian-American communities also took root after Chinese laborers settled in the region after working on railroad construction (Chan, 1986). Japanese, Sikh, and Filipinx migrants soon followed (Gonzales, 1986; Mabalon, 2013; Matsumoto, 1993). Meanwhile, Mexican-origin communities expanded during the 20th century, including through the Bracero Program (1942–1965), which recruited Mexican men to the region for agricultural labor. These non-white populations have settled in towns and cities across the Valley (Walker, 2004).

Today, Mexican-origin people compose the largest national-origin group in the region, including ethnically and linguistically diverse Indigenous residents. Mexican Indigenous residents include Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui from Oaxaca, Purépecha from Michoacán, and other Indigenous groups. More recent arrivals also included refugees from U.S.-backed conflicts, such as Hmong, Vietnamese, and Central Americans escaping war, violence, or poverty. In 2020, roughly 3 out of 4 Central Valley residents under the age of 30 were people of color, according to data from the American Community Survey (author calculations).

The Central Valley's diverse residents have a long history of local resistance against white supremacy and labor exploitation. Farmworkers fought against unjust conditions throughout the first several decades of the 20th century, with a major breakthrough occurring in 1965 when Filipino American labor leaders Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz launched the Delano Grape Strike to secure higher wages for grape pickers and packers (Cruz, 2016). They were soon joined by César

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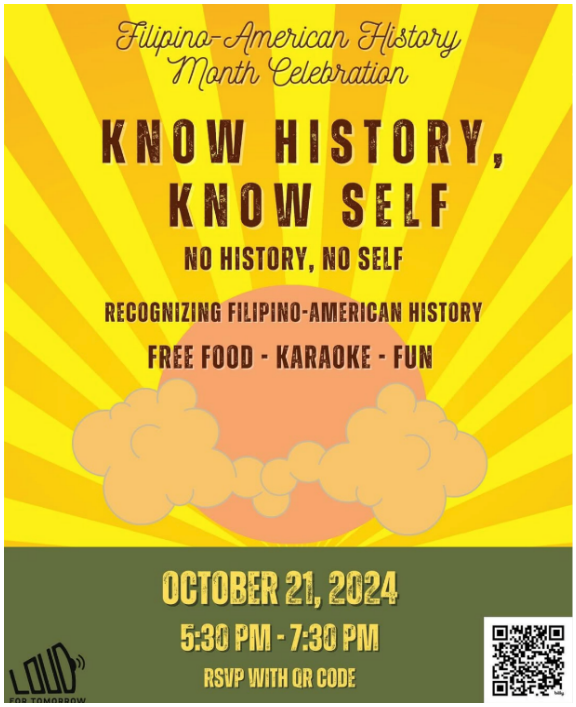
Chávez and Dolores Huerta, and together they helped form the United Farm Workers (UFW), which would bring national attention to the plight of farm laborers (Ganz, 2009). Although the UFW's influence declined in the 1980s, grassroots activism in the region expanded beyond labor rights to confront interconnected issues, including environmental justice, poverty, and mass incarceration. By the mid-2000s, youth-led efforts emerged to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline and advocate for educational justice in Central Valley schools (Wright, 2007). These local efforts paved the way for more widespread youth organizing and civic engagement in the 2010s.

Data Sources

Drawing on multiple data sources, we demonstrate the link between ethnic studies curricula and voter outreach efforts. We utilize data from a national youth organizing survey, focusing on a subsample of 20 groups from the Central Valley (for more information on the national survey, see Valladares et al., 2021). We also draw on 70 semi-structured interviews from members of 12 youth organizing groups that contributed to voter outreach efforts in 2018. The ethnically diverse respondents were aged 14 to 25, with the majority identifying as female. Interviews included data on respondents' experiences in their youth organizing groups. The first author and her research team coded and analyzed fully transcribed transcripts. Additionally, she drew on 1,600 hours of participant observations and related fieldnotes from the Central Valley Freedom Summer Participatory Action Research Project to triangulate and elaborate on survey and semi-structured interview findings (Terriquez et al., 2019). Finally, as co-founder of Loud for Tomorrow, the second author drew on his own reflections and program documentation to illustrate how youth organizing groups incorporate ethnic studies into activities aimed at building youth power at the ballot box and in the community more broadly.



Youth-led workshops and cultural activities uplift Filipino-American resistance and strengthen multiracial solidarity. Source: Loud for Tomorrow

Youth Organizing Groups in the Central Valley

Overview

As with many other youth organizing groups across the nation, most of the Central Valley's 20 groups offered their members comprehensive programming to support their academic success and healthy transition to adulthood. Survey results indicate that the majority of these youth organizing groups (55%) regularly provided members with academic guidance and college counseling. Meanwhile, 65% engaged their members in healing and well-being activities to cope with

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significant stresses connected to challenges related to poverty, their own or their family members' precarious legal status, and risks associated with political organizing in a conservative context. Such activities generally included healing circles, mindfulness exercises, and individual and group check-ins that allowed members to process their emotions. These groups involved their members in campaigns focused on issues like education, health, immigration, and/or municipal investments in young people.

In addition to issue-focused campaigns, 65% of youth organizing groups (13 out of 20) led voter outreach campaigns, and another 20% (4) created opportunities for their young members to support other groups' voter outreach efforts (see Figure 1). To varying degrees, members received training on how to register voters, canvass door-to-door, conduct rigorous phone-banking, promote voting through social media, and communicate with voters via text. Part of the training included educational workshops that linked non-partisan social issues and the voting process.

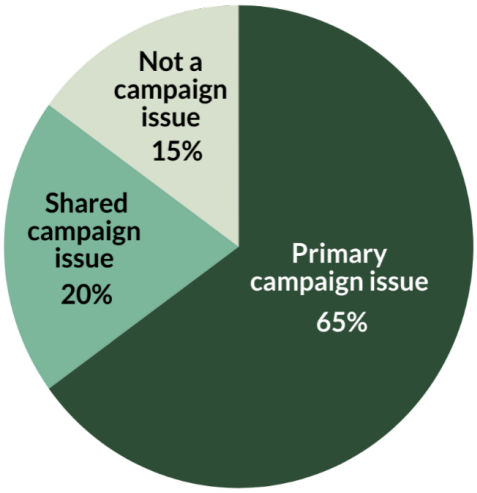

Figure 1. Non-Partisan Voter Outreach Campaigns
California Central Valley Youth Organizing Groups
Source: FCYO Field Scan Survey, 2019 (N=20)

Most groups maintained ties to allied organizations, creating valuable networking and training opportunities; 17 out of the 20 were part of either statewide or regional organizing networks. These connections enabled youth to participate in regional and statewide conferences, enhancing their leadership development. For instance, the 2018 Central Valley Participatory Action Research Project collaborated with local groups to host seven youth conferences featuring workshops on ethnic studies, health and well-being, voter education, and other topics (Terriquez et al., 2019). Held across the region, these gatherings brought together UC Santa Cruz and UC Merced research team members, organizing group members, and other youth.

Ethnic Studies Programming

Almost all youth organizing groups in the Central Valley offer their members some degree of exposure to ethnic studies curricula. As shown in Figure 2, 65% of these groups hosted ethnic studies workshops regularly (meaning one or more times a month), while 30% did so less frequently. Only one group did not report incorporating ethnic studies into its programming. As gleaned from participant observations, this programming was presented by youth organizers, experienced peer-leaders, and/or adult community leaders using interactive popular education techniques.

Youth organizing groups typically offered workshops that introduced members to the local histories of well-represented ethnic/racial groups in their memberships; workshops also imparted information about how these groups have resisted oppression. In addition, most groups explicitly

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discussed how non-white and other historically marginalized groups have disproportionately experienced injustices addressed through local campaigns (e.g., educational inequalities, environmental injustice, poor access to health care, criminalization). Regional or statewide youth organizing conferences reinforced or further elaborated on the interactive ethnic studies curricula members accessed through their groups. Whether held within their organizations or at larger convenings, these workshops provided participants with the analytical tools to interrogate power relations that have long-defined racial inequalities in the Central Valley.

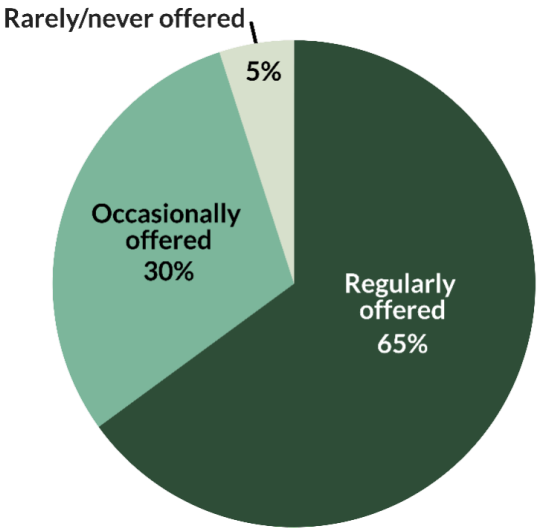

Figure 2. Frequency of Ethnic Studies Programming
California Central Valley Youth Organizing

Youth Perspectives

Filling Knowledge Gaps, Inspiring Pride, and Broadening Awareness

In interviews, youth organizing group members spoke in varying degrees of detail about the ethnic studies material they encountered through their youth organizing group. However, no matter how intensive the programming, it was clear that these curricula filled (sometimes significant) gaps in youth knowledge. For example, Laura, who had attended public high schools in Fresno, and was the daughter of Mexican immigrants, shared how her youth organizing group, Fresno Barrios Unidos, provided her with essential information about her own ethnic background. When asked about the most important thing she learned, Laura responded:

> [R]ealizing colonization [in Mexico] did happen. Our traditions are a result of the mixture of Spanish and Indigenous teachings to produce what is now known as a Mexican tradition. I think that was the biggest thing—and also realizing that Spanish isn't the native tongue of my people. It is obviously something that we had to learn and start utilizing after [the] Spanish invasion.

Laura's quote is striking in that it suggests that schools might not be introducing foundational knowledge about Mexico and the roots of Mexican American identity to their student populations. Parents, possibly with limited education themselves, might also be unable to pass on such information, leaving youth organizing groups to fill important knowledge gaps.

Whether or not the history of Mexican-origin residents is explicitly taught in schools, it is impossible to ignore the presence of Mexican culture in the region, given the population's large size. But this does not hold true for other, smaller ethnic groups in the Central Valley like Lao refugees of Hmong descent. On a number of occasions, Hmong youth expressed frustration that people assumed they were Chinese or part of another Asian group and that schools offered no curricular acknowledgement of their refugee and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, Hmong refugee parents or grandparents tend to be reticent about discussing their migration experiences due to the severe trauma they endured, as recounting memories of war, loss, and hardship can be deeply

painful and difficult (Kelly, 1986). To counteract this lack of information, youth organizing groups with Hmong members celebrated their cultural background and educated them on the "Secret War" covertly carried out by U.S. forces in Laos that resulted in families fleeing to the United States. For example, 14-year-old Eve shared how group activities transformed her sense of ethnic identity: "Before I joined, I just really hated being Hmong because it wasn't cool." But after learning how her family members had survived war, fled Laos, and rebuilt their community in the Central Valley, Eve became eager to learn more and took the initiative to educate her peers about Hmong history and culture. "How we came here as Hmong Americans isn't well known. I really just want my history known here," Eve explained. Her majority-Latinx youth organizing group offered her the platform to do so.

For many youth, learning about their ethnic/racial group through their youth organizing group enabled them to develop a sense of pride in their ethnic/racial identity. Carmen, a 19-year-old Mexican American who attended a majority-white high school, explained that before joining ACT for Women and Girls in Visalia, she "was always really shy about my culture. I wanted to fit in. But … coming to ACT, I started learning more and seeing that there are so many beautiful things about my culture."

Moreover, this ethnic studies curricula focused on civic action, with many youth organizing groups highlighting how marginalized groups have effected social change. This aspect of the programming showed young members how others before them worked to make a difference in their communities. Elizabeth, a 16-year-old Mexican American from Bakersfield, said that she used to think that "Latinos weren't really involved in social or political issues." However, through her youth organizing group, Laura learned about Latinx leaders past and present and "how hard they work to help everyone out." Her exposure to this history of activism shifted her perceptions of her own community and its civic commitment. Meanwhile, Sade, a young African American woman from Fresno, appreciated that her group devoted time to the African American experience, discussing "what they're still experiencing, what they've accomplished, what they've brought to the table, what they've made possible for society and the nation." Sade was especially proud to learn that some of the legal rights people of color now enjoy came from "what African Americans did in the past."

Thanks to ethnic studies curricula, youth members gained an understanding of not only the local histories and political struggles of their own ethnic/racial groups but also those of other groups. For example, Adolfo, a young Mexican American man, was moved by a presentation on the history of Filipino labor exploitation in Stockton and the community's subsequent organizing efforts. "It is crazy to think that people who lived not too far away from here went through all these things," he said, adding that it was "mind-blowing" he had never heard about this history until then. For Adolfo, the workshop "showed me that despite Stockton once being an oppressive place for the Filipino community, its individuals aren't tied down by what happened in the past." In another example, a Mexican American youth voiced his appreciation for a workshop on Salvadoran and Punjabi migration entitled "Not all Brown People are Mexican," noting that it was "eye-opening" to learn about the migration histories of these groups into the Central Valley. While ethnic studies lessons can often be limited to occasional workshops, they nonetheless make a lasting impression on participants and lay the groundwork for multiracial solidarity.

Motivating Solidarity

Ethnic studies curricula set the stage for members of youth organizing groups to work on voter education and other grassroots campaigns across ethnic and racial lines. As members became better versed in the histories of struggles of their own ethnic or racial groups, they also learned to sympathize with other groups. Workshops and activities counteracted negative stereotypes and encouraged dialogue around shared issues and struggles.

In this way, ethnic studies deepened young people's understanding of the deep roots of the contemporary challenges facing various ethnic groups. Darryl, a member of Youth Leadership Institute in Merced, clearly articulated the important parallels between the colonial history of his own Filipino community and that of his Latino peers: "I learned that Spain colonized most of Mexico and Latin America, and they also colonized the Philippines for a long time. We have a shared heritage—obviously very different—but we were under these colonizers for such a long time." This knowledge that Spain had imposed its culture, religion, language, and worldviews on its Filipino and Latin American subjects as it dispossessed them of their land and exploited their labor convinced Darryl that these groups must work together: "The issues and the pain and the trauma that happened then still reverberate now. We need to be able to come together. These are problems that we still need to fix."

Ethnic studies curricula also exposed youth to the interconnected systems of oppression affecting multiple racial and ethnic groups. For example, Kathy, a youth of Mexican descent, said that before joining her group, she focused more on immigration and LGBT rights "because I had a lot of close friends that were LGBT and my family is undocumented." She added, "Police brutality was not something that really concerned me. But now I see how so many families are affected by it, and how it impacts so many people of color." As a member of the Dolores Huerta Foundation's youth program, which allied itself with the Black Lives Matter movement, she noted that her organization "makes you open your eyes and notice things." Meanwhile, Eve, introduced earlier, began noticing connections between her own Hmong parents' experiences and those of migrants from other countries, fostering a newfound sense of empathy. "Before I joined 99Rootz, I was honestly perfectly fine with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]," she admitted, until the youth organization helped her understand the disparate impacts of immigration policies. Consequently, Eve joined her Latino peers in the group to support immigrant rights causes such as the extension of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which was threatened during the first Trump administration.

Ethnic studies curricula can thus encourage solidarity across ethnic groups. Derrick, a member of Hmong Innovating Politics, was profoundly influenced by the ethnic studies curriculum co-developed with partner organizations CAIR (Counsel on American-Islamic Relations) and the Jakara Movement, whose membership is mostly Punjabi. Though this programming, he developed an understanding of and commitment to aiding his Muslim and Punjabi peers. "I'll be comfortable if these communities … need our help. I'm not just supporting our own Hmong community, but also other communities." Carlos, a Mexican American from Merced, echoed this sentiment: "Just because we're Latinx, [it] doesn't mean we only stand up for ourselves." Tracing his commitment to working in multiracial coalitions to his Fresno County-based youth organizing group, Carlos said that he "learned that every group of people have gone through their sets of trials" and faced discriminatory laws that curtailed their employment opportunities and freedom. Consequently,

Carlos believed that it was important to help youth from diverse racial groups to have their voices heard.

Interviews and field notes gathered during the summer and fall of 2018 evidence this commitment to multiracial solidarity. We observed Latinx, Filipinx, Hmong, Punjabi, Black, and white youth collaboratively register, canvass, and phone-bank young voters in low-income, predominantly non-white communities. Their energy and excitement were palpable, and their commitment was captured by Eugene from Merced:

> I think it's really important for Latinx and Hmong folks and other groups to work together, because here in the Central Valley, our struggles are tied. We're organizing because many of our elders, even many of our friends, our peers, are not showing up. And honestly, our people devote so much time and energy in working to survive, so they really are not able to show up and speak up for what they want all the time. And so to bring change, we need to educate each other, educate our white peers, and we have to register voters and mobilize our community because we know damn well that no one else is going to do it but us.

The collaborative efforts of Eugene and many youth like him paid off. Youth-led efforts increased 2018 young voter turnout in the region, according to experimental research published elsewhere (Terriquez et al., 2020). In the years since, youth organizing groups have continued to refine their curricula and build on this successful mobilization of young voters.

Loud for Tomorrow's Ethnic Studies and Voter Education Curriculum

Loud For Tomorrow (LOUD) offers one concrete example of how youth organizing groups have incorporated ethnic studies into broader programming that prepares high-school-aged and young adult members to lead disciplined voter education and other policy change campaigns. Based in Delano—the historic epicenter of Filipino and Mexican-led farmworker organizing and the birthplace of the United Farm Workers—the group adapts its curriculum to members' interests and current political debates. Founded by UC Santa Cruz students Jose Orellana (second author) and Rosanai Paniagua following the 2018 Central Valley Freedom Summer, LOUD typically comprises over 50 core leaders and a base of over 1,100 students from Delano and neighboring low-income farmworker communities in Kern and Tulare Counties.

Jose Orellana and Rosanai Paniagua founded Loud for Tomorrow in Delano in 2018. Photo credit: Loud for Tomorrow

From the outset, LOUD's leaders rooted the organization's programming in ethnic studies. Members identified the need for a robust curriculum that would reflect the Central Valley's legacy of cross-racial solidarity and grassroots resistance, topics often absent in local school instruction.

To address this gap, LOUD began regularly hosting workshops that highlighted the local and global histories of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and queer communities. Centering the experiences of people of color, their current programming helps adolescent and other young members understand concepts such as U.S. imperialism, settler colonialism, environmental racism, the school-to-prison pipeline, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, the curriculum connects past movements to present conditions, reinforcing the notion that youth are not only impacted by injustice but are essential to devising and carrying out solutions. Their rich curriculum seeks to deepen members' understandings of their own ethnic/racial group while broadening knowledge of their peers' cultures and experiences.

LOUD links ethnic studies directly to nonpartisan voter engagement. Members learn about historic struggles to secure voting rights for women, people of color, youth, and non-English speakers, grounding civic participation in broader movements for justice. They explore how elections influence issues they care about, including education, health equity, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and environmental justice. They also receive training in canvassing, phone- and text- banking, social media outreach, and organizing voter registration drives at schools and community events.

Utilizing a range of interactive pedagogical approaches, LOUD infuses ethnic studies into year-round programming through training initiatives such as the three-week Liberation Academy and the six-month People Power Internship. Facilitators—staff, experienced youth leaders, alumni, adult allies, and community elders—use storytelling, art-making, theater, and peer dialogue as teaching tools. Sessions are healing-centered, often beginning with check-ins or creative prompts. For example, youth might study the labor activism of Larry Itliong and Dolores Huerta before discussing the labor conditions endured by their own family members, or learn about redlining in Delano before photographing and analyzing local neighborhood land use. While the curriculum highlights Chicano and Filipinx histories, reflecting members' demographics, the multilingual "From Roots to Resistance" series also explores Black, Salvadoran, Hmong, Punjabi, and Indigenous Oaxacan experiences.

LOUD continuously adapts its content to contemporary debates. In early 2025, as Trump began second presidential term, it began emphasizing the links among racial justice, immigrant rights, and voting rights. To help members develop a sense of agency amid the powerlessness they felt under the federal government's authoritarian direction, workshops highlighted the importance of participation in congressional, state, and local elections as one key strategy to protect the well-being of immigrants and other people of color. On the whole, LOUD applies an ethnic studies approach that centers communities of color and rural residents, framing voter education as nonviolent resistance against white supremacy and systemic injustice.

Promoting an Active and Informed Electorate

Prior research suggests that ethnic studies can inspire political action, particularly social movement activism and protest (Bañales & Lee-Oliver, 2019; Cabrera et al., 2013; Flores, 2001). The empirical findings presented in this article suggest that ethnic studies can bolster voter education and mobilization efforts. We contend that exposure to ethnic studies can deepen young people's understanding of racial dynamics, foster solidarity, and anchor voter education campaigns in a commitment to addressing racial and other injustices. In contrast to mainstream political messaging—often ahistorical and soundbite-driven—ethnic studies-related programming can

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enhance critical thinking and encourage students to consider the broader stakes of government elections.

Educators and practitioners can learn from Loud for Tomorrow and similar youth organizing groups. By developing curricular content that centers communities of color, they can help students understand past and present struggles for voting rights while preparing them to analyze how contemporary election debates impact racial justice. By implementing interactive and regularly updated ethnic studies programming, educators can equip young people to promote elections as one means of safeguarding their communities and asserting their self-determination. Ultimately, ethnic studies can be leveraged both in and out of schools to promote an active electorate and strengthen collective resistance to white supremacy and right-wing authoritarianism.

Pedro Torres and Alisha Ramos, young leaders from Loud for Tomorrow.
Photo credit: Loud for Tomorrow

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