

To: ProgressNow Arizona
From: Joshua Ulibarri, Lake Research Partners
Re: Brief Summary/Narrative Project FGS Among African Americans
Date: August 13, 2018

Lake Research Partners completed a focus group in Phoenix among African Americans. The single focus group included men and women who were in their mid-twenties to their early-fifties. The group were recruited among African Americans who were scored on the voter file as higher partisans and lower on turnout. That said, as we will discuss, there was a good mix of partisanship and ideology in the group. The team has received a link to the video for the group. This memo is brief to convey the biggest findings and what they mean for organizing later this year. As always, do not hesitate to call Joshua with any questions.

There is one big caution that must be communicated. These findings come from one focus group over a 2 hour period and from a discussion among ten people. While the findings may seem true and accurate we may be reinforcing our own beliefs in what we write here. This is a community that has not been given a lot of time and commitment when it comes to research and ProgressNow and its allies deserve credit for running this group. But, we left with more questions than answers.

Here are the major findings:

1. **African Americans participating in this focus group are frustrated, cynical, and disappointed.** They are frustrated in this political climate that seems to reward discrimination and outright racism. They are cynical that something will be done, either by others or by members in their own community to come together and change things. And they are disappointed that people from other races and ethnicities, even their friends, do not acknowledge racism and discrimination and how it effects African Americans living in Phoenix. The researchers do not want to oversimplify the summary or to stress too significantly the finding of frustration and disappointment. In fact, the participants were joyous and happy at the outset. Still, as the conversation got serious and real, the depth of the disappointment became clear. The participants wanted to have this conversation and wanted others to hear it.
2. **It is difficult to imagine a situation in which African Americans (like those in this group, lower on the turnout scale) will be motivated to vote this year, if social justice and police aggression is not a leading topic.** The conversation was not even fifteen minutes in before the first person

mentioned police shootings. The group was held shortly after the altercation between police officers and young men in an apartment lobby/stairwell; but even without this most recent event, the topic would be relevant, current, and raw. Respondents said people of color are being killed by the police for relatively minor offenses, if for any offense at all. ***To avoid police aggression is to seem entirely unserious about helping African Americans move ahead in Phoenix.*** It reminds the research team very much of the report we wrote last year for OneArizona, about how important immigration will be to lower-turnout targets Latinx. One man told a story about how he has coached his son to behave if he is pulled over, so the son lives through the event. The key to this conversation is cultural relevancy and authenticity. It is a life and death conversation for African Americans and they won't suffer through people telling them something; they need to be heard and understood and solutions need to be organic to the bottom-up movement.

3. **Race, racial equality, and tolerance are important to these participants. Many felt we have taken a step backward when we should be taking steps forward.** This was tied to Trump, of course. To many participants, his election was a symbol of how far this country still has to go, but also a personal rejection for many people in this country. The topic, though, has many levels and entry points. Some participants said it is more difficult, in this current climate, to know who might be mad at you or who might take out aggression on you, because it is so wide-spread when once it was more limited. The point being, now all the racists and haters feel liberated to reflect their hidden values and agenda; and it could be someone close to you. While racism used to be more covert and underground, now it is on Twitter and other social media outlets. Where these things were said at home, now they are said online, and even at church. This divisiveness and inflammatory rhetoric is externally much thicker than it has been and may be causing internalized stress of which these focus groups couldn't fully unpack.

4. **And, it is just simply disappointing and depressing to be dealing with this—today in 2018—and to realize even your friends may not have your back.** This tone to the conversation seemed to be more relevant to the men in the focus groups; but with only one group it is difficult to know for sure. In any case, one younger male said his white friends seemed to be “oblivious to the struggles black people go through every day.” Another participant said their friends were “blinded to the black experience and they think it is a myth.” Not only are we taking a step back but some people seem to be “pro taking that step back.” One female participant reflected that even people she felt connected to seem to be “very supportive” of outrageous things.

5. **If there was a sense that even your white friends may not be there for you, African Americans in these groups had different views on whether there was a strong black culture in Phoenix.** First, there was a sense of isolation but it was not overpowering. One person said she could go the entire day in Scottsdale and not see another African American, but others said it was not that bad. There may not be a sense of connection, but at least there was not a sense of division that may have been present in the past (this may have something to do with the growth of overt racism unifying the community, “we are not fighting each other”). Still, there is certainly the feeling among some that there is a lack of connection to each other. The older participants spoke about times the community would get together (Juneteenth) and how elders would pass on morals, values, and history and that this is gone. Younger participants, while they wanted a stronger sense of connection, didn’t seem to focus as much on values being passed on (more on this later). There was talk that there were not as many events to draw the community together and that African Americans may try to assimilate (“we consume, we do not produce”). Here, they want to hold each other accountable for the lack of connection.
6. **There was a generational divide here that was felt even if it was not overtly spoken.** Older African Americans (perhaps 35+) had a stronger sense that values are not being passed down, that there is a lack of “big mammas” to hold the community together. And, those participants yearned for that. It may be a reflection that they wanted to feel respected the way they once respected their elders (mostly among men but not exclusively so). In any case, younger African Americans in this group were less likely to feel that way. In fact, they outwardly said they need to “weed out the old heads” who are in charge. And while this was about elected officials in particular, the sentiment went to the larger community—that younger African Americans need to be given room to be in charge, and if not given, they need to do the “weeding.” There is opportunity in this challenge. Younger African Americans want responsibility leading this Phoenix community. The challenge is older African Americans need to be part of the coalition moving forward to feed the movement’s full potential.
7. **Voting is important but it is not seen as an effective way to make the change they want to see happen, and this is a big concern.** When the concern is bringing people together, hoping your friends of another color have your back when it comes to race and equality, or praying your son survives being pulled over, the vote is important but pales. Even then, the candidates they choose don’t usually win when they do vote. One participant said she has been voting since she was 18 and not a single candidate she supported has won (she is a millennial). While that may not be true, in fact, the fact that she feels this way is extremely relevant. One African American

woman participant said if our candidates lose and we feel hopeless, it is easy to understand why the non-voters don't think it matters. Voting matters, to a point, but it was visible how dubious respondents were that it could change things. Importantly, there was good agreement that it may not matter on candidates but might matter on issues – with some recall on marijuana, minimum wage, and seeing Arpaio as an issue campaign and not a candidate driven issue. ***There is a lesson here. Progressive candidates can win if they are right on the progressive issues, but these voters may need to be organized around the issue, not the candidate. The issue (solving brutality, justice reform, education) can help their community and the candidate is the vehicle, but not the end.***

8. **The political parties are not the vehicle, even if specific candidates might be right on the issues.** The parties are weak, especially the Democratic Party and neither party really gets them or is well-liked. This is not a new finding, but it remains true. These participants may be progressive and they may be Democrats by habit but they are not Democrats by repeated practice or commitment. Whatever differences these participants see between the parties are fairly thin and small (maybe marijuana, maybe immigration). And of course the bigger critique against Democrats is that they are weak and lack power in Arizona.
9. **Celebrities, to this group, may also not be the vehicle they once were.** My first real dive into motivating and organizing the African American community started in 2003 ahead of the Bush re-election efforts. Back then, African Americans, moreso than any other racial group, were motivated by knowing African Americans, celebrities, and actors wanted them to vote (and were themselves voters). Kanye West was one of the first African American celebrities to speak to LGBTQ equality and the community was aware of it. Today, in this single group, that seems to be no longer the case. When they were asked who would go to a party held by the Democratic Party, participants said Beyonce and Jay-Z. But when asked if that would make these participants feel comfortable at the party, the feeling was a resounding NO. Democrats “employ” them to get attention and then the party doesn't fulfill what the candidates are saying. More powerful, however is this— rich “black folks” are as “useless and baseless” as rich “white folks.” By being elite and rich, it makes it harder to relate to the struggles – this is where the cynical finding comes from. Money can be almost as much of a barrier as race. These rich, elite, African Americans want to do good, “but still favor the wealthy.” They become like politicians; they say good things but do not do good things.

10. **Immigration is an important factor and there are challenges here under the surface.** The sentiment is relevant and is unlikely to unravel any efforts to organize the community, but long-term it needs to be addressed (in both communities). Resentment is too strong of a word, but there is an unease in talking about the issue. The most stark comment was “there is no DACA for blacks.” When the group discussed power and who has it, one participant said “Mexicans, but it is unspoken.” There was also the sense that while African Americans may not come together, Latinx do when it comes to rallies, immigration, and protesting Arpaio or Trump. Mexicans are exerting their power while African Americans may not be. Our target communities, African Americans, Latinx, LGBTQ, even some younger voters, still fail to see the intersectionality and how the powerful use division to hold their power. Still, to be very clear, African Americans in this group knew Latinx people were discriminated against and they objected to it, period.

11. **Corruption is a strong theme and African Americans in this group related to it and to power in a way that Asians did not in the other group.** When asked who has the power in Phoenix, African American participants went right to corporations (with some mentions of softer targets like Mexicans or churches). African Americans related to power—who has it and who does not—in ways Asians did not. For African Americans, corporations have power, they corrupt the system, and their community pays a price. Some participants said they had the power, but didn’t use it. They also said the people with the power—Trump, the police—abused it. While those who would use that power for good—teachers, African Americans—were only now seeing that they could get power. ***The corruption frame that will take hold in the fall will work with these targets, but it needs to be more relevant and address police brutality and schools in their community.***

12. **Here are a final few findings that deserve attention:**
 - a. Some older African Americans were dubious about **voting by mail and PEVL** and they may need additional touches on the security of that vote. They doubted it was truly counted.

 - b. **Education is huge** and the #redforded rallies and the teacher strike were inspirational—people rising up who were not going to take it any longer.

 - c. **Affordable health care** is a significant issue but the topic was stunted in this group because there was a woman from the medical claims field with a unique outlook on Obamacare.