



# **HARNESSING THE POWER OF JOY FOR OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURE.**

BY PAOLA MENDOZA



**JOY TO THE POLLS** was a decentralized cultural intervention created by a group of women artists and organizers in response to the uncertain voting conditions of the 2020 presidential election. Led by a small but mighty team that included Nelini Stamp, Ginny Suss, Meredith Shepard, Sarah Sophie Flicker and myself, we set about to leverage art, music, and joy in our struggle against voter suppression.

We centered joy because we believe that in collective joy there is power, protection, possibility and renewal. If the last four years have taught us anything, it is that we need all of these elements to win and thrive. We were thrilled by the success of Joy to the Polls as it cemented our theory that joy can serve to organize communities, as well as infuse celebration into everyone's right to vote.

There are many lessons we learned through Joy To The Polls. I brought these incredible women together, who I have had the honor to work with for many years, to discuss our personal revelations, blind spots and the future of joy and organizing. For every artist, activist and organizer, I hope our candid conversation can answer questions, clarify doubt and expand the understanding of joy as you fight to make the world more equitable and just.

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# What was Joy To The Polls?

**GINNY SUSS**, Executive Producer: Joy the Polls, first and foremost, was a very simple idea for de-escalation. We were worried about tensions at the polls and we wondered what could we do to make people willing to stay in long lines at their polling locations, and how could we make people feel safe while they waited? How could we make them feel excited and energized about voting? We decided music would be the vehicle. We brought musicians to polling places all around the country. We were in 10 different states. We were in hundreds of counties at hundreds of polling sites. Our music set-ups were mobile. There were musicians roaming around on trucks, doing pop-up performances at various polling sites.

Think of Joy to the Polls as a kind of performance art piece. This is the kind of world we want to live in. A world where voting is a celebration, where we're dancing and singing to the polls, where it's easy for everyone to vote. A world where voting is a National Holiday that allows people off work to vote.

**NELINI STAMP**, Director of Partnerships and Strategy at Working Family Party: I was on a plane and I saw on the news that Bad Bunny was doing a roving concert. I was like "Whaaaattt!" This was the inspiration for Joy to the Polls. Bad Bunny went around performing in Harlem and all over New York City, and I was like, "Wait! What if we did this around polling locations across the country!" Whenever I have a crazy idea, I call Paola, Sarah Sophie and Ginny. This was how one the biggest artist activations was created and launched around civic engagement.



## Why was joy at the center of our campaign?

**NELINI**: The question is what do you do when faced with so much violence [threats at the polls, the raging pandemic] and insecurity? A lot of people get angry. I have gotten angry and I think that is a valuable emotion. A lot of people get hopeless, but we couldn't have that happen this time around. So, we responded in a creative way with joy as the driving force because it is what has uplifted us as individuals and as a collective.

**GINNY**: One of the main tactics authoritarian regimes use when they come into power is to try to gaslight people into feeling that they don't have control over their own joy or their own hope. And if you look at resistance movements around the world, a similarity among all of them is holding on to hope and not allowing the powers that are trying to strip them of all their humanity take that from them. And I think it's the same thing with joy, to sort of say loudly and unapologetically to the world, I'm going to proclaim my joy. I'm standing in my own joy and you can't have it. You cannot control it.

**MEREDITH SHEPHERD**, Director of Creative Strategy: We provided a space for people to feel joy around the voting process. Joy to the Polls and the messaging around it was designed to allow people to define what joy meant to them. There was freedom in the joy people felt.

**SARAH SOPHIE FLICKER**, Director of Creative Strategy: Joy to the Polls sprung out of our conversations about how critical it was to find a way to make voting joyful, especially in light of the pandemic, in light of the last four years, when so many people were feeling exhausted and just really beleaguered by all the events that had taken place. We knew we had to find creative ways to do it because of Covid.

# Why was Joy To The Polls so successful?

**SARAH SOPHIE:** Inherent in Joy to the Polls is the acknowledgment that it shouldn't have to exist.

This campaign shouldn't have to exist because voting should be a right everyone has. But that is not the case in our country today or ever. Keeping that in mind, we decided to infuse life and joy into the election because we believed it was the best tactic for safety, equity and expanding the right to vote. I think our strategies around elections have gotten really tired. I think we've all become exhausted with this idea that in order to influence an election or inspire people to vote, you have to have celebrities making these sort of canned appeals asking people to vote. We decided to try something new.

**MEREDITH:** Exercising your voice and creating moments of celebration at the polls was one of our goals. I think the secret sauce was the unexpected shift to exercising your vote as something to celebrate and party around and enjoy.



## What elements can be replicated in order to make other campaigns successful?

**MEREDITH:** I think the idea that it was local artists and performers showing up in their communities made a huge impact. The use of local talent, people on the ground knowing the population, knowing the geography, knowing the nuances, made all the difference in order to have a successful campaign. It was local people who knew what needed to get done as opposed to having decisions coming down from a national perspective. Ultimately, our choices were connected to what was happening on the ground. I also think the fact that we worked across battle-ground states and not just the big cities, but the smaller counties, made it hugely successful.

Lastly, partnerships with an organization on the front-line are critical. We worked with the Election Defenders. You know, the intent of the Election Defenders was to de-escalate tensions if they were to arise at polling stations. Joy to the Polls was one of the many tactics used by the Election Defenders. And there were moments where we (Joy to the Polls) pivoted based on requests from Election Defenders. I think that the overarching role and goal of de-escalating happened across the board at various moments and in various places. We did this successfully through the seamless integration with the Election Defenders.

I also think it's important to note that for the most part, Joy to the Polls was almost exclusively conceived, organized and run by women.

**GINNY:** I think a lesson I learned is that great art is always more valuable than celebrity cachet. It doesn't mean you can't have both. Many times, you'll have a huge celebrity who's also enormously talented and you get it all. When this happens it's great. But in general, people tend to be so excited about a celebrity presence and less excited about incredible local musicians. We found that incredible local musicians were just as successful, if not more successful, at engaging the community and getting people excited at achieving all our goals as were the giant celebrities. When you support great local artists, magic can happen between people in the community.

**SARAH SOPHIE:** I think that when you bring beauty and poetry and light and humanity in the face of total ugliness and hatred, it makes an even bigger mockery out of that ugliness and hatred and I think that's really powerful and that's something that we've seen again and again and again over the last four years.

## What elements of Joy To The Polls were unique and innovative?

**SARAH SOPHIE:** Certainly infusing beauty and art into everything is sort of daring. It's something that's easy for people to laugh at. I do think that Joy to the Polls finally cemented in me that this work is important and powerful, and in fact we cannot win without it. And by winning I don't mean an election, but I mean like humanity can't win without it. If there's anything we've collectively learned over the last four years, it's that nobody was meant to just fight.

**MEREDITH:** To me, the key, especially in cultural organizing like this, is decentralization. Joy to the Polls was very decentralized. We allowed people to own Joy to the Polls in their own communities. We created the idea, the concept, the branding, but anyone could fit under the umbrella of Joy to the Polls. We didn't try to control those who wanted to be under the umbrella. We had a basic toolkit that said this is what it means to be part of Joy to the Polls and go forth and do anything that you want with this foundation. I think being decentralized and providing support, when it's needed, is key. It's kind of a reverse hub and spoke. If you need anything, here is the hub for questions, support, and resources for whatever you need.



# What do you believe the role of the artist in organizing is?

**GINNY:** I think the role of the artist is to connect the dots between the more theoretical policy ideas and the meaningful emotional connection with the people. I think there's often a divide between an article, someone's dissertation, a policy think tank or how our society gets organized politically and what actual people on the street are feeling and thinking. And I think the artist's job is to be a bridge between those two things.

I think artists are so innovative in the way they relate narratives, and it's often the artists who are the ones conveying narratives and conveying stories that shape how we live in a way that connects with us and really resonates on a more personal level.

**SARAH SOPHIE:** Policy is so often downstream from culture, and that's something that often times goes unrecognized. In organizing, so much of what you're doing is gathering like-minded people. So much of the work is trying to convince people or sell an idea to people that they might not immediately agree with because it feels different or scary or too big or too hard. And the thing that art is unique in its ability to do, in a softer and more poetic way, is wrap people's minds around a future that could exist – if they were willing to dream big and imagine big and sort of get outside the box of what we are told is possible. I think artists have a unique ability to inspire that sort of wild and imaginative future.

**NELINI:** We artists need to use our power, our voices and our art to actually say what is going on. We need to unveil our stories in ways that people on the hill, people in D.C. or in state legislature can't. We need to use our powers of creativity to communicate to people the way only artists can.

Another important question to ask is, what is the role of government support for artists right now? How can the government support the creation of art in order to make sure our artists are able to live, thrive and create? We've seen this mutual support in the past. The New Deal supported artists with the Federal Theater Project, The Federal Writers Project and the Federal Art Project. Some of our best artists came out of that time and I believe the same can happen now.





There is still so much uncertainty in our country's future. The one thing we know for sure is the fight towards a more equitable and just country will continue. As we enter the next four years under the Biden administration, we must ask ourselves how must the power of joy evolve to serve tomorrow's needs? How can we harness this power to ensure the safety of the most marginalized, as well as ensure their voices are uplifted and their needs are met? And finally, the question I wrestle with daily, how are artists uniquely situated to this moment in time to move us forward in our quest toward justice?

Our efforts with Joy to the Polls were always focused on the ways others could take what we created and replicate it in their own communities. I encourage all artists and cultural organizers to organize how it best suits your community. If organizing around joy makes sense for you, please take the below recommendations as building blocks for your campaign, march, or rally.

- Use the power of Joy: it is truly the antidote to fear and hatred.
- Engage with local artists to inspire that joy.
- Create deep partnerships with organizations/campaigns on the front-lines.
- Focus your time on quality, inspirational artistry— don't worry about celebrity cachet.
- Hand over ownership to the community and serve as a support in their expressions of joy.

***The great artist and activist Paul Robeson once said, “Artists are the gatekeepers of truth. We are civilization’s radical voice.”***

***May every artist strive to live up to Paul Robeson’s words.***

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