



# CULTURE | PULSE

## POLITICS AS IMAGINATION

By Prentiss Haney

When people took to the streets the night after George Floyd's death, it was a righteous public manifestation of our pain and anger. As the weeks and months wear on, each wave of the uprising against state-sanctioned violence becomes more intentional, coordinated, and movement-driven. But, that first night was spontaneous, an insurmountable reckoning indicting the soul of our nation. It was impossible to watch police officers take George Floyd's life, and to think about Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many before them whose lives were stolen from them, without crying out. Folks who look like me with skin like mine.

As the largest protests in our nation's history continue to unfold, I find myself thinking of 2018. As part of the [Ohio Student Association](#), I mobilized communities to pass a sentencing reform measure in Ohio, Issue 1, and I learned a crucial lesson even more relevant today: in politics, you see some things with your eyes, and you see some things with your imagination.

### What We Can See vs. What We Can Imagine

Your eyes can show you polling, coalitions, and advocates making their best cases in the public arena. All of that matters, but it isn't how most people see the world. Most people see politics with their imaginations and through the lens of culture and stories--if they can imagine a better world and a path to get there, they vote and canvass and stay engaged. If they can't imagine the world getting better, they stop showing up.

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As a community organizer and strategist, I shape the stories of everyday people into policy platforms and invite them into political vehicles to create belonging and wield power together through our collective votes. This work is vital, and it is impossible without the artists, the culture

makers, and the dreamers, the people who make public and visible the imaginations inside of people and create new realities that change worldviews. Without the visionaries, politics is incapable of challenging the status quo, and when young voters see that politics cannot deliver on change, they stay home.



That night after George Floyd's death, people were crying out because another life had been stolen by white supremacy, but also because those cops tried to kill the better future that we are trying to imagine into the world.

### Issue 1: A Case Study in How White Supremacy Limits Our Imagination

That's what had me thinking back to 2018. We saw clearly everything that stood against love and progress was rooted white supremacy in 2018, too. Early on, the Issue 1 sentencing reform measure enjoyed wide bi-partisan support. Prior to the measure becoming public, even now-Governor Mike DeWine was a strong proponent of the policies. It was expected to pass with a wide margin; polls showed it up 60% at two months out from the election. But DeWine saw an opportunity to use Issue 1 to win votes by stirring up voters' latent racial fear.

Negating the prior support he gave to the policies, DeWine based a large portion of his election campaign ads around the accusation that his Democratic contender, Richard Cordray, wanted to put criminals back on the streets through Cordray's endorsement of Issue 1. DeWine's ads featured no fewer than 20 white sheriffs telling Ohioans that they should be afraid of electing Cordray.



This ad was a case study in dog whistle, fear-based politics. We knew opponents would use these kinds of tactics. Yet, what illustrated a stifled imagination and a pandering to fear-based

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politics most surprisingly in Ohio was the progressive response. Rather than helping voters envision a world in which we build up and heal our communities, some progressives behind Issue 1 released a counter-ad featuring yet another white sheriff telling Ohioans not to be afraid. It was a short-term gambit, an attempt to win while staying within the world that white supremacists have imagined. We chose to see the hold that white supremacy has on voters, but we refused to imagine a strategy that would move us beyond it. Unsurprisingly, Issue 1 failed.

And yet, while the overall effort failed, one strategy did achieve its aim: using culture to help young voters imagine a better world. The [Midwest Culture Lab \(MCL\)](#) created a cultural campaign, including a digital video, [A World Without Cages](#), inviting young people to dream about what can replace mass incarceration in our communities.

The response to the campaign was overwhelming. An opinion test showed that the message was both highly persuasive and highly mobilizing, with Black voters having the strongest positive reaction, but with unexpected resonance in other demographics including rural voters. More importantly, the videos worked, and young people turned out. Our get out the vote effort and cultural campaign contributed -- along with several other grassroots and political organizing tactics -- to an overall increase in Ohio's youth turnout from 11.6% in the last midterm election in 2014 to 24% in 2018.

At MCL, we know the power of the stories that young Black people create. We've collected thousands of them through our



platform, and they combine into a narrative of breaking-free of isolation, of hungering for a community, into something to believe in. That desire for a community, for a positive vision of a better world, can be a powerful mobilizing force, but only if we elevate those stories and connect them to political vehicles.

### What It Means for 2020 and Beyond

The 2020 elections present a powerful opportunity for ensuring that the outcry sparked by George Floyd's death has a lasting positive impact on our world. If the folks marching today vote in November, a transformation is possible. But it isn't a given that they will, unless we remember the lessons of Issue 1.

We will be facing strong headwinds in 2020. Voter suppression is alive and well in America, it is targeted squarely at young people and communities of color, and we must continue to fight back against it. But just as relevant for young Black voters is voter depression, the feeling that politics is a rigged game, that we're constantly choosing between one of two politicians who don't represent us, that it isn't even worth dreaming of a better reality than this one because we'll never have the power to make it real, that we are taken for granted by our supposed allies because the alternative is unthinkable.



Just as 2016 was, 2020 will be won or lost at the margins, and the path to change runs through the Midwest. If young Black voters show up, they can change the course of history. While it is easy to look to the streets today and believe that they will, translating this energy into political power requires a healthy dose of imagination.

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Despite the fact that artists and culture makers are younger, more diverse, more committed to social justice, and more empathetic than the population as a whole, the social justice movement continues to underinvest in culture and imagination. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 28% of young people overall reported finding out about the 2018 election only through social media. If we can fill that space with the work of creative young people who can breathe life, hope, and representation into our political and civic campaigns, we can win.

Right now is the moment to invest in the work of young Black artists, to give them the tools and resources they need to create an inspiring vision of the future that will bring their peers to the polls. Right now is the moment to stand up creative venues and platforms that young Black activists can use to shape our collective sense of what's possible. Right now is the moment to support young Black filmmakers who are creating web videos that not only connect Blackdeath to the systems and structures that hold us back, but also invite us to imagine the systems and structures of liberation that could replace them.

Right now is the moment. If we wake up on November 4th and realize that we offered young Black voters a choice between outright white supremacy and watered down white supremacy again, rather than an opportunity to imagine and create a better future, inspiring their peers to show up at the polls for that future, it will be too late.