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Building Political Homes for Youth

Five key elements for organizations that want to support young people's democratic belonging and civic engagement.

By: Sara Suzuki, Seona Maskara, Ruby Belle Booth, Alberto Medina

Summary

Young people today face a dual crisis: historic levels of loneliness and social isolation alongside a deep dissatisfaction with democracy's ability to solve problems and improve their lives. Only a third of youth (ages 18-29) believe democracy can address the country's pressing issues, and just 1 in 6 feel democracy is working well for young people. This erosion of democratic faith, combined with widespread disconnection from community, threatens the foundation of youth civic engagement.

Drawing on insights from CIRCLE research, and from the wisdom and approaches of community organizers, this report develops a framework for youth political homes that is aimed at addressing those interconnected problems.

A political home is a space where young people can imagine, participate in, and build a better future, grounded in relationships built on accountability with each other and with supportive adults. Political homes allow youth to learn, grow, exercise their civic potential, and be a part of collective action-taking. A strong political home can set youth on a trajectory of sustained, healthy civic engagement and democratic belonging throughout their lifetime.

Our research reveals that political homes are essential infrastructure for youth civic development, yet are severely lacking. Only 24% of youth ages 18-34 feel like they are part of a group or movement that will work together to express their views politically. This lack of belonging has profound consequences: young people with access to political homes demonstrate significantly higher levels of civic action (20 percentage points higher) and civic self-efficacy compared to their peers without such access. Moreover, political homes appear to buffer against the mental health costs of political engagement; youth who have strong political home connections

maintain their well-being <u>even as å political involvement increases</u>. Our analysis of political homes, as described by youth themselves in a survey, reveals remarkable diversity in where young people find political belonging. While service and volunteering groups are most common, political homes also emerge in organizations centered around religion, identity, environmental activism, online communities, sports, book clubs, and shared hobbies. Notably absent from this landscape are traditional political institutions like political parties and labor unions, suggesting a fundamental disconnect between formal political structures and the spaces where young people actually develop civic identity and capacity.

This disconnect speaks to the challenge of building new organizations that can serve as political homes and of transforming existing groups and institutions so they can play that role in young people's lives. Through qualitative interviews with organizational leaders we identified five core elements that define effective political homes for young people:

Space for Belonging

- Belonging creates the "home" in political home by providing a space where young people connect over shared values, beliefs, and lived experiences, forming deep friendships and lifelong relationships that extend beyond formal programming.

- A human-centered approach that honors young people's whole selves fosters belonging by welcoming all aspects of their lives and identities—not just their political work—and embedding care, respect, and celebration into programming that values each person's full humanity and cultural identity.

- Belonging is especially critical for marginalized youth who may experience "othering" in schools or neighborhoods, with many political homes founded specifically to fill the gap of "political homelessness" and create spaces where young people feel heard and valued.

Developing Political Identity

- Political homes equip youth with agency to create change by providing the motivation, knowledge, and civic skills needed to participate in democracy and address issues affecting their communities.

- They also foster political identity through learning approaches that help young people collaboratively analyze their world and form new ideas and perspectives, rather than simply transferring information, building both individual and collective power.

- Political identity formation requires exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking, which political homes cultivate by encouraging youth to examine their own beliefs, engage constructively with different viewpoints, and form independent conclusions—though this remains an ongoing challenge that requires intentional and structured facilitation.

Meeting Basic Needs

- Political homes enable equitable youth participation by providing safe "third spaces" and addressing resource barriers that prevent engagement, food, financial compensation, and transportation to youth.

- Mental well-being is also essential for young people's sustained political engagement; political homes attend to mental health in the ways they engage with youth, as well as by providing structured mental health support like workshops.

- Resource constraints limit organizational capacity to meet youths' basic needs, with smaller and youth-led organizations facing particular challenges that affect their ability to be inclusive to young people from across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

Preparing for Life and Career

- Political homes leverage the overlap between civic and career skills to support youth beyond political work, providing college application support, financial aid guidance, and professional skill development that prepare young people for future success.

- Building social capital increases equity and economic mobility by connecting youth—especially those lacking access to such opportunities—with alumni, professionals, and mentors who expand their networks and help them explore diverse career paths.

- Effective career support is youth-driven and experiential rather than prescriptive, with strong political homes listening to young people's interests and goals and using hands-on learning instead of rigid information delivery, while recognizing that not all youth will pursue careers in advocacy or political changemaking.

Developing Youth Voices

- Whether young people can use their voice is often the critical difference between an organization where young people are merely part of the membership versus a political home.

- Political homes can create multiple low-barrier entry points, leadership pipelines, and authentic incorporation of youth in organizational decision-making to allow young people's voices to be heard.

- The strongest political homes implement processes aligned with youth-adult partnership principles such as consistent feedback systems and ways to include youth in governance structures.

Few organizations can excel across all five elements of a political home due to resource and capacity constraints. That means an ecosystem approach is needed: rather than expecting a single organization to meet every need, communities should cultivate networks of complementary political homes that together provide comprehensive support for youth civic development. However, realizing an ecosystem's potential requires intentional coordination, communication, and warm referrals between organizations, along with systems-level support from funders and policymakers who understand the gaps and invest in collaborative infrastructure.

As our democracy faces unprecedented challenges and young people search for belonging in an increasingly isolated world, political homes represent a promising framework for addressing both crises simultaneously. By providing young people with spaces to belong, develop political identity, have their basic needs met, prepare for their futures, and exercise their voice, political homes can grow the next generation of engaged citizens while nurturing the relationships and community connections that make belonging to a democracy meaningful.

Background

While young people fundamentally support and wish to participate in democracy, youth from across the spectrum of political ideology are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the way our democracy is working to solve the problems they face. In fact, just 36% of youth 18-29 years old surveyed in late 2024 agreed or strongly agreed that democracy today can address the issues the country is facing, and a mere 16% agreed or strongly agreed that democracy is working well for young people. This sentiment is reflected in young people's deep distrust of traditional civic institutions such as political parties.

At the same time, young people are experiencing a profound sense of loneliness and isolation (U.S. Surgeon General 2023). They are facing some of the highest rates of social disconnection, with almost a quarter of 18-29 year-olds saying they feel "lonely or isolated from those around them" all or most of the time. CIRCLE's own research suggests that half of young people rarely or never spend time in-person with members of their community.

Young people's civic engagement is acutely affected by both distrust and disconnection from democracy and a lack of community belonging. To address these interconnected crises, we sought to build on the framework of "political home" or "civic home" embedded within the organizing traditions of communities of color and other marginalized communities, focusing specifically on what a political home can look like for youth.

Political Homes Are Rooted In Community Organizing

Throughout the civic history of this nation, communities have stood up to injustice by coming together to find a "political home." Community organizer and author adrienne maree brown defines a political home as "...a place where we ideate, practice and build futures we believe in, finding alignment with those we are in accountable relationships with, and growing that alignment through organizing and education."

Political homes are defined as much by the sense of belonging they give members as by the collective action they facilitate. As Sojourn Strategies wrote in their report "Building Black Political Power at the Intersection of Movement and Electoral Justice," organizations working to strengthen the political power of Black communities sought to build a political home that helps to facilitate civic involvement through a sense of deep connection—built by affirming the Black identity and creating opportunities for joy and community—that is often missing from traditional and formal "political" spaces (e.g., political parties). As documented by Sarkar and colleagues (2021) and Cushman and McKenna (2023), the relational ties within community organizing bodies (that often act as political homes) are the driving force that allows the transformation of individual interests and resources into shared strategies and structures that can sustain long-term change efforts.

Although the roots of political homes are in groups and movements centered on social justice and the Black community, their principles are widely applicable and can be adapted to diverse types of organizations across the political spectrum, which are represented in our research.

A Framework for Youth Political Homes

A youth-specific framework for political homes can clarify and broaden our understanding of what "spaces" and "organizations" can support young people's civic engagement as well as provide actionable recommendations to groups and institutions. These organizations do not have to be traditionally political in nature, and can range from religious organizations to sports teams.

Building political homes is also a way to address inequities and gaps in participation. Our CIRCLE Growing Voters approach to understanding disparities in youth civic engagement highlights broad inequities across socioeconomic class, race/ethnicity, and rurality in access to the resources that support civic engagement among youth. These inequities lead to some of the patterns we see in youth voter turnout, including persistent gaps between youth with access to college and non-college youth.

CIRCLE's 2022 national poll of youth found that young people who belong to a civic organization (religious, school group, volunteer/mutual aid group, or other local organization) or were actively participating in a social or political movement were more likely to express that they feel well-informed about politics and qualified to participate. Youth who were part of civic organizations or movements were also more likely to vote.

Furthermore, based on the survey run for this study, our analysis found that young people (accounting for various demographic factors) who belong to at least one political home are more likely to be engaged in a variety of civic actions and have a higher sense of civic self-efficacy. Interestingly, in our sample, there was no difference in 2024 voter turnout by political home membership, which suggests these environments of civic learning and development may be most valuable for promoting participation beyond the ballot box.

Past research has highlighted how <u>many youth are interested in taking civic action</u> but haven't yet, needing opportunities and support to participate. Being a part of a movement makes young people more likely to participate in various types of civic action, suggesting how social and political movements can support young people in building civic skills and the confidence and knowledge to use them.

Despite the evidence that civic organizations and social/political movements support youth civic participation, we found that young people severely lack access to them. Even when young people are connected to civic organizations, there is no guarantee that they are serving the developmental and relational roles of a political home. When we partially explored this question by asking whether youth "feel part of a group or movement that will work together to express our views politically, " we found that <u>just 24% of youth (18-34 years old) agreed or strongly agreed</u> that they have this kind of civic support.

As referenced in the work on Black political homes by Sojourn Strategies, political homes are essential not just for boosting episodic civic actions like voting, but for building sustainable civic engagement. There is growing evidence that health inequities, especially regarding mental health, may be exacerbated by political involvement. (See, for example: <u>this report</u> from The Trevor Project; <u>Suzuki et al., 2023</u>; and <u>Conner et al., 2023</u>). However, <u>CIRCLE research</u> suggests access to effective political homes can counter the negative impacts of mental health on civic engagement. The analyses found that politically active youth with the lowest access to political homes had poorer mental health than similarly engaged young people with high political home access.

In addition to the mounting evidence that political homes are critical for supporting healthy, sustainable political participation, political homes may also help young people to cope with an increasingly saturated, polarized, and fast-paced media landscape constructed around social media platforms. According to research by Springtide Research Institute, nearly all young people use social media daily, and 35% view information related to politics on social media on a weekly or daily basis. However, young people also express a lack of trust in big tech companies and social media platforms. Political homes can help young people discuss and interpret what they see online and translate it into political action.

About this Research

Data for this report come from two sources. The first is a survey (N = 468) of young people ages 18-29 conducted between November 19, 2024 and December 13, 2024.

The second is nine in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with the leader of an organization that supports young people's civic engagement and transcribed before undergoing extensive qualitative analysis. Quotes presented in this report from these interviews have been lightly edited for clarity.

A Wide Range of Organizations Can Serve as Political Homes

In our survey, we gauged what kinds of organizations are currently serving as youth political homes, which are visualized in the word cloud below.

Youth provided examples of different types of organizations' goals and activities:

- **Religious Spaces:** "A youth group at a church that allows anyone (mostly under 30) to come together to help the community."
- **LGBTQ Frats:** "A gender/queer-inclusive fraternity where we create a safe space for literally anyone and help the community out through volunteering."

- **Black Women Mentorship Groups:** "We mentor, volunteer, and aid in applications for grad school and med school!"
- **Recreation and Fitness Organizations:** "A climbing gym that "work[s] with local communities to raise money for environmental cleanups, community updates, and other activism ideas."
- **Discord Server:** "With around 70 people, we talk about things ranging from mental health troubles, to dating issues, to cooking and future endeavors. We communicate with a variety of people, all age groups, and it's just super pleasant to be involved with it."

Notably, more traditional political organizations like political parties and labor unions were mentioned much less frequently. This may reflect young people's <u>distrust of traditional politics</u>—and, in the case of unions, <u>their declining membership and influence</u> in American life— and underscores that they are turning to alternative spaces to build their political identity. Moreover, young people's families or friend groups and schools or workplaces were less commonly mentioned, though student organizations and workplace committees did emerge as potential political homes.

What Are the Elements of a Political Home?

Not every group that a young person may be affiliated with will be their political home. Some spaces may be too large for it to feel like a home for a young person; for example their entire college campus. Some groups may provide a lot of closeness and camaraderie (e.g., a peer group or sport team) but may not provide support for young people's civic development. Other organizations that youth may join, like a labor union or youth-serving non-profit, may have organizational aims related to civic engagement, but lack the kind of possibilities for youth input, leadership, and decision-making that are essential in a political home.

In a series of interviews with organizational leaders we gathered information about how organizations can act as a political home. All nine leaders we spoke to enthusiastically agreed that their organization could be described as a political home and shared insights about their assets and values.

Some of the leaders we interviewed were young people themselves, and they shared further insights about why they were leading organizations to create a political home for their peers.

Based on these interviews, we identified five elements that are necessary in political homes: a space for belonging, developing political identity, meeting basic needs, preparing for life and career, and developing youth voice. We share more about each element below.
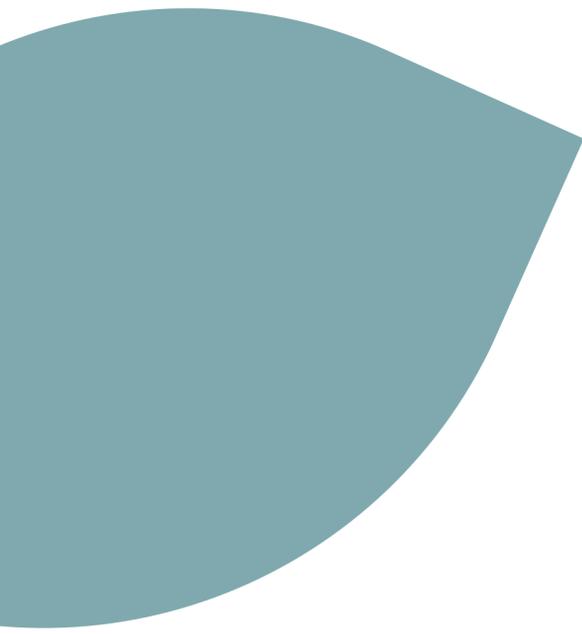
Space for Belonging

Creating a space where young people feel they belong is what puts the "home" in political home. All interviewees mentioned fostering a sense of belonging by creating room for members to form deep friendships and find community. Political homes provide a place for young people to connect over shared beliefs, lived experiences, and values, both those related to their political identity as well as other parts of their identity. Many leaders shared that young people developed lifelong connections to their organizations, often moving through different programs as they aged or staying connected with the organization after officially "graduating" or finishing the programming.

> Sometimes [our programming is] just taking them to the beach... it's maybe a 20 minute drive, and for the majority of the young people in the program they've never been to it. We organize things like that where young people can kind of build community with one another and be happy.

Political homes focus on young people's whole lives, their culture, and celebrating each person's contributions. Even though many young people join a political home because they have a shared value or goal, young people are welcomed to bring all aspects of their lives to their political home and do not have to focus narrowly on the organization's activities or mission.

The focus on creating a space of belonging is especially important to help young people, especially those experiencing marginalization or "othering" elsewhere in their lives, to feel heard and valued. Many youth look for a sense of belonging that they may be lacking in other spaces such as their school or neighborhood, rendering them "politically homeless" without a supportive space.

Organizations use a variety of strategies to foster belonging. Many focus on incorporating one-on-one connections in their operations, ensuring that young people have trusted mentors or peers they can turn to. Many also provide accessible spaces for youth to hang out and become friends (physically or online), planning social events outside of regular programming aimed at increasing bonding and community. Fully online political homes lean into a unique set of strategies to build community, organizing activities and events like "PowerPoint nights" to provide closeness in an online-based community. They also use popular forms of online communication like memes and GIFs to keep participants engaged and connected. This is representative of a consistent theme across organizations: leaning into humor and joy whenever possible to foster connection.

> ...being more personal with each other, rather than it being always strictly professional... when we have mass org calls, a lot of the times, we don't actually talk about work on those which I know is a different approach. A lot of times people do like the mass calls, it's like: "Here's everything we're doing in the next month!" Our call coming up is like a PowerPoint night ... for back to school. And so we're all doing really silly goofy presentations, just to get to know each other better.

Developing Political Identity

Political homes can provide a space for young people to develop their political identity—the motivation, knowledge, and skills needed to participate in our democracy and enact change in their communities and on issues that they care about. In our interviews, two key processes for political identity development within these spaces emerged.

First, political homes provide education and programming to support youth to develop their political knowledge. They create a space for young people to engage with current events and gain a deeper understanding of the issues that they care about and are affecting their families and communities. Political homes can also provide youth with detailed insight into the nuts and bolts of taking civic action: how to read a legislative bill, how to organize an effective advocacy campaign, how to write to an elected official, how to encourage peers to vote, etc. In particular, the civic skills that young people learn in political homes are tied in empowering ways to their identity, allowing youth to translate their experiences into meaningful community impact. For example, one political home focused on how youth can use storytelling, drawing on their specific lived experiences, in order to advance policy change.

> ...I walk through the bill with them... so when they see it in Supreme Court rulings, or when they see it in policy, they're like, oh, that's what that is. I think sort of building up... a legal dictionary for our team so when we're reading bills [they] know that they can ask someone questions instead of being like, 'Oh, I'm lost. I'm just not gonna read it.

Many political homes draw on approaches aligned with popular education to support the development of members' political identities. They seek to engage young people in a collaborative, dialogue-based learning process rooted in developing the individual and collective agency and power of young people to analyze and transform the world around them, instead of taking a didactic approach focusing on transferring knowledge from an "expert" to the young person. Political homes facilitate discussions about issues relevant to young people's lives, leaning on youth themselves to drive the choice of topics. Furthermore, political homes challenge young people to critically examine their own beliefs, encouraging them to think carefully about the narratives they hold about the world and where those narratives come from.

> There are a lot of concepts they're just learning and we're challenging their worldview and the worldview of people that they care about... And there's pushback, because it's like that's not what I learned. This is not what has been instilled in me through the years that I've been growing up. So a lot of pushback in the beginning, but I think that's the space where young people start to be able to think about what their own opinion is.

Additionally, political homes seek to create opportunities for young people to be challenged in their beliefs and be exposed to new perspectives, as well as form their own conclusions about what is happening in their communities. Leaders noted that while they strive to develop young people's critical thinking and political identity in their political homes, it was often difficult to foster open dialogue when either issues were too divisive or the organizational leaders did not feel well-equipped to facilitate a discussion on those topics.

They also noted that sometimes youth within their political home had beliefs that were too similar and disagreement or debate was infrequent.

However, many political homes took intentional steps to facilitate discussions that foster political identity development. Organizations often emphasized taking steps to establish discussion norms and best practices so that young people could have respectful and generative conversations. Several also arranged moments when the organization as a whole was in dialogue with other perspectives; for example, by hosting organizations with notably different viewpoints at an event for their members.

> " We also host events with people that we disagree with to have those open conversations. … And I think if they see us engage in those kinds of conversations it's very helpful and very empowering to them because they're part of an organization that is unafraid of having the difficult conversations across the aisle, and is actually standing up for the right thing, regardless of the kind of partisan label or political label. "
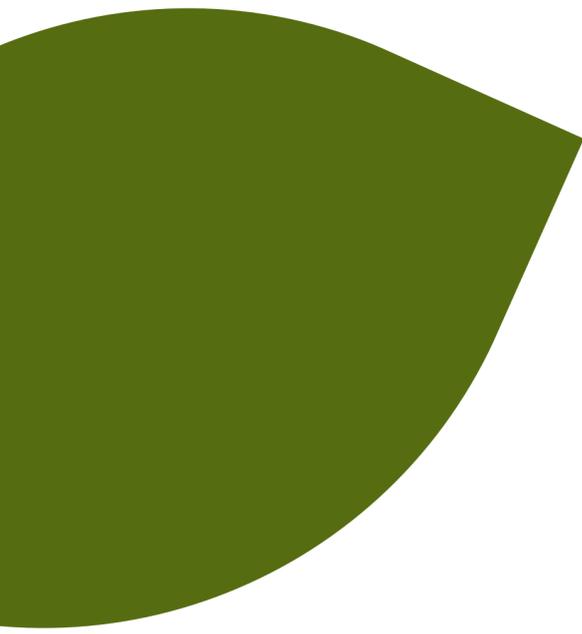
Meeting Basic Needs

" You learn about how to make change,
but it's hard to do that if you're hungry. **"**

The leaders stewarding various political homes understood that young people, especially those experiencing economic struggle or other hardships, cannot participate if their basic needs are not met. Therefore meeting the needs of young people (and sometimes their families too) is an essential function of having a political home that can equitably involve young people from all backgrounds. Those core needs can include providing a safe, physical "third space," food, money, and caring for young people's mental health.

There are few places, free or otherwise, where young people can safely gather outside of school, work, and home. Limited access to "third spaces" is often related to a young person's marginalization, such as being transgender, lacking financial resources, or living in a rural community. In the midst of declining third spaces, political homes can be a vital resource where young people can gather, decompress, and express themselves. When a political home takes on this form, it can help to increase young people's sense of belonging and community within the organization by creating space for young people to connect.

> **Also as a physical space this [organization] is a huge asset for the community. So obviously in this area, there's so much divestment. There's abandoned lots. Young people are able to come here and have places to hang out, watch TV, heat up their food. I feel like there's definitely this sense of community, of family, of just like home.**

Many organizations consider the resource barriers that can prevent young people's engagement in civic life, including the financial burden that participation can place on youth. Some organizations address this by paying youth for their time, acknowledging that they may be losing out on employment opportunities by participating. Others provide food, transportation passes, or mutual aid to their participants and community members. Providing for young people's basic, essential needs helps to make programs more accessible while building trust, community, and belonging. It starts by asking the question: what might a young person need in order to fully participate in our program?

Political homes recognize that young people who are experiencing stress and mental health challenges cannot participate fully in civic life and that taking action for change can harm their mental (and physical) well-being. Encountering and processing political information, navigating political activism, and negotiating their voice and power in the civic sphere requires constant support in order for youth to be able to engage in a sustainable manner. One way that political homes provide support to their young members is by having clearly outlined ways for youth to communicate when they need to step back or reduce their responsibilities depending on what else is going on in their lives. Additionally, organizations can allocate resources to supporting young people's mental health needs, by providing workshops for youth hosted by mental health professionals or by encouraging taking 'mental health days.'

> **We have Wellness Wednesdays with psychiatric social workers who facilitate some type of workshop for young people. It could be something like how to deescalate conflicts amongst your friend group in your community or within your family, it could be... how to process stress. After the pandemic, a lot of it was about processing loss, because I think a lot of us lost folks during that time. Having young people destigmatize therapy and asking for help, giving young people the language to be able to seek out those services, knowing where those services are, if that's something that they need.**

Meeting young people's needs requires organizational resources ranging from physical space, staff time and training, and money for internal and external programming. Some forms of providing support, such as providing a mutual aid fund, are especially difficult for organizations to build-in to their budget. Not all organizations are equally equipped to provide these resources, and smaller or youth-led organizations in particular face challenges. This limits their ability to be an organization that is inclusive to youth from different backgrounds, including youth who have less access to resources.

Preparing for Life and Career

Civic skills often overlap with broader life and career skills, and political homes take advantage of this overlap to support youth in their educational trajectories and career preparation. Political homes provide college and financial aid application support, as well as opportunities to learn vital career-related skills like networking and public speaking. Many political homes focus on building young people's social capital by connecting them to alumni and various professionals related to the organization, building their network, and supporting youth to consider various career paths.

> [Former members are] now college students and they are so willing to share what they know and to advise you and support you not only in this organization's work, but also in your work as a student, which, again, coming from a rural high school, we have very limited resources. There's very limited knowledge about what is out there in terms of educational opportunities.

Many political homes intentionally engage youth who otherwise lack access to this kind of support and resources, and they can play a crucial role in increasing equity in young people's futures. Some organizations may even primarily have a career development focus, weaving in the support they provide for youth civic engagement into their programming.

A core asset of a political home for young people is the connections it can provide to more experienced adults or older peers. However, it is important for organizations to refrain from being narrowly focused on imparting information and being rigid in their support to youth. Political homes are naturally invested in having youth consider career paths within the field they are operating in, but not all young people will want to pursue careers directly related to political changemaking. Furthermore, due to the importance of youth voice in a political home, having youth input on the resources they receive is important. Several interviewees shared that an experiential learning emphasis was helpful for imparting both civic skills as well as life and career skills. For example, an organization can have young people navigate obtaining a legal contract for a project rather than just delivering information about legal contracts to youth.

> **We have young people come almost every day Monday through Thursday. We provide academic support for young people. We have part time tutors... helping young people with their homework, applying to college, applying to scholarships. We have workshops for them on FAFSA, all those types of things. We also try to provide some degree of career preparation. So resumes, documents that you need in order to apply for jobs. We do mock interviews.**

Developing Youth Voice

A critical role of political homes for young people is to give them spaces to develop and use their voice. By listening to young people and giving them places to lead, organizations can show youth their voices and perspectives matter, empowering them in ways that will shape their civic participation. It is also beneficial for political homes to uplift youth voice, as their lived experiences can inform and shape their strategies in meaningful ways.

At the most basic level, a political home needs to have a low barrier to entry, so they can welcome young people regardless of their prior experiences with civic engagement. Organizations can do this by having varied entry points to match young people's diverse skills and interests. They can also have multiple levels of engagement to welcome more young people into their programs and have a clear "leadership pipeline" wherein youth can incrementally take on more responsibilities in the organization and see a clear pathway to being more involved. These processes are an important step toward preserving young people's autonomy by allowing youth to choose exactly how and to what extent they want to be involved.

True incorporation of youth voice in political homes needs to involve young people in the decision-making about the organization. While still very rare, a few political homes are entirely run by youth: from volunteers to senior leadership and board members. Other organizations focused on youth but run by adults can lean into important youth-adult partnership principles.

Adults can support youth voice by implementing changes based on their input and creating roles in which young people can make decisions. This may look like having a youth advisory board to give feedback on the organization's operations, or even giving young board members equal voting power to adult members on a board. Some political homes have boards in which young people have a majority, giving them the greatest decision-making power in the organization.

> " Our board is majority composed of high school students. Being part of the board, at our annual meeting we discuss the budget, and they can all just raise their hands and be like, 'Hey, I agree. I don't agree with this. I want to set forth a motion to change something.' Last year one of our students did that, and it was about the budget. And we talked through it, and then we changed it. And so we have a conversation about it, and we decide collectively. "

Organizations can also implement feedback systems to consistently and respectfully gather youths' perspectives. This is best executed at every stage of an initiative at the organization, like bringing young people in during the planning process to ensure that a new program is relevant and accessible to young people. Adult leaders and staff can receive authentic feedback from youth by speaking to them as equals, incorporating their ideas when possible, and being transparent about barriers to implementation that may exist.

> " We have a lot of feedback forms in everything that we do. And we actually have a lot of ways of giving young people just the natural relationship of peer-to-peer, real communication, that allows for more open feedback structures naturally. "

The leaders we interviewed mentioned several challenges to successful integration of youth voice in political homes. Many youth organizations have high rates of turnover—for instance, a program in a university setting will only have youth participate during their enrollment. This can pose a challenge to providing the needed scaffolding so that young people can fully exercise their voice and leadership. Adults also need development and training to support youth voice well, and staff turnover can hamper the investment of time and resources devoted to youth voice practices in a political home.

When young people are new to an organization or to its field, their limited experience can also pose a challenge. They are likely to lack deep institutional knowledge about the organization or nonprofit operations. This can pose a barrier to young people's ability to provide input on core decisions, and successful political homes have youth shadow and learn from adults during more complex processes (e.g., a fundraising meeting), use plain language to explain processes to youth, and consistently look for opportunities, however small, where youth can leverage their ideas.

Nevertheless, a core tension that arises in many political homes is between young people's desire for using democratic, non-hierarchical decision-making processes (e.g. an all members vote) and the reality of the hierarchy and power structures embedded in many organizations. As some adult executive directors of political homes described, organizations may want youth to have an influence but are also faced with the reality that they are accountable to boards, funders, and other stakeholders in ways that may clash with young people's wishes.

Implications for a Political Homes Ecosystem

At a time when American democracy demands engagement and action, developing strong political homes that draw youth in and build on their passions to make change is an essential task.

That work will look different in different fields, and meet different needs at different stages in a young person's life. During young people's K-12 education, political homes in or out of school can help youth engage from an early age, setting them up for civic engagement patterns throughout their lives. CIRCLE research shows that few young people have opportunities to feel like their voices matter in school. For youth who don't go on to college or who live in civic deserts, where they may lack access to political homes after high school, it is vital that they experience the civic learning and development that a political home can provide while in school. It can set up all young people for a lifetime of civic engagement.

For college- and voting-age young people, political homes are a key tool to address their high dissatisfaction with the state of U.S. democracy. That disillusionment with politics can lead to lower voter turnout and lower rates of civic action, especially for youth outside of higher education institutions. Having a political home can address those barriers to civic engagement by giving youth a community to get support, grapple with their frustrations, and come together to take action.

Youth-serving organizations also benefit from becoming political homes. When they help young people develop their voices, build efficacy, and think about the future in a positive way, they may also be gaining committed

volunteers, members, and leaders who can support the organization now and in the future. For political homes that serve marginalized or underserved youth, they also provide critical support that can make a tangible difference to community members.

While a single political home that excels across all elements represents an ideal, the reality is that few organizations have the capacity and resources to fully offer all of the elements of a political home to its members. Moreover, different types of political homes will be attractive and appropriate for young people at different points in their lives. This suggests the necessity of an ecosystem approach in which communities—whether defined geographically like a local neighborhood, by boundaries like a campus community, or by shared identity—cultivate multiple political homes that each excel in a few of the key elements.
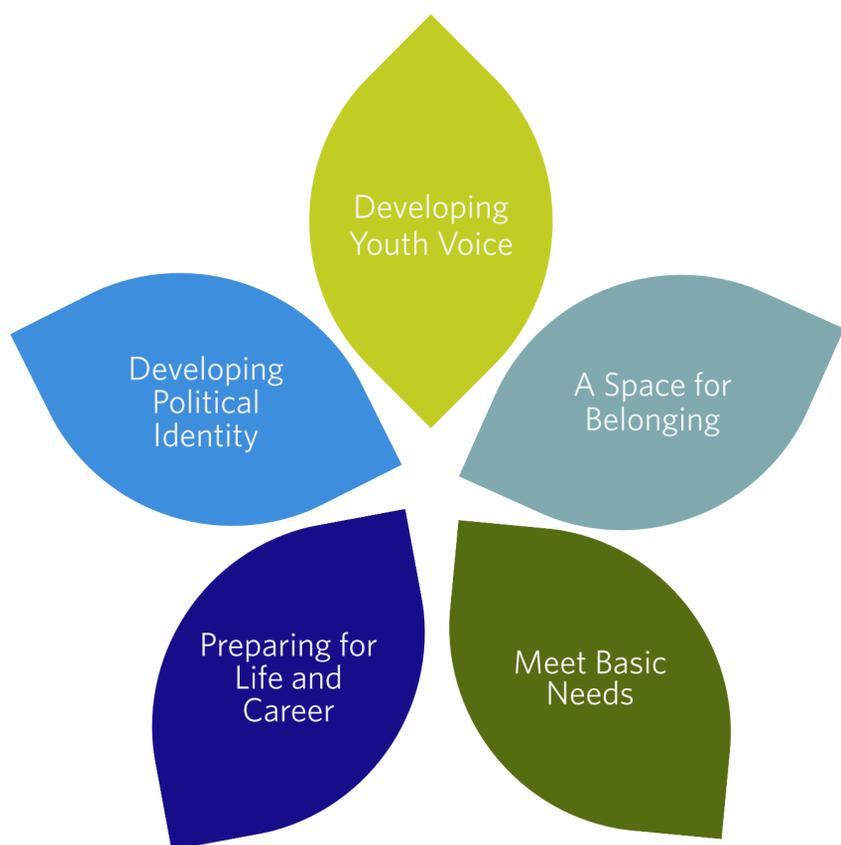
In this constellation model, while all organizations have elements of all of the themes, one organization might specialize in providing safe third spaces and meeting material needs, while another focuses on rigorous political education and skill-building, and another may provide career mentorship and professional networking. Some of these organizations may be best for youth in high school who need help with college applications; another for older youth who want to engage in more direct political learning and action. Together, these complementary political homes can collectively meet the diverse needs of young people at different parts of their lives and in different ways that no single organization may be able to achieve alone.

Realizing the potential of this ecosystem approach requires intentional coordination and communication between potential political homes. Organizations must build relationships with one another, understand each other's strengths, make warm referrals to connect youth with the right resources, and collaborate rather than compete. Without this deliberate effort to function as an interconnected network, young people may fall through the cracks or struggle to navigate disconnected services, undermining the promise of a truly comprehensive political home ecosystem. Those supporting the political homes dotted throughout the ecosystem at a systems level, such as funders and policymakers, must also understand what gaps may exist and support collaborative efforts. In order to do so, all organizations that work with youth and value youth civic engagement – whether civic in nature or not – should be encouraged to become political homes.