A White Paper from **PEOPLE'S ACTION INSTITUTE**

# THE ANTIDOTE TO AUTHORITARIANISM

## How an Organizing Revival Can Build a Multiracial Pluralistic Democracy and an Inclusive Economy

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### How an Organizing Revival Can Build a Multiracial Pluralistic Democracy and an Inclusive Economy

**May 2023**

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## Executive Summary

How can we build a multiracial and pluralistic democracy with an inclusive economy to defeat the rise of authoritarianism?

This question is front and center for People's Action Institute and our allies. As experienced organizers dedicated to building power among those long denied it, we know firsthand that transformation happens from the ground up.

This simple truth - that ordinary people, organized effectively, have the power to drive social change upwards to create the conditions for justice, equity, and freedom - has been the power behind every great expansion of our democracy, from Abolition and Women's Suffrage to Civil Rights and Marriage Equality. Yet the perils of our current moment are complex: How can we strengthen and defend our democracy, when some feel it fails them, and others want to eliminate democracy to advance an authoritarian agenda?

To find an answer, People's Action Institute held in-depth conversations with 27 of the most experienced and thoughtful leaders in the work to build power among multiracial poor and working-class people in the United States. These include the current and former directors of national networks for social change, academics, on-the-ground organizers and philanthropists engaged in the defense of civil society. [For a full list of interviewees, see Appendix A.] We also reviewed the most relevant literature on how organizing can drive social movements and progress, especially in the current moment.

## Our topline findings include:

**Good organizing, which builds from the ground up, is essential to defeating authoritarianism.** Because organized people have the power to shift narratives, attitudes and behaviors, they can challenge the forces which have converged to impose white nationalist, male supremacist, and corporate control over our society and economy.

**Not all organizing is created equal.** Good organizing is rooted in the best practices of relational power-building. These skills, when practiced effectively, strengthen community organizations as members unite around a shared sense of purpose, and experience the power to make decisions in their own lives. Good organizing is never transactional, extractive, or short-term. If we are to meet the challenges of this difficult moment, we must embrace this shared understanding of what good organizing is.

**Philanthropy and organizers must share a commitment to advancing racial equity by addressing the root causes of racial inequity: structural racism, corporate power, and concentrated wealth.** The deeper we go to address the root causes of problems, the clearer we must be about the need to share strategy, power analysis, resources, and a horizon for change. None of us has the power to undo root causes on our own, so we must do it together.

**To win lasting, meaningful change, we must build collaborative infrastructure between community organizations, national networks, and philanthropy.** For this, we must cultivate a shared sense of purpose and end competition amongst allies so organizing and philanthropy can advance together, fully aligned, toward authentic power-building for social transformation.

**Just as organizers must create new ways to work together through a shared understanding and infrastructure, so too must funders.** Longer-term, trust-based investments will empower those closest to social problems to name and lead on the specific solutions they know to be most effective for their time, context, and place.

**In summary, if we want to achieve a multiracial pluralistic democracy and move toward an inclusive economy, we must ground ourselves in the best and most effective practices of relational, power-based community organizing. The Organizing Revival is our call to renew these practices to defeat authoritarianism.**

**Throughout the following, we unpack the findings from our survey and the thinking behind them and surface common themes from our interviews**. First, we examine the connections between the multiple crises we face today, and how community organizing can advance solutions. Second, we explore the importance of sharing a strategic understanding of how change happens. Third, we examine some of the challenges that have led to the weakening of fundamental skills in community-based organizations. Fourth, we identify the best practices of power-based community organizing and why these are essential to the project of building a multiracial pluralistic democracy and inclusive economy. Fifth, we share our call for an Organizing Revival as a way to strengthen and extend these best practices, and the implications this has for community organizing and philanthropy. Lastly, we review feedback from funders to determine what community organizing and philanthropy need from each other to effectively address today's crises at their roots and spur transformational change.

**Part One**

# TRANSFORMING CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITY

An age of emergency is upon us in the United States and across the globe. Political, social, economic, and environmental crises increasingly compound each other. While this paper does not delve into the origins of these intersecting crises, a broad consensus emerged from our interviews about the threats which create this context and the urgency of our call to build a multiracial pluralistic democracy through an Organizing Revival. Around the world, the people with the least power – poor and working-class people, communities of color, Indigenous Peoples, women, children, and LGBTQIA+ – face the most displacement, suffering, and death from rising threats. These include:

1. **Authoritarianism.** The rise of white Christian male nationalism in the United States is not an isolated phenomenon: it is part of a wave of authoritarianism undermining democracies around the world.

2. **Climate catastrophe.** Climate change caused by the ongoing expansion of the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries is killing 5 million people every year, along with extraordinary suffering and forced migrations due to climate volatility and rising temperatures. Climate-change disasters caused $165 billion dollars in damage in the U.S. alone in 2022.

3. **Militarization of borders.** Refugees and asylees are criminalized, whether for voluntary or forced migration, driven by climactic, economic, and political instability. Autocratic leaders exploit these migration flows to create a sense of panic to tighten their grip on civil society.

4. **The imminent danger of nuclear war.** The Doomsday Clock, created by atomic scientists in 1947 to chart the risk of cataclysm, is now at a record 90 seconds to midnight, with looming threats of nuclear conflict in both Europe and Asia.

5. **Rising inequality.** Millionaires and billionaires hold four fifths of the wealth in the United States; three individuals hold more than the bottom half of all Americans. Wealth taxes are at a record low, while half of humanity survives on less than $5.50 a day.

6. **The deliberate dismantling of civil society, unionization, and social cohesion.** The power of the wealthy and corporations in the United States to inject unlimited amounts of money into politics distorts our public life and fuels a sense of disillusion, isolation and mistrust of government.

> **"**
> **Those who possess outside power and wealth must come to understand that this is an arrangement that is no longer—and never was— tolerable. Unless we change that arrangement, we face extinction. Either these tables are turned and power is in the hands of everyday people or we will fail to exist. The lines could not be clearer.**
>
> - **National Organizing Network Leader**

These crises are, to each of us, heartbreaking and infuriating. That is the natural response of people who value human dignity, safety, and security. However it is not the only response. Because war, mass migration, and economic instability create fear in all of us, authoritarians use this fear to tighten their grip on civil society. Authoritarians leverage uncertainty to distract the majority so they can advance the interests of an elite, undermining the foundations of democracy.

One academic interviewee we spoke with described democracy as uncertainty about outcomes, with certainty about the process. Authoritarianism is the inverse. Authoritarianism is a fear-driven reaction to uncertainty. At the same time, rising inequality forces people to accept greater uncertainty in their own lives. As a result, many people retreat from openness and turn toward more rigid worldviews. One interviewee described pro-democracy forces as holding the door open to democracy, while anti-democratic forces have convinced a wide swath of society that democracy is the breach through which existential threats have entered to destroy the sacred canopy of American exceptionalism. The conflict between these two worldviews has the potential to cause an extreme escalation in political violence.

An increasing number of Americans no longer consider democracy essential to our national identity. As a result, minority rule is on the horizon, and openly advocated by some political leaders. It is already present in many states, counties, and cities with a rollback of voting rights. It shows up in gerrymandered political maps, stacked state legislatures, unlimited money in politics, active voter disenfranchisement of BIPOC communities, attacks on immigrant rights, dismantling the path to citizenship and inclusion, and extreme ideological and cultural segregation.

The emphasis in community organizing on building relationships makes it an ideal strategy to engage people in every community, especially in small towns and rural areas, where local newspapers and other reality-based media have collapsed, according to one former executive director of a philanthropic in-stitution and current national organizing practitioner.

A pluralistic democracy, as one interviewee who straddles community organizing and philanthropic worlds explained, protects minorities while governing with the majority. Pluralistic democracies achieve consensus through voting to create policy which reflects shared values. A shared belief that the rule of law reflects these values keeps fascism in check. A pluralistic democracy offers a forum to have debates about who is included in our society and economy, who deserves dignity and rights, and how decisions are made. In an ideal democracy, which does not yet exist, all people would be represented with equal voice, and policy would emerge from open deliberations. Minority opinions would be protected, and majorities which are multiracial and economically inclusive would set policy.

The question, then, is this: if the traditional bulwarks of democracy are eroding, what can people and organizations do to better navigate societal uncertainty, and not fall prey to fear? As several of our interviewees observed, there are three ways to address rising uncertainty: 1) reduce inequality, 2) increase voice in the democratic process, and 3) help people make sense of the problems they face and the solutions to them. The answer to dangerous narratives, dehumanization, and the ginning up of false threats is to build relationships across communities and identities, to discover shared interests so people can act powerfully together. Building powerful relationships like these is what community organizers do best, and why we need more of them.

Synthesizing the extant literature and our interviewees' insights, we come to the following conclusion:

**Relational, power-building organizing is essential to building a multi-racial pluralistic democracy to address the rise of authoritarianism and the intertwined crises that fuel it.** We need to reground our movement for social justice in the most effective practices of community organizing to address this escalating crisis at scale.

**Part Two**

# ALIGNING ON HOW CHANGE HAPPENS IN ORDER TO INCREASE IMPACT

**Alignment between organizers, organizing networks and philanthropy on how change happens is essential to advancing effective strategies that address the root causes of the problems and crises we face.** It is also the key to moving from a commitment to racial equity in grantmaking to building the power necessary to address the root causes of racial inequity and anti-Black racism (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2022; The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2021). This section begins with a shared analysis of root causes and then explores how worldview frames solutions and strategy.

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**Social action organizations are founded on a set of beliefs about how to make social change. This set of beliefs is referred to as their theory of change, and it describes the relationship between the problems organizations want to address and the intentional strategies they use to solve those problems and achieve their mission. Essentially, the change theory answers this question: "How do we believe change happens?"**

- Jacqueline Mondros and Joan Minieri
(2023, p. 21)

Across the board, interviewees identified the main root causes of the crises we face in the United States as structural oppression and corporate power. Interviewees emphasized the value of community organizing and philanthropy that directly address structural racism, in particular. Some connected these root causes to their analysis of racial capitalism.

The four strands of racial capitalism, as described in a widely-embraced analysis by the Grassroots Power Project (2023), are capitalism, structural racism, patriarchy, and commodification of the Earth. Each of these strands has its own operating model: exploitation, dispossession, reproductive labor, and extractivism.

Worldviews are crafted from a shared analysis of the root causes of problems and how they have played out in history. The difference between multiracial pluralism and authoritarianism is most starkly apparent when we examine their answers to the core questions of society: who is in and who is out of our political system and economy, who deserves dignity and rights, and who decides.

Success in social change is neither partisan nor accidental: it is intentional, and happens when organizations and their associated infrastructure build enough power to advance their worldview through a long-term agenda. This is true no matter where an organization, alliance, or movement falls on the political spectrum. In this section we will explore the strategies that result from these contrasting worldviews, in order to sharpen the role of power-based organizing in countering authoritarianism.

**Those who favor authoritarianism have successfully reshaped our social, judicial and political landscape over decades by following a long-term strategy. Advocates of democracy have only recently realized that we, too, need a long-term strategy for its defense.**

The long-term agenda framework describes the interplay between power, landscape shifts, and structural change that can address root causes and advance worldviews. Each of these elements has its own logic. Landscape change happens through elections, narrative shifts, movement moments and mobilizations, and reactions to crisis.

Structural change most often occurs through stepping-stone policy changes which build on each other toward structural reforms that shift power and rulemaking in society. In rare cases, rapid shifts in the social landscape create enough groundswell to skip directly to structural reforms. (Grassroots Power Project and People's Action, 2013; Hinson, 2019).

Power must grow in order to achieve landscape and structural change. In this shared analysis, we understand power through its three dimensions:

1. the power to win demands through organizing people and resources for direct political action;

2. the power to drive the agenda through building movement infrastructure;

3. the power to shape common sense by making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview.

Analogous to these, the three "currencies" of power are organized people, money, and ideas. The most valuable currency to organizers is organized people, as they are the root of any authentic demand, as well as the most accessible resource. It is organized people who go on to organize ideas and infrastructure for successful change (Grassroots Power Project and People's Action, 2019).

These elements are interdependent: progress in one allows movement in others. Similarly, gaps and barriers in one prevent progress in others.

Strategic pathways are the bright lines that connect landscape shifts, power building, and structural reforms. All strategic pathways have milestones: key landscape and structural shifts that demonstrate progress toward the goals of structural change. Mid-range plans are charted on five to ten-year arcs, with milestones achieved on interdependent strategic pathways.

For example, the corporate-conservative right has followed five strategic pathways toward their long-term agenda for decades:

1. Build corporate infrastructure that expands and consolidates economic and political power designed to orient the public to serve the interests of private capital, even when this contradicts democratic values and practices

2. Use crises to make rapid progress in changing the landscape to favor corporate power

3. Advance structural reforms that transfer wealth and power from people and the public to corporations and the wealthy, particularly through deregulation and privatization

4. Engage in the battle of big ideas to limit the terrain of debate to neoliberal narratives

5. Use racism strategically to divide the opposition and consolidate a base of power

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**The two-party system has led us to a place where one party benefits from contracting access to democratic systems and consolidating power... Community organizing can help people to understand their space and role in the process— and specifically a political role—it can show them they have power to intervene in the political systems that feel distant from their daily lives.**

- Philanthropic interviewee

Newly emboldened authoritarians have recently emerged to align with corporate and conservative elites in a shared desire to bypass democracy to impose minority rule. White supremacists and authoritarians find synergy in many of the strategic pathways of the corporate-conservative right. Together, they:

1. Enshrine the democratic rights of heterosexual white Christian males and criminalize or limit democratic rights for all other identities

2. Undermine free and fair elections until elected autocracies fully control electoral outcomes

3. Engage in the battle of big ideas to shift blame for economic inequality onto immigrants, people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ people

4. Capture, defund and dismantle democratic institutions that protect pluralism, such as public schools, colleges, universities, and public media

In contrast, the long-term agenda for a multiracial pluralistic democracy which is now broadly shared across our movement follows these strategic pathways:

1. Build democratic infrastructure that advances inclusivity and pluralism in government and the economy, including a welcoming approach to internal and external migration

2. Use crises to advance democratic control of government by people, not corporations and the wealthy, and inclusive economic reforms

3. Advance structural reforms in the economy that transfer power from corporations and the wealthy to people and the public, in service of a fair, caring, and sustainable economy where all workers are entitled to dignity and respect, and all communities achieve climate resilience and environmental justice

4. Engage in the battle of big ideas to name structural oppression, structural racism, and corporate power as the root causes of the problems we face and posit reparative democracy, interdependence, and shared interests in a world where all people have the right to thrive

5. Advance multiracial and multiclass alliances that constitute majorities and supermajorities capable of effecting structural change

Understanding these worldviews, long-term agendas, strategic pathways and their points of conflict and dissonance are the work of power analysis, another key practice of good community organizing.

Interviewees described how more strategic, long-term thinking has helped community organizers move "into the big leagues" to win structural changes, such as passage of the Affordable Care Act, the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act and creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), and significant federal resources to combat climate change and create a more equitable economy.

Not all grassroots organizations have moved toward long-term strategy at the same pace, but there is a growing sense across our movement that a shared strategic framework can help contest the rise of authoritarianism and serve as a critical foundation as we build a multiracial pluralistic democracy. Achieving this ambitious goal requires a renewal and expansion of the most effective practices of community organizing, which we turn to next.

People's Action Institute embraced this long-term approach over a decade ago through a multi-year deliberative process with its members and member organizations, arriving at a strategy which is now shared across our network. This approach led to the emergence of People's Action Institute as a national organization through the merger of several regional power-building networks, and has since enabled several of our member groups and cohorts to expand their footprints and drive policy changes from the local to county, state, regional, and federal levels.

4,760 views

**Part Three**

# CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE ORGANIZING

We live in a moment of contradiction for labor and community organizers. Our tradition has won significant victories - from the eight-hour workday to the Clean Air Act - and there is more money available now for organizing groups than ever. There is, however, decreasing clarity about what constitutes good organizing among both donors and practitioners.

A persistent question from the philanthropic sector is how to understand what good organizing is and what it is not, given the thousands of nonprofit organizations that claim to be doing organizing in the United States. Interviewees repeatedly pointed to the need to invest more in power-building that

addresses racial justice and root causes, and to numerous reports that help sharpen this definition of organizing for the philanthropic audience (Building Movement Project, 2023; Grady, et. al., 2022; GrantCraft and Community Change, 2009).

The reality is that there is still not enough money for effective community organizing, despite the growth of support for the sector. The field of community organizing has been operating at a deficit of organized money since its inception, a problem that is particularly true for groups rooted in BIPOC and other historically marginalized communities - despite the generous contributions of philanthropy, organized labor, and individuals.

> **In organizing we have stopped really trying to organize across differences. When we actually engage people in relationships, and bring in political education, analysis of what's going on in the world, and how power is operating then folks who would otherwise be pulled into the appeal of the strong man have much more ability to hold complexity. There's no doubt that this is the way people can reject their current worldviews and change their opinion about what's happening.**
>
> **- Leader in the Community Organizing Field**

One interviewee who is a nationally recognized community organizing leader noted that a whole generation of organizers and volunteer leaders has entered the field without a solid grasp of the fundamentals of the craft, despite their enthusiasm. This failure to share the most effective skills across our movement and from one generation to the next lowers the overall impact of community organizing, even as groups and initiatives proliferate. This is why we need to reground community organizing

in fundamental techniques of relational power-building, while continuously welcoming innovations and challenging orthodoxies in the field. To be fair, there are many organizations who do practice strong, disciplined power-based organizing. We heard consistently through interviews that every organization and network in the field, including the strongest, wants to strengthen and improve their organizing skills.

**We see a dozen factors that have undermined the focus on base-building and relational power-building in community organizing and caused confusion for the philanthropic sector:**

1. **Digital-exclusive strategies** that conflate online engagement with relational organizing that builds lasting power through ongoing relationships

2. **Donor and political class-driven policy and electoral campaigns** that invest in transactional activity and isolated short-term outcomes such as voter turnout instead of power-building in strong organizations that can deliver and protect short as well as medium and long-term victories, and absorb volunteers and build power year over year for cumulative impact.

3. **Disruptions and breaks in the transmission of community organizing expertise as a craft,** leading to a lack of development and support for new and lead organizers. Organizers at all levels need sustainable and equitable practices inside organizations, including compensation that values their time, capacity, and labor appropriately, or they will leave the profession.

4. **A lack of local training programs within organizations** that could be supported by national infrastructure and training for trainers. Local training programs are essential to training new organizers and volunteer leaders and continuing the development of lead organizers as trainers.

5. **Donors who impose agendas, metrics and deliverables on their grantees** that are dissonant with power-building and long-term strategies.

6. **Lack of significant levels of independent resource generation** in community organizing groups, leading to an over-reliance on foundations and outside donors.

7. **The rise of mobilization as a stand-alone strategy for change** rather than an important tactic to change the landscape. It was relatively easy to mobilize during the Trump presidency, so groups failed to fully develop absorption strategies or understand how community organizing groups can fuel and benefit from mobilizations.

8. **Lack of a shared analysis of root causes and worldview** across organizations, networks, and alliances leading to a lack of alignment on mid-range and long-term strategy.

9. **Lack of clarity about power, its currencies, and the three dimensions of power,** which leads to confusion about the value of strategic constituency development and scale that retains deep connections to grassroots people, organizations, and relationships.

10. **Lack of discipline in power analysis** which leads to transactional and short-term campaigns that are not stepping stones to structural reforms and increased power.

11. **Over-reliance on narrative strategies separate from organizing,** when they are best paired together.

12. **Emphasis on the wrong metrics.** Philanthropy's emphasis on quantifiable campaign and policy outcomes prompts groups to prioritize external benchmarks and measures before power-building and accountability to organized people inside organizations.

The exploration of current challenges faced by organizers deserves a deeper dive than we can provide here, so we look forward to the full and thoroughgoing analysis that is forthcoming from our partners in the Strengthening Organizing Project at the Social and Economic Leaders Project.

**Part Four**

# WHAT IS GOOD ORGANIZING?

Relational, power-based community organizing can help defeat authoritarianism by building a multiracial pluralistic democracy with an inclusive economy.

If we truly want to revive and expand democracy, the fields of philanthropy and community organizing must partner to build power together, through shared practices of building relationships and power analysis from the ground up.

Both in extant literature and our stakeholder interviews, the case for organizing is made again and again as the essential strategy to win victories that relieve immediate suffering and make our democracy more structurally inclusive and our economy more fair. So what is good organizing, and why do we need a shared understanding of its best practices?

Synthesizing the wisdom of our interviewees, we arrive at the following definition of community organizing: **a disciplined method for building and wielding power that comes from organizing people through relationships into accountable organizations.**

Organizing is critical to advancing racial equity (Sen, 2003). Organizing is a disciplined practice of building power through organized people and their organizations (Bobo et al., 2010; McAlevey, 2016; Minieri & Getsos, 2007). Organizing can build majority support through strategic constituencies, as described in case studies of ISAIAH in Minnesota, The Amos Project in Ohio, Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), New Virginia Majority, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, and the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (Han et al., 2021). Organizing is the key to building the governing power of multiracial majorities (Burnham et al., 2022). Organizing makes a cost effective impact on people's lives (Ranghelli, 2009; Ranghell, 2017). Organizing is central to building an inclusive economy (Smiley and Gupta, 2022). Organizing is essential to building a multiracial pluralistic democracy (Kleinfeld, 2022) There are dozens more books, articles, and reports that prove that organizing works (see Appendix B).

Organizers use a lot of jargon - words like relational, narratives and issues, power, self-interest, base-building, networks and infrastructure. Each of these terms helps to explain an aspect of effective community organizing, but their meanings are not immediately clear to those new to the field. So let's unpack these further.

**Relational** means community organizing rooted in relationships that generate bonding capital inside communities and institutions and bridging capital across individual and institutional differences. The primary building block of relational organizing is one-to-one relationships that explore self-interest and values toward the goal of surfacing shared interests and common values that can bridge across differences.

Relational organizing demands of us a pragmatic toleration of beliefs and attitudes that are different from our own, combined with an idealistic faith in the possibility of solidarity (McArthur, 2023). This is the foundation of multiracial pluralism, with relational organizing as the means to build majorities that identify with the common interests and values underpinning democracy.

Community organizing is transformational for the people involved, generating an immediate experience of democracy that may have been lacking previously. A recent article points out that it teaches people the essential skills of democracy: how to build and sustain organizations together with others, listen to people with different perspectives, forge consensus, and understand where power lies in our political and economic institutions and how to negotiate with it. The author explains further that at a time when people have lost trust in democratic institutions, good organizing provides people a sense of agency and a belief in their capacity to influence and reform these institutions (McArthur, 2023).

**Narratives and issues** that resonate with multiracial majorities are a way to introduce new stories and actors into the public debate and imagination. Issue campaigns designed to resonate with majoritarian values, such as fairness, freedom, and dignity, are central to the bottom-up multiracial organizing and relationships needed to disrupt the zero-sum game of race and win a Solidarity Dividend for everyone (McGhee, 2021).

Additional resources on narrative power and its use in community organizing are available in Appendix B (ASO Communications, Narrative Initiative, Pop Culture Collaborative, We Make the Future).

We have discussed **power** previously, and it's worth repeating that the purpose of community organizing is to build and wield power. That "power for what" question we heard from several philanthropic interviewees who get this question from their colleagues is best answered with: to advance the shared self-interest of the community.

There is no confusion about the purpose of power on the community level. When you lack power, it's painfully obvious why you need it. The practice of community organizing builds on existing community networks and relationships to reorganize them for power (Garza, 2020).

**Base-building** describes another central aspect of community organizing: the aggregation of relationships into a power base, typically in a member-led organization. The virtuous cycle of power-building across organizing models is about developing volunteer leaders who can organize others, developing lead organizers who can train new organizers, and ensuring robust local, state, regional, and national training programs that support the development of volunteer leaders, new organizers, and lead organizers.

While specific metrics vary by community organizing model, there are underlying math equations that help outsiders assess if the virtuous cycle of power-building is happening inside an organization or network:

1. How many volunteer leaders are on **core teams** in the organization? How many people can they produce at public meetings and actions?

2. How many **volunteer leaders can organize** at the level of a new or lead organizer in the past year, five years, ten years?

3. How many **new organizers have been developed** into lead organizers in the past year, five years, ten years?

4. How many **relational one-to-one meetings** are happening between volunteer leaders and between paid organizers and volunteers every week, month, and year?

5. How many **house meetings** (small group meetings in homes, congregations, nonprofits, or other community meeting spaces) are organized every year by volunteer leaders as a way to recruit and develop more volunteer leaders?

6. How many **new members** have joined the organization in the past year, individuals or institutions?

7. How many members pay **dues** to the organization as a strategy for community-ownership and independence and what is the annual total for individual and/or institutional giving?

8. What is the **turnout capacity** of the organization for its biggest events and actions of the year?

9. How many volunteer leaders go through local **training** each year in the local organization? How many volunteer leaders are sent to national training each year?

10. How many new and lead organizers are **qualified to train** in local and national training? How many people does the local organization and network move through training for trainers each year?

11. For networks, how many organizations are in the **network** and what is the collective capacity and reach?

12. How many **different constituencies and geographies** comprise the organization, network, or alliances? What's the plan for expansion?

One academic interviewee described how good organizing is fundamental, not instrumental, in creating change that addresses structural racism, structural oppression, corporate power, and concentrated wealth. Their analysis of qualitative as well as quantitative metrics from campaigns makes it clear that **organizing delivers transformational improvements** for communities of poor, working-class, and middle-class people, as well as in intersectional ways on race, gender, sexual orientation, and more (Pastor et al., 2011).

On the purely transactional metric of return on investment (ROI), organizing is the most cost-effective way to improve the lives of all Americans, particularly for community members who have been excluded due to their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status.

Organizing is also uniquely positioned to **prevent autocracy** in the United States (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks assert that pro-democracy organizing can:

1. Build and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democracy united front that continues to push for structural/institutional reforms and contest for power, even after authoritarianism has appeared to consolidate its grip.

2. Protect, hold, and build local and community power through alternative institutions to address urgent communal problems, protect minority rights and lives, reinforce an oppositional pro-democratic culture, develop leadership, and build capacity for collective mobilization when needed.

3. Build pressure to induce defections among those loyal to the autocrat or authoritarian alliance, including through widespread economic noncooperation and labor action.

4. Prevent, deter, and strengthen resilience to increased threats of state or paramilitary violence through strategic planning and organized and disciplined actions, including building a capacity to anticipate, induce, and exploit defections; broaden inclusive participation; document paramilitary networks; publicize abuses; and demand local accountability.

There are different models for organizing people. Some organize solely individuals, others both individuals and institutions (congregations, nonprofits, small businesses, mutual aid associations, and more), and some are only composed of institutions, but all are part of this pro-democracy movement.

Community organizations relate to each other through movement **infrastructure**: networks, alliances, and coalitions that aggregate power toward winning stepping-stone policy reforms, structural reforms, and landscape shifts, with a shared north star of racial equity and justice (Building Movement Project, 2023). In the next section we will expand how the call for an Organizing Revival and the infrastructure needed to support it is central to the project of building a multiracial pluralistic democracy and inclusive economy.

# WHY WE NEED AN ORGANIZING REVIVAL

**The Organizing Revival is a ten-year project for People's Action Institute and movement allies to reground our movement for social change in the best practices of relational power-building so we can, together, build a multiracial pluralistic democracy as we move toward an inclusive economy**. This requires a massive infusion of resources into community organizing groups, networks, and new collaborative infrastructure to support its growth and development.

We envision a newly robust organizing ecosystem with new pathways between allies that can reorganize existing communications, policy, and research capacity in a more effective constellation that is oriented toward building and wielding power at the scale of the crises we face. Taken together, we envision a ten-year mid-range plan developed by the organizing field and supported by philanthropy that will make significant contributions to defeat and out compete the authoritarian movement and build a resilient multiracial pluralistic democracy and inclusive economy.

The choice of the term revival is intentional: a revival is an improvement in condition or strength. The onslaught against democracy by the corporate-conservative and authoritarian movements is dangerous and demoralizing. An Organizing Revival is a way to strengthen hope, joy, spirit, and power through the energy-generating relational practices of community organizing. A revival keeps our eyes on the prize: it directs our vision beyond the current obstacles, toward our goal of an inclusive society where all people thrive.

## There are six interdependent elements of the Organizing Revival:

**Building power that centers the virtuous cycle of developing volunteer leaders who can organize others, developing lead organizers who can train new organizers, and ensuring robust local, state, regional, and national training programs.** The metrics for power-building start with the quality of the leadership development pipeline for member-leaders who then become volunteer organizers, trainers, and strategists. They continue with the quality and scale of organizing training programs inside organizations that move members toward becoming leaders. The third key metric is the development of lead organizers who can recruit, train, and develop new organizers into lead organizers themselves. These three components are the virtuous cycle of base-building and power-building.

**Strategic constituency development using the Bigger We framework for constructing multiracial majorities, and then investing in collaborative and strategic base-building.** The Organizing Revival offers pathways to build multiracial majorities  - commonly referred to as "building a Bigger We" - by organizing deeply and broadly among key constituencies. This is a 50-state strategy that contests for power at every level. Developing a shared Bigger We framework among national networks and their affiliates, together with unaffiliated organizations, is a multi-year project. The good news is that organizing groups are already building an inclusive majority, which is especially important as the demographics of our country change. Organizers are hard at work building bridges across geographies (rural and small towns, mid-sized towns, suburbs, big cities), and constituencies (immigrants, women, LGBTQIA+, youth, seniors, people with disabilities, BIPOC, working-class, Native Americans, Jewish, Muslim, Asian, Latinx, African-Americans, and many more) who together comprise a multiracial majority they can also lead.

**An ideological framework that builds shared analysis on root causes and worldview, a vision of a future where all people thrive, and then alignment on mid-range strategy using the long-term agenda theory of change.** The highly participatory process that People's Action Institute used to craft its long-term agenda for change in 2008-2012 and then updated in 2017-2018 in partnership with the Grassroots Power Project could be updated and replicated as a field-wide activity with thousands of people (Grassroots Power Project & People's Action, 2013; Grassroots Power Project & People's Action, 2018). This is a means of building shared analysis and alignment on strategy that would be the basis of a field-wide mid-term (5-10 year) plan and long-term agenda (30-40 years).

**Disciplined, ongoing, bottom-up power analysis that leads to meaningful stepping-stone campaign victories and structural reforms that shift power and money from corporations and the wealthy to the people and the public, all of which starts with talking to organized people in local and state organizations about their collective self-interest.** Power analysis is the single most important tool that organizing brings to the work of strategy. While we look forward to the results of several projects that are updating the methodologies and tools for conducting power analyses, the organizing field's discipline and practices on power analysis will be central to identifying campaigns that can seize the imagination of majorities and advance mid-range plans and our long-term agenda.

**Landscape shifts that change the terrain from an uphill battle defined by the corporate-conservative and authoritarian movements to one more fair and inclusive.** This is achieved through mass mobilization, democracy and election reforms, nonviolent direct action, electoral campaigns, and narrative strategies that change the landscape.

**Stronger, more sustained, and more effective organizing infrastructure that supports all of the above.** The key to improving the quality of local and state community organizing is collaboration among networks and intermediaries that are delivering for the groups on the frontlines. The leadership of the community organizing sector is positioned for collaboration that will accelerate the Organizing Revival. The rising leadership of strategic, ambitious and generous women and BIPOC leaders in local, state and national organizations and networks opens the potential for collaborative movement infrastructure that accelerates and strengthens frontline organizing and impact.

Within the Organizing Revival, there must be a strong and symbiotic relationship between community organizing groups and their networks, with power-building organizations recognized as the highest form in the field of organizing.

Networks work in service to the needs of community organizing groups in a myriad of ways including fundraising, training and political education, organizational development, multi-state and national campaigns, and access to people and resources critical to the success of affiliates.

The functions of collaborative infrastructure span the full range of social change ecosystem functions: organizing, policy, power analysis, shared analysis, narrative and communications, data and research, civic and electoral programs, and fundraising. This is the infrastructure that will advance a long-term agenda for a multiracial pluralistic democracy and inclusive economy that addresses the root cause of structural racism, structural oppression, corporate power, and authoritarianism. Infrastructure ideas generated by interviewees for this paper include:

1. **Base-building experiments, innovation and learning.** New national infrastructure could support dozens of experiments with expectations of learning from all and finding innovations to deepen and replicate across the field of organizing.

2. **Partnerships that facilitate the recruitment and development of new organizers into lead organizers, and ongoing support for lead organizers to stay in the craft.** We could invest in learning about the best practices in mentoring, development, and retention of organizers. Joint recruitment pipelines and shared learning could increase the hiring and retention of working-class, BIPOC, women, and LGBTQIA+ organizers. Creation of a shared alumni network that engaged people who leave the organizing field for related careers as government workers, elected officials, philanthropy, and more would extend power-building across government and the economy. People should be compensated properly to begin and end their careers as organizers if that is what they want, instead of being subsumed into management.

3. **Construction of a movement-owned national campaign center.** We envision a federated structure and grassroots leadership and governance that replaces episodic and donor-driven D.C.-based consultant-managed policy campaigns. This would be permanent infrastructure that manages campaigns decided by the organizing field, in partnership with donors. Imagine this like a utility where competition for resources is off the table.

4. **Creation of a shared long-term agenda and mid-range plan for the organizing field.** This goes hand in hand with building a shared analysis of the root causes of the problems we face through a political education program that builds alignment on worldview and strategy. We envision a shared movement school that relies on the Grassroots Power Project and other allies to build this strategic education program.

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> **We have this saying in organizing that structures channel power. We need to recenter around deep investment in power building and sharing. We need to be much more intentional about working with and among everyday people. To build structures, coalitions, institutions that convey that power. None of us should go it alone. In going together, we must be going together toward something. To move in the direction of our aspirations, we need to have those centers of power.**
>
> **- National Network Leader**

5.  **Construction of a shared, rolling power analysis of state and national elected and other government officials and agencies, and corporations - as well as a power analysis of the field of organizing.** A collective, rolling power analysis database would strengthen campaigns and strategies across the organizing field. This would include the creation of updated power analysis tools and training on how to use them. We could also apply this to the field of organizing with a rolling landscape and power analysis of the depth and breadth of organizing in America. The power analysis of the organizing field could also drive collaborative decisions by local and state power-based organizing groups and alliances, and national networks, on a division of labor for an expansion of organizing in critical geographies and constituencies.

6.  **Scalable and collaborative digital operations.** This could lead to better ways to use digital resources to move people into relational organizing, strengthen digital fundraising operations from local and state groups to national networks, catalyze and energize mass mobilizations and absorption, and enable strategic coordination on local, state and national issues that will drive impact and power-building. Collaboration will increase data hygiene and cleanliness, and therefore overall efficiency.

7.  **Collaborative experiments and learning in independent resource generation.** Examples include the organizing cooperative model from Citizen Action of Wisconsin, individual and institutional paid membership models, digital fundraising, and more.

8.  **Develop new evaluation criteria and metrics for organizations and donors.** We could clarify metrics that increase accountability from the members and boards of directors of organizing groups rather than accountability to donors in ways that demonstrate impact.

9.  **Better storytelling about organizing geared toward member, public, and donor audiences that build a collective drumbeat of stories about the power and impact of organizing.** Use pop culture, digital channels, and other media to tell a bigger story about the role of organizing in making change.

10.  **Reorganize existing policy, research, narrative, think tanks and other forms of national infrastructure around this organizing-centered ecosystem.** There are many formations that could be connected more directly to supporting organizing groups on the frontlines of critical issues and meaning-making opportunities.

The next ten years also hold enormous potential to achieve a more inclusive economy. Over this period, $4 trillion in federal investments will roll out through four new programs (the American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure & Jobs Act, CHIPS Act and Inflation Reduction Act).

The scale of these investments is greater than those which created Social Security in the 1930s and brought universal healthcare to the poor and elderly in the 1960s. If managed well, this new wave of resources can have similarly transformative effects, creating good jobs and the infrastructure for a clean and sustainable economy, in both rural and urban communities.

But none of this will happen unless trusted community members and organizations advocate where they live to ensure resources go where they are needed most. This is why we are launching our call for an Organizing Revival now.

> **For donors, the Organizing Revival is a call to action to support both strong local and state organizing and invest deeply in infrastructure that strengthens the organizing field. These are mutually reinforcing investments, whose benefits we will explore in the next section.**

# WHAT PHILANTHROPY AND THE FIELD OF ORGANIZING NEED FROM EACH OTHER

For this paper, we spoke with nearly a dozen interviewees from the philanthropic sector, all of whom have demonstrated track records in supporting community organizing. These individuals spoke candidly about the systemic and structural challenges in their own institutions. They also reflected on what it would take for community organizing as a field and especially for national networks and infrastructure to demonstrate their value to funders in the current climate. We share the most salient insights from these conversations below.

First, the question of securing significant philanthropic investment for community organizing is not a question of values. The values expressed by the foundations that support organizing are, by and large, aligned with practitioners in the field. Instead, the barriers many funders face to investing in organizing are structural and systemic. As increasing numbers of former organizers enter the sector, we see some indications of positive change—especially in the real work underway to explicitly address structural racism.

As funders embrace priorities of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) internally, they are also strengthening their commitment to ending anti-Black racism and structural racism in their operations and grantmaking. This commitment also leads to the need for power analysis, an area where the organizing field could actively help philanthropy connect the dots between structural racism and the strategies to address it at the root.

Interviewees also agree that to do this work well, philanthropy needs a worldview that acknowledges the undertow effects of structural racism and corporate power and embraces a clearer understanding of the three dimensions of power and its currencies. To those who say philanthropy purposefully lacks ideology, we are reminded that structural racism and corporate power are baked into all of our institutions. If institutions do not have clarity about their ideology, they mistake neoliberalism for neutrality.

The funders we interviewed, many of whom come from community organizing backgrounds, spoke frankly about their institutions' limited understanding of the dynamics of power and the root causes of today's most pressing social issues. Several were also unflinching about the elite nature of philanthropic institutions and the ways their tendency to emulate corporate structure influences their worldview and outcomes. Many recognized the partial sea change that has resulted from philanthropy's efforts to embrace DEI internally, noting that their presence in the sector as former organizers, BIPOC, or both, is an indication of modest progress. However, interviewees also spoke of a glass ceiling for colleagues like themselves or others from "untraditional" backgrounds in philanthropy. While the rank of program officer or senior program officer confers some degree of autonomy and authority, it is minor in comparison to the C-Suites and Executive Boards of many institutions, many of which stubbornly remain majority white and male.

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> **The surge in donor investment has helped organizing groups scale their power. Yet in important ways, philanthropy's investment in organizing has also been constricted and limiting. Most donors take a transactional approach to community organizing, viewing it as a tactic for advancing policy or political objectives. They fail to adequately value organizing's role in fostering democratic norms and practices and strengthening social trust—important preconditions of a functional and equitable multiracial democracy.**
>
> - Loren McArthur (2023)

> "
> **We won't defeat authoritarianism with an elitist, top down, inside the beltway approach—but that is what many funders embrace. Most of the people who govern and work at foundations are themselves elite. They have been able to make those approaches work for themselves in the past on various issues. They have an inherent distrust of grassroots wisdom and irrational attachment to experts. The more we can get people from different backgrounds and experiences on boards and in key staff roles the more we can get to the kind of shared power and organizing as a strategy.**
>
> - Philanthropic sector interviewee

It is an uncomfortable truth that many modern philanthropies owe their existence to the direct line between pre-World War One colonialism and post-World War Two neoliberalism, as efforts to distribute surpluses of wealth that originated in slavery, low-wage work, stolen land, and extractive industries. Not only do they manage privately-controlled capital which has frequently been diverted from public coffers through tax avoidance, some feel reparations are due to the populations harmed by the original sources of this wealth, which has since been compounded by capital market investments that fueled the most abusive practices of racial capitalism.

Many philanthropies are addressing these realities through increased payouts, giving priority to communities most harmed by racial capitalism and colonialism, and stronger partnerships with BIPOC and other marginalized communities in the direction of their giving. Yet modern foundations also often share the same habit of many other private institutions of shielding their decision-making and capital investment strategies from public scrutiny (Giridharadas, 2018; Reich, 2018; Villanueva, 2018).

We understand that many philanthropic institutions cannot openly say what we say in this paper about confronting racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and conservative-corporate elites. Philanthropy that is committed to addressing racial equity and structural racism is starting from the right place. This quickly leads to power analysis and strategy to answer the underlying question: why is there racial inequity? Institutions will find that there are radical (in the sense of getting to the root) implications to a commitment to address structural racism which the fields of organizing and philanthropy can share (Pastor, et al., 2011).

There are additional resources to help philanthropic institutions understand community organizing, power, and infrastructure and how to best support the field, in Appendix B.

Other notable barriers within philanthropy include:

- **A lack of understanding of what good organizing is**. Many funders, especially those without a background in community-based organizations, are unfamiliar with what authentic, power-building organizing looks like. Numerous activities can be "sold" to funders under the guise of organizing that do not actually yield meaningful outcomes.

- **Fear of the political.** Longstanding conservatism in philanthropic law also stands in the way of bold action from the programmatic side of the house. Too often, bold and legal programmatic work gets shut down before it can get started because counsel fears it could constitute political activity or take the foundation over its legal lobbying limits.

- **Lack of clarity on how to connect values of racial equity to solutions that address structural racism.** The deeper you go to address the root causes of racial inequity, the clearer you need to be about power, power-building, power analysis, worldview, and theory of change.

- **Focus on transactional metrics and the short term.** The structure of contemporary grantmaking is almost unchanged from half a century ago. With its heavy focus on corporate systems, philanthropy's need to document short-term or time-limited results is antithetical to the realities of power-building and social change strategy.

- **Limited internal consistency about support for power-building work.** Bold action to invest in power building frequently draws the eyes of legal counsel, leading many funders who support community organizing do it in silos from their colleagues or by framing the strategy in a way that is less threatening to institutional priorities.

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**I think the thing that is one of the hang ups is that philanthropy is worried about scale. They say it's too incremental. The fear/hesitation is how do we build big? [The organizing field] hasn't always demonstrated how we scale up. We need to do the slow, difficult incremental growth and we also need to do the much bigger scale mass influence needed to blunt the right right now and to shift the conversation. This dual track is what's missing, and communicate that we need both. And that they help each other, not that they're contradictory.**

- National Network Leader

What can philanthropy and community organizers do together to overcome these barriers? Some of the top recommendations we heard include:

- **Provide fresh, clear stories of impact.** The victories of the Civil Rights era are undoubtedly powerful, but proponents need contemporary examples of places where community organizing has built power in sustained, meaningful ways and changed people's lives for the better.

- **Articulate a clear narrative of what will happen if we don't act**. Too many funders remain insulated from the realities of our current moment. We must tell a clearer story about the consequences of failing to stop the rise of authoritarianism and related intersecting crises.

- **Stop competition and gatekeeping and play to our strengths**. One common refrain we heard from funder stakeholders was their disapproval of the gatekeeping function some networks seek to play, serving as intermediaries between grantors and grantees. As a sector, we must do better at finding ways to build collaborative infrastructure and limit competition for resources if we are to restore confidence in the value networks add, which funders do recognize, especially when it comes to training and national policy change.

- **Strengthen shared analysis of root causes and alignment on strategy across the pro-democracy ecosystem that includes philanthropy and the organizing field**. The misalignment of worldview, analysis, and strategy in the pro-democracy ecosystem is preventing us from advancing a multiracial pluralistic democracy and out-competing authoritarians for critical constituencies. Investing in shared analysis and strategy is the solution.

- **Tap into regional, community, and women's foundations**. With their donor-advised structure, these institutions are ripe for recruiting to support place-based power-building work.

We welcome philanthropy's embrace of diversity, equity and inclusion, and growing commitment to address anti-Black racism and structural racism at its root (The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2021). To those within philanthropy who share these priorities, we recommend finding and engaging with fellow travelers who share your worldview. These may be in your current institution or across institutions. Through conversation, as in all good organizing, you can uncover shared values and interests, and find opportunities to bring foundation trustees, executives and program staff together with organizers, grassroots organizations and their members to build relationships and learn from each other. This is the work of power analysis and strategy applied internally to philanthropic institutions and the field of philanthropy.

As organizers and funders who believe in democracy, we are in a symbiotic relationship. Together, we can use tools and exercises to advance a shared worldview, analysis, and strategy to build a multiracial pluralistic democracy where everyone's voices and votes matter and an inclusive economy where everyone can thrive.

## Conclusion

The intertwined crises that are generating uncertainty and fanning the flames of authoritarianism are alarming - but they should not be disarming. The good news is that the antidotes to authoritarianism are in every community and available to be activated right now. While there are several interdependent strategic pathways that involve government, business, and civic action to build a multiracial pluralistic democracy and inclusive economy, a revival of community organizing will supercharge this work and provide a foundation of support for related strategies.

There is enormous potential to achieve social justice and economic equity over the next ten years in ways that reduce economic insecurity and advance the project of building an inclusive economy. With unprecedented federal resources allocated to create good jobs and infrastructure in a clean and sustainable economy, we need trusted community members and organizations who will advocate where they live to ensure resources go where they are needed most. And none of this will become reality unless we restore faith in democracy and overcome the mistrust that divides our society. This is why we need an Organizing Revival now.

The vast majority of people in the United States and around the globe want peace, fairness, freedom, economic security, and an end to political violence. They are ready to be organized in their communities and across differences. Someone has to knock on their doors, listen to them with curiosity and compassion, and invite them to meet with neighbors, co-workers, and fellow congregants to talk about their common values, interests, and issues.

## This is the essential work of community organizing.
## This is the promise of an Organizing Revival.

# Appendix A · Interviews

**Sulma Arias**, Executive Director, People's Action Institute

**Ana Garcia Ashley**, Executive Director, Gamaliel

**Deborah Axt,** Consultant to the Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project; former Co-Executive Director of Make the Road New York, Action and States

**Seth Borgos**, Director of Research and Program Development, Community Change

**Ryan Canney**, Senior Program Officer, Economic Justice, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund

**Libero Della Piana**, Senior Strategist, Alliance for a Just Society

**Aaron Dorfman**, President and CEO, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

**Damareo Cooper**, Co-Executive Director, Center for Popular Democracy

**Keesha Gaskins-Nathan**, Program Director, Democratic Practice, Rockefeller Brothers Fund

**George Goehl**, former Executive Director of People's Action Institute

**Hahrie Han**, Inaugural Director of the SNF Agora Institute, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Professor of Political Science, and Faculty Director of the P3 Research Lab at Johns Hopkins University

**Richard Healey**, Board Member, Grassroots Power Project

**Reverend Alvin Herring**, Executive Director, Faith in Action

**Madeleine Leader**, Director of Data Strategy + Analytics, Center for Popular Democracy

**Anna Loizeaux**, Senior Program Officer, JPB Foundation

**Analilia Mejia**, Co-Executive Director, Center for Popular Democracy

**Maurice Mitchell**, National Director, Working Families Party

**Amy Morris**, Interim President, Neighborhood Funders Group

**Scot Nakagawa**, Executive Director, 22nd Century Initiative

**Shuya Ohno**, Director, Just and Inclusive Society Project, Democracy Fund

**Manuel Pastor**, Distinguished Professor of Sociology and American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California and the director of the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI): Data and Analysis to Power Social Change

**Deepak Pateriya**, former Managing Director, Community Change

**Doran Schrantz**, Executive Director, ISAIAH

**Martin Trimble**, Co-Director, Industrial Areas Foundation

**Aditi Vaidya**, President, Mertz-Gilmore Foundation

**Javier Valdés**, Director of the Civic Engagement and Government Program, Ford Foundation

**Dorian Warren**, Co-President, Community Change

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