



Interview with Katie Fahey (The People)

Jessica Kantor

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Jessica Kantor: Can you please introduce yourself, the organization that you are running, and then the problem that you're solving for and how you're addressing it?

Katie Fahey: I am Katie. I am out of Michigan, and I'm the Executive Director of an organization called The People. We're focused on addressing our democracy in America and how to make it be more accountable and responsive to the people of our country.

We try to help people come together, everyday citizens come together, identify common ground and what shared problem they have, and identify what the root solution could be related to democracy. And then, we help them try to implement that solution, whether that's through a ballot initiative process, or working with the legislature, or some other kind of public interest campaign that can hopefully help drive change to get that accountability and responsiveness from our government.

Jessica Kantor: Do you have specific communities that you're working with, or specific audiences that you're working with? And how are you engaging with them specifically? Is it in person? Is it all digital?

Katie Fahey: We have volunteers in all 50 states and really, we're here to help everyday citizens. I would say, the folks we don't help are folks already in the political system. We are helping the folks who are trying to figure out how to navigate the political system do that more effectively. We do that in person and digitally by assisting where they need it.

We help folks with either doing bridge-building, which includes holding a community meeting and having people talk about what issues are bothering them, or trying to look at understanding how implementing different types of voting reform impacts their community. What would that look like? Or build a plan and learn about the political system and the levers of change within it. What are the laws that they can change, or what are the processes they can use to change those laws in order to get more accountability out of that system? That looks really different, too, depending on how much help they may need.



We also help facilitate and bring folks together across the country. We do citizen assemblies, identifying issues that then can lead to laws that can be changed. Just helping be a connector for people who are raising their hand and saying, "I know I want to do something, but I'm not quite sure what."

We help with the citizen-led ballot initiative process. We are helping host a coalition to strengthen, defend, and expand that process.

Jessica Kantor: How are you tracking things, and what are some of the metrics of success that you guys are measuring?

Katie Fahey: We track all kinds of things. We have a tracker in general of what reforms have happened in what states in the country. And then, how does that impact voting? Who's turning out? What's their confidence in elections? Looking at whether legislatures are being responsive to voters. Meaning, they're creating laws that the majority of people in their state want to have happen. They're creating laws that are reflective of the people in that state, and that they have opinions from the people in that state. That's on a macro scale, what we look at and what we track to figure out where we can be helpful.

And then, internally, we're tracking how many people are participating in a certain state. Who are the people that we have reached, or who have been part of our process? A big part of our process is bringing people together, listening to them, having them learn about the process, and then having them change the system. Throughout that, we want to make sure it's reflective. So, we'll look at the demographics of the state - who we have reached and who we haven't. We look at who traditionally has been left out of the decision-making process. Can we bring those folks to the table? Were we successful in that or not?

We also look at if we were successful in passing laws, or were we not successful in passing those laws? And then, what could we learn from those practices? We also do a bunch of civic education work. We have a big program called Deliberations.US, where we bring classrooms together and they'll talk about a good governance topic, like the Electoral College. The goal of that is to increase their understanding and willingness to talk to people that are different from them. And also see if they are more inspired to want to make change, or feel more confident in participating in the electoral process related to whatever that issue is. Anyways, going back to your other question. So many different chunks of work.

Jessica Kantor: What's the evidence that you're making progress based on the success metrics that you already mentioned? Can you also share an example that illustrates that impact?



Katie Fahey: I think the easiest example is the one that we got started with, but I can also add a couple others if helpful. In Michigan, we wanted to end partisan gerrymandering, so we went across the state and we tracked who we talked to. We were able to see that we had a representative group of people in what this new law should look like. And then, we also looked at where we were talking to people. Because this would be impacting district lines, we went to all of the congressional districts in Michigan at least twice, and we held meetings. That was really to try and make sure we were getting input from the people of the state.

They gave us their feedback, and then we went to go gather signatures, which is another step to qualify for the ballot. It's one of the processes you have to follow in order to change this law. One of the indicators we got is very rapidly, under 100 days, we had gotten signatures from people in all 83 of Michigan's counties, which we had seen before was hardly ever done during this process. Usually, they're just from the largest cities, which are only in a couple counties. We were able to see, "wow, our geographic reach is across the whole state," as well as seeing that from our donors as well, the individuals who are giving money to this process.

So then it came to needing to vote while being changed, and we got over 2.5 million people to vote yes, which was super exciting. It was over 61% of the state. But we broke that down too and looked at the counties that had passed it. We have 83 counties in the state, and 66 of them, over 50%, voted for our proposal. If you looked at the governor, who also won with a majority, over 50%, the governor only won 17 of those counties, over 50%. It showed that our political organizing was really different from the status quo, and how normal purely partisan organizing happens.

Once that law was passed, it got implemented. The whole point was to try and make elections more representative and accountable. The first elections that that law was held in was the 2022 election. Our solution was to be nonpartisan. It was to be representative of the voters, but over 50% of the total number of voters who had turned out had voted for Democrats. Yet, the Republicans ended up having a majority in both our state house and senate because they were gerrymandered. There's a lot of gridlock and laws that were not being passed because our governor was a Democrat. So a split government control.

In 2022, we saw a little over half of the state voted for Democrats, and then the rest of it for Republicans. And our state legislature was actually an exact match for that. The Democrats had a very slim, one or two person majority, and had gotten power back for the first time in 40 years, even though there consistently should have been more of the power structure because Michigan is very purple. So then you actually could see that the legislature actually reflected the will of the people.



Furthermore, we then started seeing all of these laws that had had bipartisan support for years, but had been stuck because the political system really relied on overly partisan primaries. Meaning that, you would not get re-elected if you worked with somebody from the other party. Democrats, if they worked with Republicans, often experienced attack ads to say that they shouldn't be elected and vice versa.

All of these laws that have been talked about for 40 years around just really common sense, like “you need a law saying you should lock up your gun in your house, or that LGBTQIA people shouldn't be able to be fired for their sexual orientation” and stuff like that, sometimes, these are looked at as if they aren't bipartisan. But in Michigan, they really are. They finally passed, and those laws have now been implemented. There's a lot of them. Those are just two examples I used.

[This is a] long way of saying, in the beginning we had hoped that would be the result. But this is our first time actually being able to see, “okay, bypassing this law.” Now, seeing this law in action, seeing it in its first election cycle, our outcomes we were hoping for, responsiveness and accountability to voters, laws being passed are lined up with what they actually want, that has happened. The legislature, again is more representative, more matching of how the people actually voted. That's a longer term example.

Jessica Kantor: That's a really helpful example. What do you think makes your approach distinctive? And do you think that it's that distinctive approach that has made you successful? Or is it something else?

Katie Fahey: I think how we're different is we really try to center approximate leadership. What I mean by that is, the people who are being impacted the most by our broken government are at the center of driving change, and the ones that we're helping organize to be the leaders of wanting to drive these changes. Traditionally, it has been more nonprofits that think it's a really good idea. Good governance, nonprofits or individual people who have enough money to do the ballot initiative process, or sometimes businesses, that then decide what the answer is for all of the political consultants to make these changes happen.

Traditionally, if you do have “everyday people” involved in the process, it's maybe to gather some signatures, but it's often not in the leadership. They're not helping write constitutional language. A lot of the reasons why we've heard they aren't is because they aren't constitutional experts, which okay, that on its face makes some sense. But you can have constitutional experts and everyday people at the table together making more informed, better policies. That is what we've seen.



In the example I just gave from Michigan, that piece of legislation, there have been multiple states who have passed redistricting reform. But so far, this one has stood the test of multiple lawsuits being brought against it, and the result led to what it was supposed to. The reason it was written that way is because we went across the state and we listened to people, and we had them actually build it themselves from scratch. They understood what it meant to implement it. Because with that example, you needed people to actually show up and want to be on this commission, and give public testimony for thousands of people to stay engaged.

Again, if you just come in and you're trying to buy it, yet it's a change to the political system that everyday citizens pay more attention to, we have found that it doesn't work as well. In places like Michigan, it works and it has sustained success from that. It also leads to those citizens wanting to get more involved, either by continuing their volunteerism, or deciding to run for local office, or deciding to vote when they previously weren't a consistent voter. Those are all metrics we've also tracked by being a part of this political process. I think that it is a distinct approach, and I think it's more successful because it's helping bring more people into knowing what the solutions are to fixing our democracy.

Jessica Kantor: Since you got your start in Michigan, and it's been very successful in Michigan, because you mentioned at the beginning that you have boots-on-the-ground representatives in all 50 states, do you have as large of a model in all 50 states? And if so, when did you start branching out from Michigan to go national?

Katie Fahey: Great question. The very beginning of 2019 is basically when we officially branched out, although we had been getting requests from people all the way through that. When we were getting those requests, I felt like, "well, we haven't been successful yet, so I don't want to provide advice if it's bad." Then, we decided, "okay, we'll provide advice". How it looks now is sometimes, there'll be a really established group. There'll be several hundred people who are trying to pass a law in their state, and so they don't need us to provide people. They just need our advice or our tools that we've helped create and make available, or they need us to be a facilitator. We might just be there in a limited capacity, even though we're helping impact thousands of people. Or then ultimately, millions once that law gets changed.

And then, there are times like in New Hampshire right now, we're doing a citizen assembly there. It's very similar to Michigan. We're really in control of it. It's our volunteers. We're the ones who are leading it fully, and we're not doing that assistant role. Because we do both roles of assisting and then being the full, on-the-ground folks. We do more of the assisting, I would say. More people heard about our story or heard about our organization and then want help in figuring it out. Often, I have found, going back to your last question, if they aren't already going to be successful, if it doesn't look like it's a 70% chance they're going to be successful, there's just not a lot of



institutional support. Funders don't want to go there because they don't have a guaranteed success. Other organizations don't necessarily want to because they just assume, "Oh, you don't know what you're doing."

But that's part of the problem, you have a lot of people who haven't been a part of the political system, but have the will. They have the incentive because they're living with problems, but we aren't taught how laws [work]. That's where we can usually find a sweet spot in being able to help them where they have low experience.

Jessica Kantor: That's so interesting. Because you do hear that a lot, especially from funders, that they basically want a guarantee. But then, it just completely removes the fact that things take time, and they take work. Sometimes you need to try different things and formulas in order to figure out what works. If you just are completely bypassing a certain area because it's not a guaranteed success, then that almost makes zero sense, because you're not going to have any impact.

Katie Fahey: Exactly. You have less people trying to be successful then, too. Because again, the school education system doesn't teach you how to do this in the ballot initiative process. You're already a political consultant if you know that. The people paying for those, again, are often special interests in whatever interest that is, and that's not necessarily bad. But it makes sense that everyday citizens wouldn't know how to necessarily create a successful campaign from scratch, because it has nothing to do with their day job.

Jessica Kantor: What are some insights or teachable lessons from your work? Things that we haven't already touched on that you think are important to share for people who are just wanting to learn from what you've done or maybe even replicate it?

Katie Fahey: It's okay that there's a healthy tension sometimes between institutional organizations who've been helping drive change in a place for a long time and new movements or new individuals who are interested, that maybe happens from a catalyst. Perhaps something really unfortunate happens in your community. There's a big wave of people who care and they're deciding, "okay, I can't just keep going about my day job. I've got to get involved." There's a tension there, and you can handle it one of two ways.

You can just resist and say, "Nope, we're just going to keep doing things the same way." Or you can hopefully find a way where you can use that energy and be open to a new moment for change. I think what we've really learned is that when you can try and be more open, you can actually accelerate success. But you need to be willing to actually let these new people into the decision-making process. It has to be an open, transparent process that people can build trust in, and that they can have real ownership over as well. Otherwise, it's just going to remain tense, and



folks are going to get frustrated. If you can navigate that, I think you'll hopefully see that you can be more successful than you were without those people who are showing up for the first time. I think that's one.

Being open to doing things differently than how they've always been done is okay and actually should be encouraged. Sometimes you don't have enough money for a poll, and a poll often helps you understand your viability or how things will resonate with people. Or it gives you insight on language that you should use when talking about something. But you can also just go and talk to people, and hold community meetings and invite their opinion. It might not have the same methodology, but often it can provide even richer or the same insights at a much more affordable rate.

Being unafraid of finding a healthy balance between your metrics and your scientific rigor, but also practicality and innovation, and also letting people customize things to their own community. That's another big one. I think approximate leadership really requires a flexible leadership structure. You are giving trust to folks locally to make real decisions and understand how they can design for their community, while helping make sure that they're being inclusive and thinking about how do you really reach all members of a community?

But I've also learned that if you're trying to apply a cookie-cutter strategy for political organizing and getting buy-in, it just often isn't going to work as well as being able to actually let people say that the tractor pool contest is going to be more effective than standing outside of the Secretary of State's office for gatherings.

Jessica Kantor: Are there any lessons that you learned along the way that you didn't already speak about, that came from basically failure? You tried something, it very clearly did not work and now you know?

Katie Fahey: Yes, I'm sure there are. Even if you know an idea is popular and that folks really want to address an issue, you still need actual time to do relationship-building, both with coalition partners and individuals on the ground. At times, we'll get really limited funding that only gives us capacity to be in a place for a couple months. Every time we try to just bypass that step and get to the work, and get to try and do whatever the project is, it just never works as effectively. You might still get people who turn out. You might still have some partners that can get excited about it, but I think people are really hungry for wanting that longevity.

[Additionally with local leadership], we really are all about the people who live there being in charge of the process and owning the changes they're going to make in the state or their city. There's one best practice that I have really learned. You have to give people the vision of where you're going. They have to understand what the steps are. If I'm going to show up and volunteer, what does that



lead to? How is this leading to change? There was a disagreement at the local level about that. They didn't want to talk about that. They just wanted to focus purely on relationship-building.

We had some good conversations, but the volunteers, the people who were showing up, kept telling us, "I don't just want to sit around and talk. It's time for action. If I'm going to choose to do this over anything else I can be doing, spending time with my kids, watching Netflix, going and volunteering somewhere else, I want to know that it's going to be worth my time." In the meetings where we did spell out that vision of "by showing up here, here's what this will lead to", and reminding people even if it was a long process and it's going to take us a couple of years, that was much more effective than to shortcut that, or try and be less bold, I guess.

Because sometimes, it can feel scary. I think that's another thing the folks on the ground were trying to say, "We're a little scared to say that this is really our plan and our vision." But I think you've got to be unafraid too, because people need to know what they're signing up to do. How does step A plus B equal this solution?

Jessica Kantor: You are working for systems level change in general, it sounds like, in 50 states. Are you eventually going to go larger and potentially go national, federal with your work?

Katie Fahey: Hopefully, yes. Our volunteers do some projects that span nationally. They aren't trying to do anything necessarily through Congress, but we'll have a campaign that is national, that then people try to enact in their states. I think our hope is that making changes at the state level will lead to congressional change in a more responsive and reflective congressional piece. But we'd really love the partners who are already doing that work, because I think there's a better way to leverage citizens whose representatives aren't representing their interest in Washington. We're trying to do that.

And then, some of our civics education work is talking about issues, like the Electoral College, at the national level. It's not necessarily lobbying or something, but it is addressing those types of issues, and trying to help more people understand them.

Jessica Kantor: What do you think is most needed from either your partners or just other people, other actors in the space, in order to not only see continued success, but to even see scale and growth?

Katie Fahey: I know we already hit on this, but I definitely think we need more investment in innovation and the front end of the pipeline for reform changes to the political system. And what I mean by that is, you've got to help more people understand they can try to change the system, so



that we get enough people trying that, there are more successes. And then, helping really support them throughout that process.

I also think folks just need to get more honest about whether they have a political agenda or not. A lot of folks try to say they're nonpartisan, or I think try and stay in the 501(c)(3) space when they just aren't actually doing that. It leads to breakdown in trust from the volunteers and people who are trying to figure out where they can spend their really valuable time or money. They keep seeing, "okay, these groups say that they're nonpartisan, and even if I voted for candidate A or candidate B, I should be able to participate." And then, they show up and that isn't the real experience. I think if we don't start changing that sooner, you're going to segment the American population into thinking that democracy is only for one type of voter when really, it's for all voters.

Jessica Kantor: How do you see the work that you all are doing evolving over the next five years?

Katie Fahey: We've been working in New Hampshire for the last couple of years, and we finally got enough resources to be able to help support our volunteers in a major way, which is really exciting. We're doing a version of a citizen assembly that, I think, is more for American democracy, or more realistic for American democracy than some of the ones you see in other countries. We're really hoping that can be used as a model in other states when folks are trying to identify the systemic ways they would like to improve government. And then, we would make sure that there's actual buy-in from the citizens and the legislature. We would really love to see us have success later this year in doing that, and then be able to be applied and used as a model in other states, or with partners who want to see where that goes.

I think we're really actively working, too, on how to bring to scale deliberations on civics. Being able to talk about these kinds of issues, or even just social issues in general. I guess it doesn't have to be civics. Right now, basically it's hard to get people to actually show up to these and feel like it's worthwhile. Our Deliberations project is really focused on that, and starting with schools, students who are a captive audience and who are in an environment where they might not on their own be wanting to go and talk to strangers about how to perform campaign finance. But hopefully, by having positive interactions with that, [we'd be able to grow it]. [We are also finding] other ways that we can make it more accessible, including at the local decision-making level.

How could a city council meeting use deliberation in a way of bringing people together to hear about an issue and thoughtfully talk about it, versus just the three-minute speaking gaps that we have right now? Our hope in the next five years is to get a couple successes at that local level, to also then become models for them wanting to adapt this. And then working on the technology



and the way that people can have these deliberations thoughtfully and with good information at scale.

Jessica Kantor: Are there any challenges that you all haven't quite figured out yet that you're hoping to solve in the next five years? Aside from funding, I will say.

Katie Fahey: I think finding funding for actual nonpartisanship is definitely a piece of that. Probably the biggest piece, too. I'm sure that's why everybody says it. Because there is never enough, huh? We would really love for some of our programs to get sustainable funding. I was going to say we get a lot of one shot, but we'd love for it to become more. I think one of the other things we're trying to do is to hopefully get more media coverage in general for what we're trying to do and how we're trying to do it. Getting a bigger base of national reporters who can see the value in it and not just talk about it in a partisan lens. It doesn't have to be nonpartisan, but just in a way that [isn't red vs. blue]. They can make it about actual voters who are participating. Because sometimes they try to just make it simpler, and try and act like this just benefits Democrats or Republicans, like the gerrymandering in Michigan. But it's like, no, actually this is fixing the system for all voters. I think that would be really good in just helping highlight more of the systemic reasons why our political system isn't responsive and accountable to voters. Instead of just reporting on how this election turned out. If we could get more coverage locally in the places we're working, and then nationally, I think that would be huge for us in the next five years. We're having some success, but definitely could use more.

We have volunteers in all 50 states, and we have a lot of great partners, too. But I think being a smaller organization and being able to be as responsive as we need to, to the folks that we have showing up and so that they can work on something locally or nationally, just that capacity, we're still perfecting, I would say. We haven't mastered it yet.

Jessica Kantor: For the sake of this conversation of people being able to learn from what you've done, is there anything that we didn't talk about that you think is really important to add?

Katie Fahey: Best practices would be to go to the place with the highest populations, as that's where you get the most engagement. But we have really found that by taking the time to go to more rural places, or places where there hasn't traditionally been as much political involvement, communities that don't always show up for voting, that by taking the time to actually go there and extend the invitation for folks, we've seen a great response to that.

It doesn't take a lot of money to do, but in order to do it well, you have to have a process that is going to allow them to have local ownership in some way over what you're asking them to do. And in a way that is guaranteeing or showing how their feedback and they're showing up is going to



help with the wider issue that you're working on. Again, it might be a smaller population in the state. It doesn't mean that their opinion gets to ride over or be the majority of everybody's, but it still is being used in the same way that it is for folks in a more populated place. We've seen really good results from that.

I also think that often, with trying to help a coalition of organizations, we are seeing that everybody's stretched so thin that they're unfortunately constantly having to be reactive. One of the places where we've been able to really help is by coming in as a facilitator that has no stakes in the game. We're just there to facilitate and help organizations be able to show up and make a plan for the future. We help facilitate the creation of that plan. That's a really needed and desired resource that folks are really excited to have. Because they don't often have the capacity in their own organization to then do that for a group outside of just themselves. I definitely think if it was appropriate for anybody's organization to play that role, that you might be surprised by how many people want to take you up on that offer.

I just remembered, I don't know that this is relevant as much, but we did do a pretty large project for the 2022 election. We did a series of videos on general education on voting. What does it look like? What is a voting machine and how does that work? But in a more conversational tone so people can imagine. Like, TikTok. That's what we did. We were able to put some advertising dollars behind it. Basically, we're trying to say, how do we make civic engagement look different, and maybe come out of the mouths of influencers, or people who don't normally talk about politics? Just try and make it more relational and use language that is more conversational.

We ended up finding that people were really hungry for those videos. Once they found one, they wanted to go and see all of them. They were really simple. Even just like, "what can I wear to the polls?" Because you can't wear candidate stuff. Making those kinds of videos available and putting them out there, we saw that there's an appetite for basically civics 101. How does this stuff work? We found that in several states across the country, in Arizona and in Michigan and New Hampshire.

Jessica Kantor: I actually have a question that is more just my curiosity. Because obviously, TikTok and social media in general are the number one places for misinformation and disinformation, especially about the United States election. With the upcoming 2024 election, do you all have any plans in place to combat a lot of that disinformation? And on those videos that you shared, did you notice that there were a lot of negative comments, or just negative interaction in general? Or were the views mostly positive?



Katie Fahey: A big part of 2022 was basically our pilot to try and learn as much as we could for 2024. We still need to secure funding for doing that. But our whole goal, we actually targeted the demographics in those states who are most likely to be influenced by misinformation and/or most likely to be drawn to violence around the election. We reached other people, too, but that was where we overly focused.

There were still comments, people talking about who they wanted to vote for or whatever, but what was interesting was that there wasn't a lot of misinformation comments. Because we were providing factual and accurate information, there weren't a lot of comments debating whether it was true. The comments revolved more around specific candidates that people didn't like. Sometimes someone commented that they didn't know about a fact, but a lot of the comments were positive. We didn't have a lot of people trying to redirect people from our videos.

Jessica Kantor: So, for 2024, is that a part of your boots-on-the ground efforts or digital efforts? Monitoring for misinformation about the election and talking to people about it? Or is it just a case by case thing?

Katie Fahey: This is what we have done in the interim, because we know how hard it is to get funding, so we already made these plans when we were in 2022. We've tried a crowdsourced model, which will be a test, to be honest. We've had success. In Michigan, we basically crowdsource everything. But still, I'm a little like, "Ah, we better not create a bigger problem." We've got a system where if folks want to help film a video in their community, we have a process of checking the information and helping them understand what aspects to highlight on the videos. We started with 17 videos last time. We at least have the outline for those 17. And then we're going to try and do, as we have capacity, additional topics that people want to do. So they can submit wanting to do a video for their community, and then we can help them with posting and best practices for filming it.

We also have another initiative called Peace at the Polls, which started in Arizona, but has spread from there. It's like a group of citizens on the ground who will either be election observers or volunteers within the election. They communicate and talk with local organizations, as well as us, nationally, about what they're seeing. We try to do some proactive strategies around that, too. We try to get a Democrat and a Republican to volunteer together, and then they'll do social media videos of themselves talking about their experience. And how even though they voted for different people, they had a positive experience with this person who is a Democrat, or who's a Republican. And then they'll write an OP-ed ideally. It's more grassrootsy. And if we got funding, it would be different. But that's the stuff we are for sure doing.

Jessica Kantor: Thank you so much for talking with us.



Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, The Las Vegas Review-Journal, and others. She is a living kidney donor.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*