

#IfIWastheMayor

[A CASE STUDY]



Background: Popular culture shapes our understanding of the world. From popular culture we learn lessons about who we can be, the possibilities and realities of our society, what is moral and acceptable behavior.

But most importantly – popular culture is fun. We might be learning those lessons, but we're also laughing, crying, enjoying, and empathizing with the art and entertainment along the way.

We're also connecting. Pop culture is, by definition, popular. Communities of fans, often referred to as "fandoms," come together to enjoy their favorite comic books, TV shows, movies, or podcasts. They obsess and argue over, dissect, lift up, defend, and celebrate the object of their devotion.

There's power in those communities. Groups of disparate people coming together to be passionate about one thing can translate that passion into real-world results. By connecting with those fandoms about the thing they love most, there is an untapped opportunity to steer that passion and energy into **real-world change**.

The field of pop culture organizing is still relatively new. The most common practices so far have included long-term campaigns to shift larger narratives in pop culture, like collaborating with and organizing artists and culture makers to better integrate progressive ideals into culture. The power of fandoms has remained largely untapped in pop culture organizing. The #IfIWastheMayor campaign is a distinct model of a pop culture campaign that focused on those fans – on the consumers of culture rather than the creators. The campaign grew with a fandom in an attempt to redirect its energy back into the real world. We hope that other social justice and democracy-focused organizations can learn from our campaign and are inspired to undertake their own pop organizing experiments.

Theory of Change:

Pop culture portrayals of politics and politicians are overwhelmingly cynical, corrupt, and white. From murderer-presidents Frank Underwood and Fitzgerald Grant in *House of Cards* and *Scandal*, to the for-sale Mayor Quimby on *The Simpsons*, to the profoundly inept and self-serving Selina Meyer on *Veep*, Hollywood paints a bleak picture of our elected leaders. Even less cynical portrayals of politics such as *The West Wing* and *Parks and Rec* show mostly white people in power, reinforcing stereotypes of who is qualified to lead.

Pop culture portrayals of Black people and other vulnerable communities frequently reinforce negative stereotypes – causing real-world harm. Racism that Black people face every day is made worse when pop culture and mainstream media portrayals of Black people bolster white people's fears with inaccurate portrayals and negative stereotypes.

When ABC released a two-minute trailer for *The Mayor* in June of 2017, we were excited for the potential of a show that would break out of these molds. The new sitcom in the network's fall lineup was about a young Black rapper who runs for mayor of his northern California town as a publicity stunt, and unexpectedly wins.

With Yvette Nicole Brown starring in the show, and Larry Wilmore and Daveed Diggs producing it, we were hopeful that this would be a positive and reflective portrayal of a young, Black leader in service to his community.

Because of this hope, we focused our campaign not on trying to shape or push back against the narrative of the show but instead on trying to lift it up, and organize fan enthusiasm into productive, real-world actions. We wanted to tie issues in the show to their real world counterparts, and see if we could then collaborate with the fandom to work on those issues – like lowering barriers to participation, running for office, and creating an inclusive democracy.

We wanted to experiment with the following hypothesis – by joining and growing with the fandom from the start, could we successfully connect democracy issues to an otherwise uninvolved group of people, and spur them to take action to strengthen democracy? Could those fans, otherwise left to obsess over the show, channel that obsession into political power and action?



Planning and Preparation:

The #IfIWastheMayor campaign was designed to engage with viewers and fans of *The Mayor* to encourage them to envision themselves in elected office, get them the resources they needed to get started, and draw attention to the structural barriers that keep our democracy from being accountable and reflective.

We wanted young people of color who might see themselves in *The Mayor* to go one step further and actively imagine what they would do in elected office. By completing the sentence "If I was the mayor..." we hoped to spur people from passively watching a fictional young Black mayor, to more actively thinking of themselves as qualified and able leaders. We then hoped to give them the tools and resources they would need to actually consider a run for office at the time that they were thinking about it, and teach them about some of the structural barriers like voter suppression and big money in politics, which have historically kept candidates from achieving power.

We began by securing the core partnership between Every Voice and Color of Change. Every Voice was looking to bring the principles of pop culture organizing to the democracy space. Color of Change already had an established practice of pop culture organizing, and had existing relationships with Yvette Nicole Brown and ABC Studios that we hoped could amplify our campaign and its message.

Building from the expertise and dedicated time of that core partnership, we set about building a larger coalition of participating groups. Because the campaign would center on spurring people to think of themselves as candidates, we reached out primarily to candidate pipeline groups – groups that train, coach, and foster new and "nontraditional" candidates to run and win. We ultimately brought Collective PAC, Higher Heights, New American Leaders Project, People's Action, Run For Something, She Should Run, Stamp Stampedo, and Voto Latino into the campaign coalition.

The members of this broad and diverse coalition were our messengers but also our message – that there is no one-kind of person qualified for office, and that democracy works best when everyone has a voice and is represented. The reach and prestige of the coalition gave the campaign a legitimacy and seriousness of purpose.

We also received a one-time, rapid response, "pop up grant" from the Pop Culture Collaborative, which helped us devote staff time to the project and hire consultants and designers to carry out our vision.

Since our primary activity would be live tweeting the show to interact directly with fans, and since pop organizing and fan interactions can be different from regular organizational or institutional communications, we commissioned Elana Levin of New Media Mentors to hold an online training on interacting with fans on social media that all partner groups were invited to attend. The training covered valuable principles for interacting with fans, like starting by listening and taking their lead, focusing on the show first and pivoting to our message and campaign only when it felt natural and organic, and tips for what to do if the show or stars took a turn for the problematic.

We wanted people to submit their stories, either written or video, about what they would do in elected office and then have easy resources and tools to immediately convert those thoughts and that energy into action. We built a website, ifwasthemayor.com, that could collect and showcase those stories, with links out to the groups that could help them turn those ideas into action. Importantly, we wanted the site to have the look, feel, and energy as the show itself, and hired a designer who was able to translate the show's existing collateral into an exciting and dynamic site that would seamlessly welcome fans from the show. We also set up Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube accounts for the campaign.

We launched the site a week before the show's premiere, and asked our partner groups to email their members explaining the campaign, directing them to the site, and encouraging them to submit their stories and share with their friends.

Meanwhile, we also hired Miles Maker, an experienced pop organizer based in LA with ties to the television and film industry, as a consultant. Miles gave input to the structure and goals of the campaign, and worked on outreach to individual influencers and taste-makers about how they could participate in and support the campaign.

We also reached out directly to ABC studios to see if they wanted to collaborate on the campaign in any way. Unfortunately, they declined because their primary goal was getting viewers to the show, and we weren't able at that time to prove how our campaign would help them with that goal.



The Campaign:

Each Tuesday night, the coalition live tweeted both the East and West Coast airings of *The Mayor*. Earlier in the day, Every Voice circulated a synopsis of the plot, sample tweets, graphics, and gifs so all partners felt prepared and ready. We also had a Twitter DM back channel for chatting amongst ourselves, sharing important tweets to respond to in real time, and thinking through the issues the show presented and how best to respond.

We interacted with fans, responded to their love of the show, and – when it felt organic and unforced – encouraged them to complete the sentence #IfIWastheMayor... or directed them to the website. In the beginning, new fans were engaging with the show on a very basic level of like or dislike, funny or not funny, and weren't yet ready to connect the characters or issues to real life. We tried to meet them where they were, engaging with them over the show itself, the jokes, characters, and narrative arcs.

We also saw great social engagement from the cast and show creator of *The Mayor*. We had reached out to Yvette Nicole Brown during the planning stages of the campaign to see if she wanted to collaborate, and while that never came to fruition due to scheduling, she knew of the campaign and did inform her fellow actors about it. On show nights, we got great engagement in the form of likes, retweets, and replies from the principal cast members and the show creator.

Feedback and Outcomes:

Every Wednesday, we sent a statistics and best practices round up from the night before to all coalition partners. This organized infrastructure between all the partners took a lot of time upfront, but proved worthwhile once the campaign was underway and everyone was trained, prepared, confident, and knew what to expect.

After three months on the air, *The Mayor* was cancelled. We had succeeded in consistently reaching 3 million people a week with our hashtag, and accounted for 5 percent of the online conversation around the show. Fans were just beginning to make connections between themes on the show and the realities of political accountability, and we feel confident that with more time, we would have been able to strengthen those connections, further organize the fan base, grow our coalition, and even provide input into future storylines for the show itself.

Lessons Learned:

- Engaging with fandoms is a new skill, and training can help.**
The training we held for all partners was universally appreciated and meant we were all starting from the same understanding of how best to engage with fans online.
- Connecting to a fandom takes time.**
It took time for the fandom of the new show to coalesce and grapple with the themes beyond simply stating a preference for or against the show itself. It was unrealistic of us to expect people to be open to our message right away, but to be successful, we wanted to be there from the beginning so as to form that trust and those relationships and develop a shared appreciation for the show together. Fans were just beginning to draw their own connections between the show and real life politics toward the end of the show's aired episodes. Had the show continued, that community and those connections would have continued to grow, and we would have been an established and trusted part of the fan community, able to better deliver our message and spark conversations about our issues.
- Meet people where they are.**
Our original ask wasn't the right one. At first we wanted people to submit stories and videos of what they would do as mayor to the website. It turned out to be unrealistic to ask them to leave Twitter and the show to visit a standalone site and submit a video. Instead, we pivoted to engaging in fan and actor to conversations, trying to help folks make connections to how *The Mayor* related to real life or how to get real life, more to closely resemble *The Mayor*, all while staying on Twitter.
- Build a strong coalition and make it easy for them to participate.**
Our partners – and their reach, credibility, and expertise – were crucial to the success of the campaign. We tried to make it easy for our partners to participate by training them ahead of time, having regular check in calls to set strategy and tactics, and sending around weekly information with a show synopsis, sample tweets, graphics and gifs.
- Reach out to the show's talent.**
We were lucky that Color of Change had an existing relationship with Yvette Nicole Brown, earning us credibility and trust right away. Once the show began airing, many of the cast started following us, and we were able to DM with the actors, giving them campaign updates and suggested tweets and messaging to use while they live-tweeted the show.
- Be ready to prove your worth to the network.**
Color of Change also had existing relationships with ABC that allowed us to get a meeting with their PR team. However, unless we were able to show the campaign's value to the show and how the campaign could bring new viewers to it, they were unwilling to partner. Be prepared to make that case, and also make the case of how the engagement and backing of activist groups around a new show might boost its visibility. This is a two-way relationship – you will each bring new audiences to the other.
- Keep experimenting.**
We tested a hypothesis with this campaign. And despite the show being cut short, we did learn a lot about how to engage with fan communities, how to organize them, and what to ask of them. We encourage other democracy and social justice organizations to continue our experiment and build from the lessons we learned, as we continue to believe that fandoms are a potent and untapped audience capable of creating great political and social change.

