

# Getting Ready & Staying Ready

Lessons from 2025-26 Scenario Exercises

October 2024

Space to imagine. Strategies for action.



# About Future Currents & Future Currents Action

Future Currents creates the spaces for movement organizations to build resilient relationships, tackle pressing challenges, prepare for possible conditions, and map our way to the future we deserve. We focus on the knotty, chronic, systemic, and often scary obstacles in our daily lives, including authoritarian threats to our democracy, the shifting economic paradigm, and the effort within movements to retool and reshape to meet changing conditions. Our mix of creative methods are key to sparking new understandings, analyses, and strategies that open up the potential for long-term change. In 2017, Future Currents began as the Social and Economic Justice Leaders Project (a 501c3 project of New Venture Fund), and Future Currents Action began as the Social and Economic Justice Leaders Fund (a 501c4 project of the 1630 Fund).

# Introduction

To help the field prepare for the possible conditions following the coming election, Future Currents designed and ran 2025-26 governing scenario exercises with over 800 staff and board members of about 300 grassroots power-building organizations, policy shops, national networks, and philanthropies.<sup>1</sup> The immersive scenarios offer plausible futures against which participants can test their preparedness for different conditions, develop a common touchpoint for their strategic alignment, practice responding to conditions outside our control *while* holding our focus on our affirmative priorities, and experience some emotional inoculation for the onslaught of developments so that we can take action more quickly during crisis and opportunity moments.

The scenario exercises presented one condition in which Joe Biden or Kamala Harris was elected with a divided Congress and another condition in which Donald Trump was elected with Republican control of both houses of Congress. In addition to “facts” that were dependent on the outcome of the 2024 federal elections, the scenarios included climate and economic conditions, a political violence landscape, and internal movement organization dynamics. The scenarios also zoomed in on conditions in at least one state while also offering headlines about developments in several states.

Participants recognized very different opportunities and threats in the two scenario conditions, but they also recognized that even in the more pro-democracy scenario, we continue to face a strengthening authoritarian threat. And across exercises, participants were clear that the work of strengthening our democracy and protecting our communities is critical. Regardless of election outcomes, our organizations must have a plan and be trained for the potential of violence, harassment, intimidation, and retribution targeting our communities, organizations, and leaders. At the same time, we must continue to foster hope, joy, resilience, and healing within our campaigns, organizations, and communities.

Though not exhaustive, this paper aims to share our participants’ wisdom regarding the preparations we need to get ready as well as strengths and capacities to amplify to stay ready. Throughout this document, we have used italics to indicate when we are quoting

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<sup>1</sup> This reflects exercises run from November 2023 through Sept. 20, 2024. We are continuing to run these exercises through October 2024. We have provided materials to organizations to be able to run the scenarios with additional staff members, board members, and member-leaders.

Organizations committed to democracy participated in a range of scenario planning processes — many more than in past years. As such, these numbers are but a small slice of the total number of organizations and formations preparing for the governing dynamics in 2025-26.

Future Currents strategists Lori-Ann Clementson, Sasha Rauch-Kelly, and Kendall Short led this process, with support from Claire Guzdar, Monisha Som, and Nicole Svajlenka.

exercise participants or from exercise summaries. This document is an invitation for you to find the most salient action items to undertake with your crew — whether that is a leadership team or an affinity group; an organization, network, or coalition; or some other grouping.

All of the recommendations are actionable today, though some are longer work than others. And like the times we're in, for most of us, they require shifts in how we *be* together as well as what we *do* together. For many of the suggestions here, there are resources available to the field; however, many of those resources are not public. We have included some resources (primarily web-based resources) but are by no means exhaustive. We hope that you will share resources with us and others in the field for this work.

# Priority Actions

## **Build Power**

### **Commit to a proactive agenda**

Articulate clear priorities and long-term power agendas

Clarify your purpose and organizational role

Boldly go

### **Train on power, power-mapping, and power-building**

### **Build the “bigger we”**

### **Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us**

## **Labor Together**

### **Deepen trust, coordination, and shared analysis with allies**

### **Level up on solidarity efforts**

### **Practice principled, curious conflict**

### **Build alignment in states and regions, across states, and nationally**

### **Build a united front**

## **Keep Safe**

### **Prepare**

Feel the feels early (emotional inoculation)

Learn from those with experience

Get ready for opportunities to leapfrog in certain places

### **Protect against attacks**

Make political violence backfire

Strengthen organizational crisis and security plans

Develop a collective action disposition to responding to attacks

### **Develop alternative structures**

Consider innovative structures

Distribute leadership

Explore mutual aid

### **Rethink strategies for when government becomes unpetitionable**

Examine the impulse to be public on all efforts

Combat the impulse to go silent

# Build Power

The problems that the scenario exercises presented were not only about the future conditions alone; they are really about the power with which we meet those conditions. It comes as no surprise that participants responded to both scenarios with the call to build power with a larger base and broader set of allies to take collective action and shift the balance of power. Harvard University political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks highlight this as a key strategy for organizing against autocracy: "Maximize community power-building, politically but also practically, at the local and state level, and empower local neighborhood and community groups to build alternative institutions for economic, social, and security-related mutual aid."<sup>2</sup>

## Commit to a proactive agenda

*"The scenario planning is a trick question. But it doesn't matter what the scenario is, we know the underlying themes, the agenda that the right is going to throw at us. We just did an intensive process to find our North Star .... We know what our agenda is."*

## Articulate clear priorities and long-term power agendas

Clear priorities and long-term power agendas resource strategies regardless of the scenario. One of the challenges of the scenarios — and significant pivot points in general — is how distracting all the new conditions can be. While our strategies and tactics may need to shift in the face of changing environments, our priorities and agenda guide our activity and attention.

## Clarify your purpose and organizational role

Similarly, clarifying your purpose, organizational roles, and staff responsibilities supports organizational stability, cross-organizational efforts, and effective communication and decision-making in moments of crisis and opportunity. In complex times like these, "front-end research and development, expertise, and command-and-control execution" fail to meet the moment. The common orientation around shared goals and clear roles

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<sup>2</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, "[Pro-Democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the US: A Strategic Assessment and Recommendations](#)," (2022), 25.

enables the nimbleness, dynamic sensemaking, and decentralized decision-making needed.<sup>3</sup>

## Boldly go

In different ways, participants pushed each other to think — not only proactively but boldly. In a federal election outcome with the most opportunity to drive a progressive agenda (one not contemplated in our exercises), participants questioned whether we would be ready with bold enough proposals — and the specificity to get them enacted. On the flip side, in the most hostile federal outcomes, participants from states with governing power identified an appetite at the state and local level to demonstrate resistance by making leap-frog gains — have we prepared for those possibilities?

## Train on power, power-mapping, and power-building

*"I feel like we are missing the bigger point of building power. We haven't done that real deep deep organizing — we are often just pulling from people (votes, etc.), it becomes like a fan club that we need to lean into instead of building power in the community itself."*

Participants in the scenarios reiterated what Future Currents has been hearing from organizers across the country:<sup>4</sup> We have a long way to go to attain the power we need, and we lack a clear understanding of how power works, where it resides, and how to build and leverage it to win more of it. The past decade saw a shift toward activism and away from organizing.

"[The Strengthening Organizing Project] found that virtually all our interviewees believe that organizing, most fundamentally, involves facilitating people to take action in collective struggle. Most also included the following elements:

- **Building a base** of people who are harmed by conditions of oppression or injustice.
- **Taking collective action** as the primary means through which ordinary people can exert leverage over those with the power to change oppressive conditions.
- **Developing leaders and leadership**, covering core organizing skills and practices as well as political education to support the base in understanding root causes of oppression and how to transform it.

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Carroll and Connie Razza, "[Dispatches from Possible Futures: Interim Report](#)" (June 2023), 13.

<sup>4</sup> See "[Fighting Shape: An Assessment of US Organizing – an interim report from the Strengthening Organizing Project of Future Currents](#)" (March 2024)

- **Shifting the balance of power** to those directly harmed by oppression and deprivation in a way that improves the material conditions in which they live.”<sup>5</sup>

Scenario participants articulated the need for training and training materials on power, power-mapping, power-building, and other organizing strategies for existing members and staff.

*“Organizations need to have the capacity to prioritize power-building and practice leveraging political power.”*

Participants also highlighted the need to grow to include a massive base of organized people everywhere. Organizations should consider finding ways to engage as many people as possible into their organizations and implement programs to educate, train, and politicize them. This includes both activists who show up for upsurge moments but are not organized and people who may have been part of democracy’s opposition before and who should be celebrated for doing the right thing now. In both cases, we need to find on-ramps to our organizing and to identifying with our values of shared power, shared resources, and care. And in both cases, we need to be real about whether our current organizations make sense as their political homes and to build (either directly or through our relationships with other organizations) with organizations that do make sense as the political homes for others.

When we take our power-building seriously and see it through to its goal, we see that we need to make shifts in our standard workflows to accommodate a more robust and intentional co-governance approach to our work that allows for big vision to be actualized from our electoral work. In particular, we heard over and over versions of “we’re not voting for our heroes; we’re voting for more favorable terrain to win the world we deserve.” This phrase is also cautionary: Do not get too hyped about a candidate or too glum that they aren’t all of what progressive organizers want. Power lies in these relationships with elected officials and candidates so that they can be pulled in the left’s direction. Therefore, participants want to get a clearer picture of what relationships on the federal, state, and local levels can advance their shared priorities. Deepening relationships with aligned elected officials and staff, training them on co-governance, and recruiting and training the next generation of elected officials and staff are all part of this process.

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<sup>5</sup> Strengthening Organizing Project — Future Currents, p 13

## Build the “bigger we”

Our organizing practice historically has brought people together across differences to identify common concerns, interests, and identities; organizers have reached beyond their existing base to broaden the number of people joining in collective struggle to improve their lives and increase their power. Though many efforts have continued to reach beyond their current bases, the last decade has seen a lot more focus on mobilizing existing members. Building the bigger “we” requires us to double-down on organizing, power-building, and narrative strategies to have the hard conversations with people who do not already agree with us, creating alternative inviting spaces that people want to be a part of, and conceiving of policies that subvert the weaponized polarities of difference.

*“Consolidate left and bring in others: organizing needs to focus on building a bigger tent — whether and how bringing people who don’t identify as ‘progressive’ but do share some of [our] ... desired outcomes will strengthen the movement.”*

This proactive stance on belonging will also position us to be more prepared to overcome the divide-and-conquer tactics of our opposition. As importantly, it provides a strategic lens through which to test our campaigns and tactics — do they include opportunities to engage a broader base, to focus on defending democracy, and to improve community well-being?

Centering belonging in this way can help define short-term wins in ways that contribute to long-term community-building. Short-term wins are critical to reinvigorating a demoralized or exhausted base, and we should attend to building “the organizational infrastructure, leadership, and norms by which to build and contest for power over the long term.”<sup>6</sup>

## Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us<sup>7</sup>

*“Hope is a discipline ... we have to practice it every single day.”<sup>8</sup>*

Hope is our superpower. One expert defines hope as “a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy),

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<sup>6</sup> Chenoweth and Marks, “Pro-Democracy Organizing” (2022)

<sup>7</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (1900)

<sup>8</sup> Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago, IN: Haymarket Press, 2021

and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)."<sup>9</sup> This description permits for dire conditions in the present, and it allows for skepticism that the conditions will better themselves; instead, it leans into what we know to be true: The clarity of our purpose and plans create the possibility for the world we deserve and resource our effort. Deliberately leveraging the energy of hope drives our movements, actions, and organizations toward joy, even in grim times.

*"Hope may seem a flimsy thing to wield against autocracy, but it is the secret weapon of resistance and an essential lever of action."<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> Professor C. R. Snyder in Utpal Dholakia, "[What's the difference between optimism and hope?](#)," *Psychology Today* blog (February 26, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Ben-Chiat, "[How Chile Won Back Its Democracy](#)," *The Atlantic*, September 11, 2023.

# Labor Together

The opportunities for and threats to our communities and democracy are too great for any one organization to address alone. Coalitions, alignments, and a united front are all critical to meeting the conditions in a proactive stance.

Over and over, participants emphasized the importance of relationships to the success of a pro-democracy movement:

- The tight relationships of deep comradeship: *"The deeper our relationships, so much more becomes possible in our ability to move strategy together."*
- The loose relationships of newly built bridges: *"organizing needs to focus on building a bigger tent – whether and how bringing people who don't identify as 'progressive' but do share [some values and outcomes]."*

Authentic connections, relationships, and community are key both for well-being and for building community power. We must have the discipline to stay connected and have hope and the wisdom to "secure our masks first."

## Deepen trust, coordination, and shared analysis with allies

*"You have to build trust to have the trust to move."*

Participants noted the wide gaps that still exist between organizations that are in relationship with each other through coalitions or networks. These relationships are critical to the outcomes we seek in the world but also to the resilience of our movements and organizations. Participants highlighted the need for innovative relationships that go beyond our traditional alliances, bringing together grassroots organizers, mutual aid networks, legal advocates, and others. These resilient relationships, they said, would strengthen their ability to respond to threats, sustain long-term efforts, and achieve significant victories. Julia Roig, who founded [The Horizons Project](#) after decades of work with international peacebuilding organizations, has emphasized that organizations that work with other organizations to support each other's practices are the most successful at incorporating resilience practices.<sup>11</sup> Building trust takes time and structure — and that requires deliberate planning, capacity, and vulnerability.

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Roig, interviewed by Deb Axt, Feb 2, 2022.

*"it's necessary to build trust that they won't leave each other behind. That's the part where we need to agree and have tough convos about what it will cost to protect each other and if they're willing to face those consequences. A few months back talking about immigration was a big no-no. They have to agree that these are shared priorities, these issues are interconnected and they understand the risks that arise from having each other's backs."*

Throughout the exercises, participants consistently called for shared spaces across organizations and geographies for making meaning, building alignment, navigating conflicts, training our people, preparing for future conditions, and creating shared strategy. Different formations were, in fact, using the exercises themselves for diverse purposes: to deepen the shared analysis of a loose set of partners, to tighten the bonds of partnership, and to provide a common provocation in an arc of shared strategy development.

## Level up on solidarity efforts

Solidarity among movement organizations bolsters collective strength. Hahrie Han once described solidarity as a structure for power-sharing; it is a commitment between two people to each use their resources to act on each other's interests. As such, it requires a relationship of real assurance to be able to share resources and power over time.<sup>12</sup> It must be our practice in the face of opportunity as well as attack.

In our scenario exercises, participants repeatedly named one threat internal to progressive movement: In a more promising federal governing environment — one in which we have more hope of advancing our policy agenda — organizations, coalitions, or other formations will splinter for a few years as they each try to win their particular thing instead of remaining aligned and in solidarity with one another as we are leveraging opportunities to advance policy victories. In short, the worry they voiced was that we would disorganize ourselves over the long term — and maybe fail to protect one another, our communities, and our democracy — for the hope of victories in the short term. It's a worry borne of experience.

*"Concerns about working across differences and through conflict. This is something broadly progressives haven't been skilled at and still processing the trauma from 2016-2020, and we know that it's continuing with the War on Gaza and immigration. How do we stay in a relationship across the progressive movement across principled difference."*

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<sup>12</sup> Hahrie Han offered this definition, Dec 6, 2022.

While we have exercised strong solidarity with vulnerable communities in politically hostile environments in the past, we must double down for their safety; address the interconnectedness of the attacks; build public awareness, support, and advocacy to counteract regressive policies; and build community solidarity and resilience.

*"... the amount of division these attacks have caused and, in moments of rapid response, how people have had to choose their identities when multiple communities are impacted, multiple fights are playing out at once .... Show up in a way that is breathing and not letting urgency erase the ability to work together in a more united front."*

And we must apply those lessons to attacks on our organizations and leaders. We must commit to a solidarity stance when we see takedown pieces of media or weaponized attacks by governmental entities. Instead of the text threads asking each other, "Did you see this? 🧟🧟🧟," we need to be jumping in to ask how we can resource and support these organizations during the moments of attack.

*"What's become vivid is that they'll pick off the most vulnerable and sharpen their sword to go after the next in line. We need the clarity that there can be no daylight between these struggles."*

And we need to share with our ecosystem when we are under attack. We need a channel to be able to share this information securely, and we must have resources (funds and practitioners) to defend (and protect) organizations — lawyers, crisis communications, physical safety, and cybersecurity programs.

## Practice principled, curious conflict

To deepen relationships and coordination, we have to commit to a collective care practice of forthright conversation and the principled, curious conflict that can "become generative fuel for innovation and collective advance."<sup>13</sup>

*"A lot of times, people will clock why is that org doing that, but then never actually say it to them directly. The courage to say, 'I notice you're doing x, y, z.' It's not just time, it's having enough courage and curiosity to name your feedback and that person/org not getting defensive."*

*"... movement internally has to be a practice of breaking down the barriers so they can build together, have hard conversations, how do they practice*

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<sup>13</sup> Amy Carroll and Connie Razza, "[Dispatches from Possible Futures: Interim Report](#)" (June 2023), 22.

*intersectionality. To be in a movement that practices their values of what we're inviting people into ..."*

The kind of attention given to ground rules and norms at the top of meetings can be extended to explicit conversations about how, when, and with whom specifically partners should convey curiosities, concerns, and critiques. Top among these might be "accountability, not perfection," a framework for collective care through conflict and conflict through collective care.<sup>14</sup> This kind of practice can replace both the avoidance that prevents the conversation (but not the grievance) and the conflagration that burns bridges.

"In the civil rights movement, they used to say we need to turn to each other instead of on each other. If you read the accounts of Ralph David Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, and C.T. Vivian, Hosea Williams, and all these other people, they used to fight so bitterly behind closed doors, but they knew how to present a united front once they came out to confront Bull Connor. The legends have it that even the Selma march that John Lewis organized, most of the leaders didn't want him to do it. But you never heard a word of criticism about him doing it. And so that's what we need to learn. You don't win when you're trying to be right, versus trying to be effective. That's gonna be the big message."<sup>15</sup>

## Build alignment in states and regions, across states, and nationally

State-based alignment tables continue to form across the country; however, many organizations are not in the practice of collaborating with other organizations to build a long-term strategy or vision centered in a shared ideology. Grassroots Power Project describes key characteristics of state alignments as: "created and led by power-building organizations rooted in multiracial working class communities," with the recognition that organizations need "to collaborate in order to win transformational change"; they are "focused on winning long-term structural change," especially "focus[ed] on impacting statewide decisions," aiming to "fundamentally change the terrain for policy-making by building power and helping to shift the dominant narrative in their states."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Angela Peoples and Connie Razza, "[Reframing the Prevailing American Narrative for 2052](#)," (August 2022), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Loretta Ross and Scot Nakagawa, "[Loretta Ross: 'Don't Let the Chain of Freedom Break at Your Link'](#)" *Convergence*, July 6, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Scharff and Harmony Goldberg and the Grassroots Power Project team, "[Strategic Power-Building Alignments in States: Reflections on Innovations in Power-Building for Structural Transformation](#)," Feb 2024, 1

Particularly in rural areas and in states with more hostile political terrains and thinner progressive infrastructure, having strong relationships with other organizations that can support each other can change the game in power-building and campaign efforts, increase staff and leaders' sustainability and resiliency, and provide a powerful sense of belonging.

*"We have everything we need no matter what. We have that North Star, inner star, and compass. No matter what comes, we'll lean on each other. We have this alignment and group to deal with whatever comes our way."*

Building alignment across states and nationally is particularly important to countering the national strategy of the far-right, because it enables the coordination, division of roles, and clarity needed for states to support each other.<sup>17</sup>

Further, during heightened moments of disagreement, cross-movement alignment provides a container for working through differences and developing shared strategies. The existing working relationship and ongoing communications across movement sectors are resources to help deal swiftly and directly with potential or existing fractures.

## Build a united front

*"Movement needs to better align on a broader strategy. Organizing beyond smaller flights, toward a unified vision felt like a next step for many. Participants articulated this need to focus on solid strategy and homing in on what the problem is for the movement and a decisive, inclusive, strategic response."*

The neural network of shared analysis, the heart of trust and the lungs of principled conflict, the muscle of solidarity and coordination, and the connective tissue of alignment are critical to the organism of a united front. Although the term "united front" is sometimes used to refer to a very loose alignment of general principle, here we adopt the meaning presented in [\*"Pro-democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the United States"\*](#):

*"an organizational infrastructure to develop and implement a nimble strategy.... that can provide the basis for a resilient, nationwide, pro-democracy coalition of local, state, and national left and center-left forces. The united front should have capacities in communications, education, training, intelligence, community power-building, scenario-planning, conflict resolution, and diplomacy."*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Chenoweth and Marks, p18.

<sup>18</sup> Chenoweth and Marks, p4.

The united front is broader than any one network or coalition, with the possibility for looser alignment on particular issues. But it is structured and strategic and shares a formal and relentless commitment to rooting out the authoritarian threat and nurturing a robust and reparative democracy. United front efforts are underway, and the agitation in our exercises was to ambitiously connect them to one another and more fully connect them to regional and state organizations.

In exercise after exercise, participants specifically named the need for a unified narrative strategy, enabling organizations to communicate effectively. That narrative would help weave interconnected issues into a coherent and aspirational story, provide messaging guidance, and leave room for organizations and coalitions to articulate the story in their own voice. By aligning across organizations to create a strong, consistent narrative that effectively communicates the movements' values and goals, we can engage communities, build momentum and power, and help counter mis- and disinformation. While creating this shared narrative, special attention should be paid to build support in communities that have weathered deteriorating democracy in their state or country of origin.

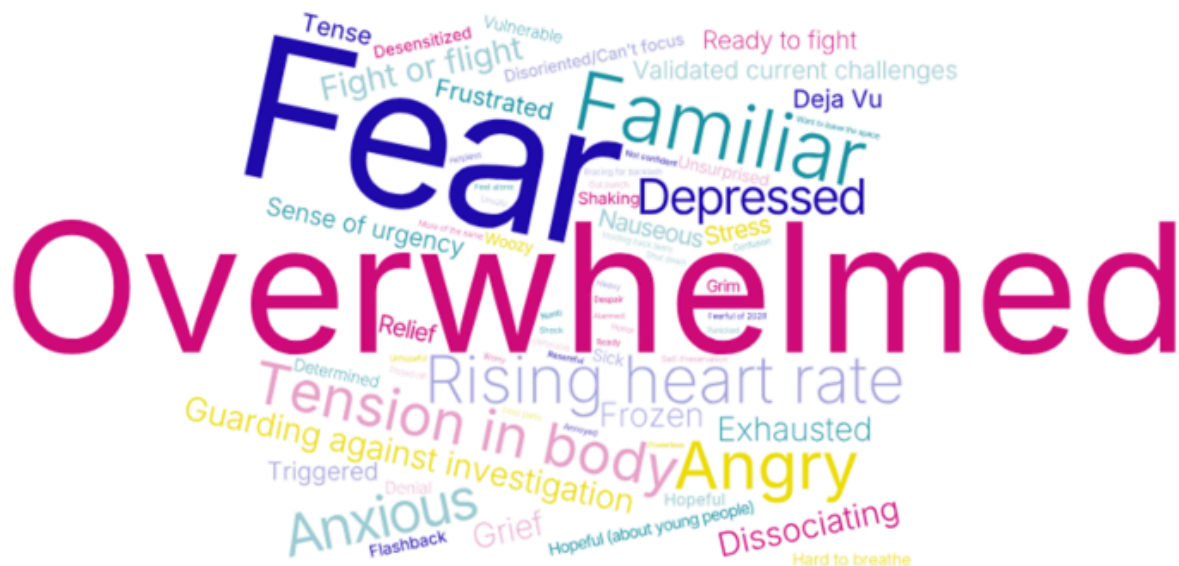
# Keep Safe

The outcome of the elections may change the nature of the threats to our organizations, communities, and democracy, but participants universally agreed that fundamental threats will face us in any plausible scenario.

## Prepare

### Feel the feels early (emotional inoculation)

Indeed, our scenario exercises offered one step in preparing for that threat. In the moments when we most need our full capacity, we are hampered because we are human and experiencing the crises that we need to respond to in our hearts as well as our feet and minds. In the scenarios, participants named feeling rising heart rates, tension in their bodies or shaking, nausea, difficulty breathing, or numbness. Some named feeling unsafe, anxious, depressed, alone, angry, overwhelmed, and cautiously hopeful.



We attend to these responses in the exercises for at least three reasons:

1. We need to be familiar with our emotional and physical response to crises to be able to act even as we are feeling them.
2. We need to understand the emotional and physical toll of crises to plan for the capacity we will need to face them.

3. We need to take care of ourselves and each other.

## Learn from those with experience

Participants consistently recognized that we are not starting from scratch. Movement veterans, with their wealth of experience and knowledge, need to keep passing on the lessons and stories of past fights — victories and losses — so that younger generations in the movement can apply them to current work. At the same time, they counseled that we should more deliberately also learn from young people, who may have a better understanding of some of the current conditions and opportunities.

Similarly, participants valued learning from communities historically and currently experiencing crises, particularly — but not limited to — escalated authoritarian threats as well as full-blown authoritarianism in states in the U.S. and throughout the globe.

*"I'm curious to learn from the climate disasters that people experience across the country. They are very constructive in terms of how our communities respond to crises. It would be very useful to identify over the last decade what the key crisis points have been in the US and on the global stage. It's very useful to not stay so focused on elections in 2016-2020. Our communities have gone through a ton of crisis moments that teach us a lot about how people respond. For example, in terms of mutual aid. We need to get grounded in our experience of how communities show up and be able to drill closer into what is our particular role as we navigate any crisis that comes our way."*

## Get ready for opportunities to leapfrog in certain places

Particularly in places with well-developed alignment, participants saw opportunities even in hostile landscapes. In states that are innovating authoritarian policies, participants remind us that those policymakers are moving unpopular laws and practices. A version of the old proverb of labor organizing — "The boss organizes the workers" — pertains.

*"There's a slingshot effect that occurs in the midst of backlash. They think they're pulling us back, but they're helping build the tension to spring us further forward than where we were when they picked the fight. We need to make sure we're not flatfooted and realize that's when the race really begins."*

In states that are innovating on pro-democracy and progressive policies, participants shared a similar insight. In a politically hostile federal political context, their states may be positioned to take bolder action than they might otherwise. In both cases, we must be ready with actions and proposals to meet the moment.

## Protect against attacks

The scope of the kinds of attacks on our communities, organizations, and leaders is broad — including political violence, bureaucratic attacks, breeches of offices, online threats, hacking, and more.<sup>19</sup>

*"Prepare community members and organizations for a range of challenges, including political violence, restrictive policies, and changing socio-political landscapes. Organizations are focused on developing essential skills, such as de-escalation techniques for managing conflicts, security measures to protect against surveillance and harassment, and technological skills to enhance digital communication and organizing. Leadership development is also a key focus, with efforts to cultivate new leaders."*

## Make political violence backfire

Rising political violence has practical implications for our movements. Political violence is the "force or violence, including threats and intimidation, used with a political motivation, to achieve a political goal, to assert political power over another group, or to disseminate a political message to an outside audience."<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the outcomes of these elections, our organizations must have a plan and be trained for the likelihood of being confronted with violence or the threat of violence by individuals, organizations, and possibly the government and targeting our communities, leaders, organizations, and governments.

Preparing our members, staff, and allies in techniques to make political violence backfire is critical. Most people in the U.S. oppose political violence;<sup>21</sup> but they need help to move from being intimidated and silenced by the political violence to isolating the outliers who are trying to bully the rest of us into submission. There are resources available for understanding the political violence landscape in your area and making political violence backfire in our communities:

- The [Bridging Divides Initiative](#) (BDI) delivers action-oriented research, including identifying hotspots and high-risk geographies, assessing response capacity,

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<sup>19</sup> Resources have grown for supporting organizations to protect themselves against attacks. Many of the resources are closely held. And although there are more resources available, they are still too scarce. We are including some of the valuable accessible resources here, but this is by no means exhaustive.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Dresden and Ben Raderstorf, "Threats of Political Violence Are Injurious to Democracy Too," *The UnPopulist*, January 6, 2024. Quoted in Hardy Merriman for 22<sup>nd</sup> Century Initiative and the Horizons Project, [Harnessing our Power to End Political Violence: 2024 Guide](#).

<sup>21</sup> HOPE-PV, 29.

and identifying groups working to mitigate risk and build resilience. BDI has a resource page "[Elevating De-escalation and Community Safety Approaches](#)" that "equip users with the tools they might need to mitigate current violence risks as well as to spread skills and understanding of alternative community safety strategies necessary for a vibrant democratic society."

- The [Harnessing Our Power to End Political Violence](#) (HOPE-PV) curriculum and training — offered by the Horizons Project and 22nd Century Initiative, together with a dozen other core partners — is focused on helping communities organize and mobilize using creative and courageous collective action to make political violence backfire. It is about *going on offense* and raising the social, political, and economic costs of political violence to perpetrators and their enablers through strategic nonviolent action and narrative power. Resources include the [Guide](#) written by Hardy Merriman, a short [three-pager on Backfire](#), interviews, and videos of community-led backfire (including "[Clowns, Reverse Boycotts, and Involuntary Walkathons: How Communities Are Making Political Violence Backfire](#)"). People can [request trainings and coaching](#) and be added to the distribution list.
- [Over Zero](#) offers resources — including guides and trainings — for preventing and rising above political and identity-based violence. It focuses on understanding the role of narrative, including guidance for how to talk about political violence without feeding into its aims and tools for diverse leaders such as journalists, faith leaders, the local government, and community leaders and organizers. A compilation of their resources with a focus on preventing and addressing political violence risks during election cycles can be accessed [here](#).

## Strengthen organizational crisis and security plans

Organizations face bureaucratic, legal, public relations, funding, and digital threats. In the exercises, we saw participants exchange best practices for securing their organizations. These ranged from creating soft security checks at physical offices to removing staff lists from websites to preparing communications redundancies in case of denial-of-service attacks. This kind of peer learning can be an excellent starting place.

In addition, conducting self-research to understand your organization's vulnerabilities can be critical. These self-audits can focus on basic financial stewardship and compliance with the rules of your tax status(es); the terms and conditions of your federal funding (should you have some); HR policies and staff sustainability; document retention and interpersonal communications policies; public profile; personal and physical safety and security protocols; and more. That self-research can help you identify where to strengthen your day-to-day practices and preparation.

Ready the organization for crisis moments by preparing for the types of triggering moments likely to occur in your organization's work. Anticipate crises with a plan, create a response coordination team, brief and train leaders and staff, and have a plan to deploy.

- For federal grantees, [Democracy Forward](#) has both a [webinar for federal grantees](#) and an [Interested Parties Memo](#) (registration required), which present in simple terms threats federal grantees may face from an anti-democracy administration, how grantees can use litigation as a tool to counter these threats, and steps grantees can take now to prepare. Democracy Forward experts are available to conduct customized, live trainings for grantees or any other group.
- [Democracy Security Project](#) is a one-stop shop for security and safety services and trainings for anyone working to defend democracy.
- [NGO Information Sharing and Analysis Center](#) is a community of cybersecurity and IT professionals charged with defending nonprofit organizations from attacks of all shapes and sizes.
- [Protect Democracy](#) has a new primer, "[Protecting Civic Space: How to Prepare Your Organization for Politicized Government Investigations](#)," which orients civil society organizations to the risks posed by politicized investigations by federal or state governments and how to prepare for them. The goal is to ensure that a diverse range of organizations doing lawful mission-based work — critical to a healthy democracy — are well positioned to continue doing that work, even if they are targeted by partisan or politically motivated law enforcement contrary to principles of equal justice and the rule of law.
- [Vision Change Win](#) offers a wide range of practical and effective solutions, services, and programs to support organizations to fully manifest their missions, visions, and values, even in the face of attacks and threats.

## Develop a collective action disposition to responding to attacks

We need a channel to be able to securely share information with each other about attacks on our organizations and a disposition to understand each of those attacks as attacks on our ecosystem. Within our organizations, our coalitions and alignments, and our united front, we need to develop and practice responses to these attacks that both defend the particular targets and communicate our solidarity and strength.

*"We are going to need a new kind of solidarity and commitment to stand with and for each other."*

Right now, this disposition is countercultural. If the attacks are not already public, we are (reasonably) worried that funders will get spooked, that partners will back away, and that looser allies will abandon us. The practices that will enable organizations or leaders who are under attack to reach out must be complemented by solidarity practices within the

organizations not currently under attack. Some resources for building solidarity practices can be found at [Solidarity Is](#), which “generates tools, trainings, and narratives to facilitate transformative solidarity practices for movement building organizations and activists.”

## Develop alternative structures

### Consider innovative structures

In preparation for organizational attacks, explore alternative structures that may work for your organization or alignment. In concert with appropriate counsel, perhaps consider different tax statuses, structural relationships between organizations, or organizational domiciles. For instance, when organizations are unable to continue their work due to attacks, consider sharing staff across organizations, coalitions, tables, and networks or moving your work and staff to an aligned entity.

“Movement has gone through moments where they’ve had to be reorganized — to what extent do we need to be prepared to move staff to different orgs, be prepared to make those switches, for funders switch funding?”

### Distribute leadership

In the past several years, there has been a shift toward co-leadership, allowing for more sustainability in the role and increased executive capacity in the organization. Existing leaders might consider co-executive director/co-president models for emotional support and coverage, particularly to allow for rest and healing in hostile political times. Even where that kind of co-executive model might not make sense, empowering work teams for planning and well-defined decision-making together enables members of the team to step away, develop overlapping knowledge of the strategy and plan, and step in to cover for one another. With standard and accessible planning documents, substitutions in times of crisis can be smoothed.

### Explore mutual aid

Throughout the exercises, participants said that there is a strong need for organizations, coalitions and networks, alignments, and the united front to explore which existing systems should stand up mutual aid efforts, how to partner with existing mutual aid organizations, and whether and how to resource mutual aid systematically.

*“... in terms of mutual aid. We need to get grounded in our experience of how communities show up, and be able to drill closer into what is our particular role as we navigate any crisis that comes our way.”*

In particular, participants were interested in marrying efforts to provide for our communities' needs with continuing to build power. Mutual aid can involve developing thick ties and a collective-action disposition between neighbors as well as alternative institutional structures for training and power-building.<sup>22</sup> However, this purpose can be a significant difference from some existing mutual aid efforts.

*"We haven't figured out a great way to leverage and fill the mutual aid piece. How do we prepare ourselves and or how do we build power with the orgs that are doing that right now, instead of it being at odds. Regardless of what happens, mutual aid is going to continue to be a need."*

(For an in-depth exploration of power-building through mutual aid, please see Future Currents' report [Building Power through Mutual Aid: Lessons from the Field](#).)

## Rethink strategies for when government becomes unpetitionable

Democracy is meant to be a system of self-government, rule of the people. Our movement infrastructure and practices have been built around the notion that our government will be responsive to the demands of the people. However, organizers and mobilizers alike note an increasing experience of our government becoming unpetitionable.<sup>23</sup> This is an uneven experience, truer in some states than others; but it is also already being felt in the federal context. As our government becomes unpetitionable, we have to revisit the purpose and outcomes of our strategies; be clear and honest with our members, supporters, and allies; and adjust our tactics.

## Examine the impulse to be public on all efforts

When our government is responsive to our demands, sharing publicly our goals and our moves can be an effective tactic. Sometimes we overindex press hits, social media engagement, and web traffic when evaluating our effectiveness. In a context in which our government is not only unpetitionable but potentially hostile, we should consider which of our activities need to be public and when we may have more success pursuing a strategy under the radar — not only might our opposition be tracking our activity, but also unlikely allies might feel too exposed to bridge with us.

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<sup>22</sup> Chenoweth and Marks, 25.

<sup>23</sup> This insight, articulated by LJ Amsterdam and Angela Peoples, informs the work of Future Currents' Direct Action Incubation Lab. Look for a paper from the Direct Action Incubation Lab after the election.

"In Chile under the fascist regime of Augusto Pinochet, organizers and activists discovered ways to build alternative, underground sources of power that were difficult for the regime to detect and suppress. Despite widespread repression against organized opposition parties, labor unions, and leftist political organizations, pro-democratic forces built a coalition of families of the disappeared, striking workers, clergy, small business owners, and independent political groups. Rather than march in the streets, they banged pots and pans within their homes; built mutual aid networks, legal assistance, strike funds, and support for families of the disappeared; engaged in work stoppages and slowdowns; developed communications networks and political education; and waited for opportunities to oust Pinochet from power."<sup>24</sup>

## Combat the impulse to go silent

So much of our orientation to the work of organizing, policy, and direct action is grounded in the belief that we can count on decision-makers (in government, our workplace, etc.) to respond to our petitions. When it feels obvious that it won't, people get cynical, demoralized, and demobilized. But we have to fight that impulse. Instead, we have to shift our purpose and articulate different goals. Our defense of democracy depends on it. The way we think about direct action will need to respond to this — for example, we should reframe elections as direct and collective action.

Focus on opportunities for mass democratic political participation and decision-making, including in elections at every level in the midst of authoritarian-like rule. Elections are a vulnerable time for an autocrat who wants to continue the appearance of democracy. Mass participation "bolster[s] norms and practices of democratic political participation"; "emboldens political engagement and participation by opposition groups and individuals"; creates the expectation of representation; helps "communities to build the organization infrastructure, leadership, and norms by which to build and contest for power over the long term"; and provides "hope, inspiration, and a replicable playbook for pro-democratic forces elsewhere."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chenoweth and Marks, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Chenoweth and Marks.

# A Note for Funders

This whole report speaks to you, as part of the field, as “people working for the robust and reparative democracy, caring and democratic economy, and just and joyful future that we all deserve.” And there are particular action items growing out of the scenarios that only you can effectuate.

Funders from multiple sectors need to play a more coordinated, robust role investing in building community, local, and state power. While in some plausible scenarios we can see a path to winning some policies, there is no plausible scenario in which we no longer need to respond to an authoritarian threat on the national level. This means that our organizations hard at work in authoritarian contexts are testing, learning, and proving the anti-authoritarian strategies we will need on the national level; that those in pro-democracy contexts are building the models and demonstrating the possibilities of our bold aspirations for the country; and that those in the rest of the country are doing the heavy lifting of building the bigger “we” — organizing people to prefer democracy and moving lawmakers to pass the policies that move us closer to the future we deserve — based on our shared values and across the lines that divide us. But these crucial organizations face massive shortfalls in funding, especially for making their organizations more resilient.

## Fund, of course

Some of the lessons of the field apply in particular ways to funders addressing this challenge. Seeing philanthropy as part of the united front, funders should build alignment and develop a shared long-term power strategy to raise and deploy the resources needed for both immediate preparation efforts and for the long term. In exercises for philanthropies, funders emphasized the need to be fearless and be in solidarity with other foundations who share their mission and vision of the future. This means, in part, that each funder needs to get crystal clear on their purpose, role, and lane and communicate that to each other and to the field. Participants from field and philanthropic organizations saw real promise in this kind of cross-philanthropy collaboration, resulting in better support for cross-issue and cross-organization work in the field, something that the field is hungry for.

Participants from field organizations urged that investments in organizations that build capacity and that directly engage with communities should be increased surely but also that foundations and donors need to rethink their approaches to funding. We are already seeing where a focus on short-term wins amounts to disinvestment in the long-term community-building and power-building that we will need in any plausible scenario.

Participants from philanthropies identified the need to develop a plan for funding the pro-democracy ecosystem so that it can withstand attacks and politically motivated, bad-faith scrutiny in the future. They felt that this strategy would require significant collaboration, both within their philanthropies and across philanthropies. In addition, as the political and cultural landscape changes, they noted that funding will need to allow for flexibility.

Shifting the view in line with the shifting context also means reevaluating what funders are incentivizing. Publicly facing documentation (e.g., press clips and reports) may not be the useful validators of an organization's effectiveness, particularly in more authoritarian contexts when they must strategically work under the radar.

While keeping the sights set on the longer term, protecting organizations in the immediate term is vital. Foundations can do a better job of meeting the gaps in essential resources by intentionally asking their partners and grantees about their safety and security plans, legal strategy, organizational health and wellness, and access to resources. Funders have the opportunity to provide legal assistance and ensure that grantees are prepared to meet inquiries and compliance requirements. In addition, participants noted an opportunity for philanthropy to stand together in support of grantees and act as a buffer between vulnerable grantees and potential attacks.

## Nurture alignment through landscape research and convening

Funders are uniquely situated to see a fuller view of the landscape and to convene diverse sets of organizations and movements and to nurture a more coordinated, strategic, aligned, and successful united front. Many funders are doing this; however, often efforts appear to be proprietary, and funders are communicating neither efforts nor learnings with one another or back out to the field. Funders and donors should share what they are learning with each other and with the field. And they can leverage those lessons to help organize new major donors who may be entering the scene.

Additionally, when funders convene (or fund convenings for) field organizations, they provide precious space for leaders to think beyond their immediate goals and collaborate beyond their specific lane; to coalesce around a shared vision; to generate more comprehensive, future-oriented, winning strategies; and to develop action steps to achieve that vision over the long term.

## Stand firm

Like field organizations, philanthropies and donors are — and will continue to be — under attack. In every plausible scenario, anti-democracy forces will continue to use public relations attacks and weaponize government agency regulation, congressional and state investigations, and legal battles to silence critics. These efforts aim to wedge funders from the work that breathes life into their missions and visions, bully funders into constraining the aspirations and work for the just and joyful future we deserve, and bankrupt the pro-democracy movement.

Funders and donors need to prepare for this by updating their risk tolerance dispositions, defining redlines they will not allow to be crossed, and increasing the legal support they and their grantees need to face a more hostile political climate on a proactive and protective footing.

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