



Rainbow Whitehouse by Gregg Chadwick

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# RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY

DEMOCRACY: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER ELECTION YEARS



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# A message from the Vice President and Chief External Affairs Officer

Dear Reader,

On the eve of the 2024 United States presidential election, we find ourselves raising the alarming question of whether democracy in the United States as we know it will survive. This edition of *Responsive Philanthropy (RP)* confronts some of the ways philanthropy contributed to getting us to this challenging place and what is needed as we march forward, regardless of the outcome of the election.

In these tumultuous times, the fragility of our democratic institutions and the forces undermining them have become glaringly apparent. As we confront these challenges, these 5 incisive *RP* articles shed light on the threats to democracy and propose vital solutions to fortify our collective future.

My NCRP colleague Katherine Ponce provides a sobering analysis of how right-wing nonprofits have channeled significant resources to dismantle democratic norms. Highlighting the explosive growth of anti-democratic funding, her piece serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to counteract these forces with strategic, values-driven philanthropy.

This issue of *RP* offers a robust critique and thoughtful analysis of the current philanthropic and political climate. Authors and co-authors include Annissa G. McCaskill and Jia Lian Yang; Sulma Arias, KD Chavez, Denise Collazo, Lauren Jacobs, and Peggy Shepard; Rana Elmir; and Rye Young. These authors challenge us to reimagine our approaches to funding, activism and solidarity by urging us to shift from reactionary stances to proactive and principled engagement. As we grapple with these issues, let us heed their call to action with urgency and resolve.

Funders should be supporting year-round civic engagement and democracy efforts – not just in election cycles – and move more money faster and earlier like the All by April campaign did earlier this year. It’s impossible to hold on to progress if funding delays require organizations to completely restart their work every other year.

This issue of *Responsive Philanthropy* underscores a crucial message: Our democracy’s resilience depends on addressing both the overt and subtle threats it faces. By embracing thoughtful, proactive strategies and shifting our philanthropic focus, we can better uphold the principles of equity and justice. As we engage with these insights, let us commit to fostering a more robust and inclusive democracy for all.



Unidos en la lucha,

**Russell Roybal**

**VICE PRESIDENT & CHIEF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OFFICER**

# 10 years after Ferguson: How philanthropy can bridge funding gaps for Black and brown-led organizations

By Annissa McCaskill and Jia Lian Yang

*“The principle of equality, which is at the core of democratic values, has very little meaning in a world where the oligarchy is taking over.”*

- bell hooks

From the Trans-Atlantic human trafficking massacre to the impacts of the current climate crisis, a consistent thread in the story of Black people in America. How can responsive philanthropy nurture equity and justice? The United States attempts to portray itself as an ideal democracy where representatives are elected by “the people.” But is it possible for a country to truly be democratic when it was founded on the systematic exclusion of Indigenous, Black and brown people? This country has a “democracy issue,” and responsive philanthropy is unfortunately the main answer to it.

But why are we more often reactionary, rather than proactive in our philanthropy? Why is philanthropy that empowers the disenfranchised most often a response to crisis, rather than the basis of a new, improved approach to resourcing organizations and initiatives? Why, after the crisis simmers down, can we not sit in the real discomfort that we feel, the tension between the world we live in and the one we aim to create? The answer, dear friends, is that democracy and traditional philanthropy must fulfill their promises for those who typically are only identified as “other.”

## PHILANTHROPY'S RESPONSE TO FERGUSON

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown Jr., was murdered by a white police officer as he was walking to his grandmother's home in Ferguson, Missouri. I found



Annissa McCaskill

out about his death via social media. I watched as people uploaded images as events unfolded. Then I watched “democracy” stall. Michael's body lay in the street in front of Canfield Green Apartments for 4.5 hours before it was removed. The dignity of being covered was given by a resident who provided a sheet, not by the authorities who were on site to “investigate.” His death was treated as if it was a minor administrative issue until the community made clear that it was not and insisted that it be treated like the deep, tragic loss that it was.

The Ferguson Uprising was a response to the status quo. In the uprising, we witnessed what happens when generations of residents are systematically excluded from justice,



Jia Lian Yang

resources and yes – democracy. We also saw a flood of responsive philanthropy and goodwill statements. However, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity noted in “Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice”: “Even with the increased attention to the impact and importance of Black-led organizing, especially since the Ferguson uprising in 2014 and the growing focus on Black Lives Matter movement work, **of all funding directed toward Black communities, the percentage awarded for grassroots organizing in 2015–2018 never exceeded 2 percent.**”

Now, 10 years after the murder of Michael Brown Jr., we see a walking back of the promise of responsive philanthropy and goodwill statements,

even as efforts to advance anti-racist systems change come under fire. Local and national peer organizations dedicated to creating a new, more equitable society are being told by the philanthropic community that priorities have shifted, and their work is no longer aligned. In short, social justice and equity are no longer trendy, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is now being used as a slur.

In the face of growing white supremacist, fascist and authoritarian movements, the philanthropic community seems to be running scared. Now, more than ever, we need it to boldly step forward. The way to restore democratic movements is not only funding anti-racist systems change organizations and initiatives, but also providing long-term commitments to grassroots organizing.

## CENTERING COMMUNITY GRANTMAKING

We used the phrase “Ferguson is everywhere” during the uprising. This was not just a reference to the rage felt in the wake of Michael’s murder, but the understanding that the foundation of our democracy is flawed. Broken societies built on exclusive social contracts aren’t easily fixed, nor are they stable.

Forward Through Ferguson (FTF) was created to carry on the legacy of the Ferguson uprising and to ensure that the 189 calls to action outlined by the Ferguson Commission are never forgotten. Since we were founded, responsive philanthropy has been essential in supporting our work promoting justice for all, youth at the center, opportunities to thrive and racial equity. At FTF, we advance racial healing and justice by addressing the funding disparities that Black and brown-led organizations face compared to their white counterparts.

The Ferguson Commission report called for the creation of a 25-year endowed and managed Racial Equity Fund to support organizations and ini-

tatives that promote racial healing and justice. For the St. Louis Regional Racial Healing + Justice Fund (RH + JF), which was the pilot program of the Racial Equity Fund, FTF served as project manager while the Deaconess Foundation served as the fiscal administrator. The RH + JF was managed by a community governance board composed of between 9 to 15 Black and brown residents from across the St. Louis region. Across 3 RH + JF cycles, the community governance board distributed over \$1.3 million to Black- and brown-led initiatives in areas like education, arts, racial justice, maternal health, youth mentorship, urban farming, holistic wellness and general capacity building.

Those involved with the RH+JF were firmly committed to the kind of proactive and forward-thinking social justice grantmaking that community residents have long sought from philanthropic partners. As the national multiracial nonprofit organization Resource Generation states, “social justice philanthropy focuses on the root causes of social, racial, economic and environmental injustices.” Within a democracy, philanthropic organizations have a unique opportunity to support initiatives that strengthen civic engagement, protect democratic values and promote social justice. The RH + JF evaluative process will end in September with a presentation of what has been learned.

However, one thing that remains uncertain is whether we can secure long-term partners and resources to create an endowed, perpetual fund. This has been a question that has long hovered over the process. At its inception, financial partners and resources for the RH + JF were scarce. Now, at the completion of the RH + JF pilot, we are still seeking investors willing to join us in this generationally impactful work.

By investing in the Racial Healing + Justice Fund, philanthropic organizations can support the transformative work be-

ing done by Forward Through Ferguson and contribute to building a more equitable and just society. We believe the Fund serves as a model for responsive philanthropy that prioritizes the needs of marginalized communities while addressing systemic barriers that perpetuate racial disparities.

## THE FUNDING DISPARITIES THAT WEIGH DOWN BLACK- AND BROWN-LED ORGANIZATIONS

Despite the important work being done by FTF and other Black- and brown-led organizations, there exists a significant disparity in the amount of funding we receive compared to our white-led counterparts. Studies have shown that philanthropic dollars are disproportionately allocated to organizations led by white individuals, while Black- and brown-led organizations struggle to secure the resources they need to sustain their work.

Recent local fundraising data illustrates that point too clearly. In 2022, the local Give STL Day initiative raised \$4.053 million for local nonprofits spanning 12 categories, including human services, animal and health focused organizations. Less than 2% of the funds raised went to Black-led and Black-benefiting organizations. Results remained similar in 2023, which led the St. Louis Community Foundation to conduct focus groups and address the funding disparities experienced by Black-led and Black-serving organizations.

Of course, communities are not standing still but mobilizing to shift practices. In 2018, Young, Black & Giving Back Institute Founder Ebonie Johnson Cooper created Give 8/28 Day – a giving day focused on and dedicated to grassroots, Black-led and Black-serving nonprofits. In 2023, this national day of giving raised \$220,000 to support Black-led and Black-serving nonprofits. Yet we cannot do it alone. We know that it is possible to focus on addressing funding gaps experienced

by Black-led and serving organizations and that we need to continue pressing for data that can evaluate and inform such efforts, both locally and nationally.

This funding disparity reflects broader systemic issues of inequity and funding gap and supports the transformative work being done by organizations like Forward Through Ferguson. Addressing the disparities in funding for Black- and brown-led organizations is crucial for advancing equity and social justice. Philanthropic organizations must actively work to dismantle systemic barriers and biases that hinder access to resources and support for Black- and brown-led organizations. By centering DEI in their grantmaking practices, philanthropy can help create a more level playing field and amplify the impact of organizations working toward racial healing and justice.

## A CRUCIAL TIME FOR RESOURCING – AND DEMOCRACY

Moving forward, it is imperative that philanthropic organizations embrace responsive philanthropy as a guiding principle in their work. By remaining attuned to evolving community needs, fostering collaboration and partnership, and prioritizing equity and justice in their grantmaking practices, philanthropy can play a

pivotal role in nurturing a more inclusive, equitable, and participatory democracy.

In conclusion, responsive philanthropy in democracy is a powerful force for positive change, particularly in addressing racial disparities and advancing social justice. By supporting initiatives that empower marginalized communities, amplify diverse voices, and promote equity and inclusion, philanthropic organizations can contribute to building a more just and equitable society for all. Through strategic partnerships, capacity-building efforts, and a commitment to amplifying marginalized voices, philanthropy can help bridge the funding gap for Black- and brown-led organizations and foster a more inclusive and equitable philanthropic sector.

At Forward Through Ferguson, we acknowledge that we often sit in discomfort between the future that we are working toward and the reality within which we exist. In the spirit of responsive philanthropy, let us continue to work together toward a future where all voices are heard, all communities are empowered, and all individuals have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to a more just and equitable society. We ask that the philanthropic community join us in sitting in discomfort until ALL can be comfortable.



“From Ferguson, to Baltimore, to Minneapolis” by Gregg Chadwick

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*Anmisa G. McCaskill is the Executive Director of Forward Through Ferguson, where she is responsible for supporting staff in its work of centering racial equity in systemic systems change, building organizational stability, and advancing strategic leadership. She is a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, a graduate of the HBCU Livingstone College, and has forged a career shattering barriers as the first African American to be both elected to serve as President of the M.P.A. Student's Association and nominated for the prestigious Presidential Management Fellowship at Indiana State University, and the first African American to hold municipal positions in Chesterfield, MO; University City, MO; and Belleville, IL.*

*Jia Lian Yang (she/they), MDiv/MSW, is a storyteller, cultural worker, and facilitator. Born and raised in San Jose, California, she came to St. Louis in 2012 to pursue a Master of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis and Master of Divinity at Eden Theological Seminary. They are the Director of Storytelling & Communications at Forward Through Ferguson, where they manage data storytelling initiatives such as #Transforming911 and craft narratives around grassroots efforts to advance Racial Equity.*

# 5 lessons learned about trust-based philanthropy

By Sulma Arias, KD Chavez, Denise Collazo, Lauren Jacobs and Peggy Shepard

As democracy makers, and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx women who lead 4 national networks, we spend a lot of time fighting for and acting into multiracial feminist democracy. Together, we are working diligently to ensure that people’s voices are heard and acted upon in local settings, states, regions, tribal communities, nationally and even internationally.

On a daily basis, we and our member organizations engage in democratic practices – majority rule, free and fair elections, and people-centered decision-making – such as supporting warehouse and farm workers organizing together for safer jobs and renters talking with their neighbors about unfair rent hikes. In communities from Alaska to Alabama we influence decisions about the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the rates our families pay for water and energy. We work together to ensure that everyone has safe and healthy places to live, work, play and pray.

We embarked on an experiment in collective leadership, participatory grantmaking and trust-based philanthropy 6 years ago. Together, we co-created a shared set of

goals to redistribute power to the people, build a stronger, more coordinated infrastructure for change, and achieve greater environmental justice outcomes.

Here are 5 lessons we learned along the way:

## 1. START WITH TRUST

Because change happens at the speed of trust, the first step was to build trust between our networks and with our philanthropic partners. Dana Bourland, Senior Vice President at JPB Foundation, remembers, “We started by commissioning research on the

landscape. We learned from that research on the landscape of networks focused on community organizing. We learned from that research that the members and participants of *networks matter* but are often under-resourced compared to the organization holding the network. We invited representatives from 4 networks to consider working together with us to try strengthening the larger ecosystem. They took us up on our offer. We were careful not to require that they work together. We weren’t interested in creating forced partnerships. What has emerged, though, has been dynamic and really magical.”



Sulma Arias



KD Chavez



Denise Collazo



Lauren Jacobs



Peggy Shepard

As we began our work together, we made some of the earliest and most consequential decisions. We asked difficult but important questions such as: How would we decide how much funding to give to individual groups within our networks? What information would we request from grantees at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the grant? What role should donor partners play? How will we govern ourselves?

In 2018, we launched an intermediary fund called the Fund to Build Grassroots Power. We have governed it to serve as a movement-accountable resource. Since its inception, the fund has carefully built trust among partners while streamlining \$34 million in funding to 135 grassroots groups in every region of the country, Guam and Puerto Rico. The combined 2023 budgets of all the grantees is \$262,219,343.

We established 4 central values and definitions of each to guide our practice of building trust. The 4 values are inclusivity, responsiveness, efficiency and transparency. Each of the values are defined and listed on the Fund's website for all to see. For example, we define efficiency like this: "We try to minimize the burden the applicant organizations face during the application and reporting processes so community members can spend less time trying to access funding and more time on their important work. We also try to balance the time our advisory board members spend guiding the fund's strategy and decision-making with the need

for authentic input from field leaders." By stating our values and defining what it looks like when we successfully act into our values, we build trust.

A key orientation that sped up the trust-building process happened when leaders – initially from The JPB Foundation and then The Waverley Street Foundation – made it clear that grantmaking recommendations would be made by the groups. That was a huge step toward building trust.

Handing over decision-making authority about recommendations to the groups communicated to us that they trusted our analysis and our ability to make strategic choices about groups across and within our networks.

## 2. COLLABORATE, DON'T COMPETE

The 4 of us embody the values and principles of feminist leadership, and together we share a vision of a feminist economy that ensures a just transition from fossil fuels to a regenerative economy can happen. "[Feminist] leadership is a process by which women assert their rights by continually evaluating relevant experiences, questioning their roles in society, challenging power structures and effectively catalyzing positive social change."

And since women are overwhelmingly hit first and worst by the effects of climate inaction, we are inspired by each other as we continue to chart a path forward.

It's not lost on us that this big, collaborative effort of 4 national networks with 190 affiliated groups in every region of the United States has worked in part because we ourselves are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, queer and femme. As people who have survived unspeakable oppression, we are responding using tools given us by our ancestors – moving together, not separately, toward solutions that shift power toward different ways of knowing.

We made the collective choice early on how to assign funds across the 4 networks. Choosing that formula was another initial step in building goodwill among the networks. We decided to allocate funds to each of the networks in proportion to the number of member organizations they had. We also created a way to consider the groups that were affiliated with multiple networks. Having that clarity early on made it easier for us as networks to be accountable to each other. Transparency about decision-making was also key, because we all had the information in front of us if there was ever a question.

Since 2018, our networks have run 6 dockets together. In our most recent docket, we recommended \$10.1 million over 2 years in grants. Of the groups who received funding, 87% of grantee organizations are led by people of color, and 77% of them are led by people who identify as women, femmes, trans or gender non-binary.

*"As people who have survived unspeakable oppression, we are responding using tools given us by our ancestors – moving together, not separately, toward solutions that shift power toward different ways of knowing."*



### 3. SHOW GRANTEES YOU TRUST THEM

In the same way that the donors to the Fund have acted based on their trust in us, we communicate that we trust our member groups. We use the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF) crafted and co-led by partners in philanthropy, evaluation and nonprofits to make sure that the weight of evaluation falls mostly on the Fund instead of grantees.

The Fund requests very little information from grantees. This is possible because as network leaders, we have a lot of context about local affiliates and the context in which they are doing their work. The grant application process is very simple. We ask basic questions like: What is your budget? Are you a 501(c)3? Can you submit one paragraph describing your organization? All grants are general operating grants. We are making multi-year commitments to grantees. We don't propose to know what groups need to continue their incredible work. The decision on how to spend the funds should belong entirely to them.

The groups in which we are investing do incredible work with relatively few resources. That's why we are proud to give them as much flexibility as possible. We also don't tell them what they need to report on. Instead, we ask for a brief report. What we have found is that these brief reports are packed with information. We trust that they will share the information with us that is the most important.

Sometimes, a group may require a reminder to send in their report. We reach out, and if they need to submit their report as a telephone conversation that we transcribe, we do that.

The Fund's evaluation also includes the feedback we've solicited from our member groups about what works for them and doesn't on the funding process. We then reflect on this collectively and



shift our practices accordingly. We don't require grantees to participate in interviews or surveys. If they do, we compensate them for their time. This figure demonstrates the exchange between funders and grassroots organizations through the Fund to Build Grassroots Power.

### 4. INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE

The Fund's trust-based grantmaking is grounded in 4 forms of interdependent infrastructure that create an ecosystem that makes change happen. These include local/state organizations, networks that support collectives of local/state organizations, networks and their members collaborating with each other through the Fund and other spaces, and the Fund itself as a form of collaborative cross-network infrastructure.

This year, we are putting together an impact report to highlight the wide range of interventions grantees are using to make

an impact. Grantees are making impressive progress. They are actively fighting to close down dirty coal plants and taking legal action against federal agencies who allow toxins to contaminate drinking water. They are educating community members about ways to reduce emissions, like providing reduced transit fares for young people and teaching them about heat islands and how to be part of their community's public decision-making process.

While our work together up until now has focused mostly on environmental and climate justice issues, the grants we make are general support grants. The groups we are investing in are the people who serve on the front lines in communities. This works well because the same group that's holding local governments accountable for transitioning their fleets to electric vehicles may also be helping farmworkers get access to wages taken from them via wage theft. While philanthropy is often divided up into discrete issue areas, people in communities are not.



## 5. LOOKING AHEAD TO THE NEXT 5 YEARS

The strength and stability that trust-based philanthropy can provide alongside our movements is now more critical than ever given the current political landscape. Recognizing the urgency of this work and the need to have a dedicated leader building the fund, the steering committee hired Denise Collazo as inaugural executive director. Denise will partner with us to continue to grow the resources available to grassroots groups who fight to advance a just transition from fossil fuels to a regenerative economy, with examples including reducing energy burdens, advancing clean energy and ensuring clean water for all. Generally, a household energy burden over 6% is considered unaffordable.

We are proud to be co-founders of this important endeavor. We are happy to be partnering with the JPB Foundation, the Waverley Street Foundation and future philanthropic partners. While we have plenty of ideas about how to make the Fund better, we are reminded as organizers to continue to follow the expertise of grassroots groups that are on the frontlines of building a multiracial functioning democracy in the face of rising authoritarianism. Their vision for the future of the Fund is our north star and will guide our next chapter. With this deep trust and direction set from the ground up, we're excited to see what groups across the country supported by the Fund continue to win for our communities in the coming years.

***Sulma Arias** brings over 20 years of organizing experience to her role as Executive Director for People's Action Institute and People's Action. Sulma's organizing work spans many issues, including immigrant rights, voting rights, and economic justice, and her practice has always centered directly impacted people to build power. Sulma has worked closely with local and national organizations to build and advance strategic campaigns that build power. Sulma also has extensive experience training organizers and growing organizing capacity and building strong community-led organizations across the country.*

***KD Chavez** is the Interim Deputy Director of Climate Justice Alliance. They are a revolutionary mother, organizer, and strategist who leads by way of ancestral knowledge and the land. They have spent the last decade in social justice philanthropy moving millions to the frontlines and working to advance freedom through culture shift and intentional investments.*

***Denise Collazo** is the Executive Director of the Fund to Build Grassroots Power. For twenty-five years, Denise helped build Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network), the nation's largest organizing network of faith and spiritual communities. Most recently she served as Chief of External Affairs. Denise cut her teeth organizing in San Francisco during Mayor Willie Brown's term. She has run large voting programs at local, state, and national levels and has raised \$100M+ for grassroots organizations efforts.*

***Lauren Jacobs** is the Executive Director of PowerSwitch Action (formerly the Partnership for Working Families). A longtime labor organizer with UNITE, SEIU, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center, she has organized thousands of janitors and security officers, and led campaigns that won breakthroughs in wages, healthcare, and other benefits. Lauren is a proud native New Yorker, a daughter of Harlem, an intermediate knitter, and a terrible but dedicated artist.*

***Peggy M. Shepard** is co-founder and executive director of WE ACT for Environmental Justice and has a long history of organizing and engaging Northern Manhattan residents in community-based planning and campaigns to address environmental protection and environmental health policy locally and nationally. She has successfully combined grassroots organizing, environmental advocacy, and environmental health community-based participatory research to become a national leader in advancing environmental policy and the perspective of environmental justice in urban communities — to ensure that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment extends to all.*

# A clarion call: How attacks on U.S. Palestinian solidarity movements undermine our democracy

By Rana Elmir

On September 24, 2001, President George W. Bush announced an executive order expanding the Department of the Treasury's authority to freeze the assets of any non-profit organization designated as a "terror" entity. The move – overly broad, steeped in anti-Muslim bias and lacking in basic due process mechanisms – signaled a pattern of cynical tactics, secret evidence and opaque procedures used to stifle Muslim non-profit organizations for years to come. All told, about 30 Muslim relief organizations were targeted – some were abruptly shut down and others closed under the weight of shrinking donor pools.

Today, we find ourselves at a similar inflection point with unrelenting federal and philanthropic scrutiny and the suppression of Black, African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian (BAMEMSA) organizations advocating for Palestinian human rights in the U.S. and abroad. But today, we must take a different path – the very existence of our social movements and our democracy demands it.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS: THE 5TH ESTATE

Non-profit organizations that make up our social justice movements are an immutable part of our democracy, acting as a de facto 5th estate. They hold our government accountable, advocate for policy changes, change hearts and minds, and ensure that those who are marginalized have the opportunity to build and assert their power.

At their best, our movements embody our democratic ideals of transparency, justice and equity, holding a mirror to our society and demanding better for us all. In fact, it



Rana Elmir

has always been "We the People" through the vehicle of our movements that have forced change, shaped our democracy and pushed beyond our societal comforts toward lasting justice. The path to justice has always been winding – even elusive – and those in power have too often served as obstacles rather than guides. It is through our movements holding steadfast and pushing our country toward our ideals that we have learned that backlash is often a tool to impede our progress. Similarly, as Palestinian human rights voices that make up our movements suffer the return of McCarthy Era tactics that target them with harsh consequences because of their political affiliations, identity, the communities they serve or the issues they support, it is not just these organizations that suffer – our entire social justice movement and consequently the very foundation of our participatory democracy is made more vulnerable.

## YESTERDAY'S TACTICS, TODAY'S FIGHT

BAMEMSA movements and allies are facing intense scrutiny. Politically motivated investigations, congressional witch hunts, unchallenged media

narratives, funder retrenchment, physical and digital threats and attacks, and baseless lawsuits have reemerged as the norm. These tactics are not new. The United States has had a long history of using federal investigations and financing laws to suppress Palestinian solidarity activists. The Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) and Palestine Legal document this in a recent [white paper](#), noting that the first mention of "terrorism" in a federal statute appeared in 1969 after the 1967 war between Israel and a coalition of Arab armies and was aimed at restricting humanitarian aid to Palestinians, thus equating Palestinians and relief efforts with terrorism.

Whether in 1969, 2001 or today, the goals have been transparent – bleed these organizations dry, raise the specter of fear and suspicion to isolate them from broader social justice movements and philanthropy, and limit their ability to advocate effectively for the issues they care about – namely Palestinian human rights. While the attacks are numerous, a few are particularly insidious:

**Revoking Nonprofit Status:** The House passed bipartisan legislation ([H.R. 6408/S.4136](#)) empowering the Treasury Department to shut down nonprofits under the value label of "terror-supporting," echoing and expanding the Bush administration's 2001 executive order. [Many RISE Together Fund \(RTF\)](#) grantees and partners are pushing back against this legislation recognizing that if it becomes law, it will be used to also target political foes on issues such as abortion, climate change, police accountability and LGBTQ rights. As Kia Hamadanchy, senior policy counsel at

the American Civil Liberties Union, put it, “You’ve basically left a loaded gun on the table,” with the implication that it can be used indiscriminately in the hands of authoritarians interested in consolidating power and eliminating critics.

#### **Questionable Congressional Actions:**

Earlier this year, the House Oversight and Education and Workforce Committee chairs demanded that the Treasury Department provide Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs) for 20 nonprofits and funders – some loosely or erroneously – linked to Palestinian solidarity efforts on university campuses. The Suspicious Activity Reports are not evidence of a crime. Similarly, and using the same list of organizations, another legislator demanded all correspondence between these organizations and the State Department, while a group of 16 legislators sent a letter to the Internal Revenue Service requesting an investigation of several Palestinian solidarity organizations. Even former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi got into the mix calling on the FBI to investigate pro-Palestinian protesters. The naked motivation of each of these efforts is to push an unsubstantiated and dangerous narrative

that protests, advocacy and funding for Palestinian solidarity is not connected to organic community-led movements, but instead to foreign influences.

#### **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation and Politically**

**Motivated Investigations:** Some groups have been persistently smeared by local, state and federal authorities. In October 2023, the Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares announced a far-reaching investigation into American Muslims for Palestine, a United States-based Palestine solidarity group. Soon after, several civil lawsuits by private citizens were filed that baselessly called U.S. non-profit organizations propaganda divisions of Hamas. While many of these tactics have failed to result in judgements in the past, the goal is to push organizations to divert their time, energy and funds to defend against baseless allegations and impede their activities into the future.

### **INAPPROPRIATE FUNDING BEHAVIOR**

Yet, these political attacks are not the full story. For months, many movement

organizations and some funders have sounded alarm bells to concerning funder behaviors or as a coalition of Jewish donors and philanthropy professionals have described it: “The harmful practice of withdrawing funding for and/or delaying payments to organizations that speak up for the lives and safety of the Palestinian people.” The undue pressure from philanthropy not only compromises the independence of nonprofits but also weakens our broader social justice movement by creating divisions, limiting the scope of advocacy and often working against the foundation’s own goals of strengthening our democracy.

In one egregious example, a field leader shared that a private foundation questioned whether it would be prudent to give a large grant toward non-partisan civic engagement activities led by an Arab-American organization given community anger over the current administration’s policy position on the violence in Gaza. The implication being that the increased political participation of Arab Americans would be harmful to securing electoral wins for democratic candidates. Make no mistake, under resourcing organizations that are often the only connection communities have to the polls has the effect of suppressing Arab-American turnout. Not only is this questioning and potential impact wholly inappropriate and abusive, but it also goes against every principle we hold dear as funders committed to the inclusion of historically marginalized communities in the electorate and consequently a robust participatory democracy.

For the RISE Together Fund, many of our grantees have experienced canceled and shrinking grants for their United States-based Palestine solidarity efforts. Some have lost funding for personal social media posts. Others have experienced intense questioning, pressure to denounce campus protests or risk grant renewals, and at least 1 of our grantees is anticipating an 80% drop in institutional funding next year. These examples on



their own evoke images of a field under pressure, however alongside a history of chronic underfunding, we find ourselves at a crisis point. In 2022, RTF and a team of researchers – including partners from NCRP – embarked on a research project to quantify resource mobilization for BAMEMSA causes in the United States. While the study itself was challenging due to the dearth of data, lack of disaggregation when it did exist, and inconsistent data categorization across philanthropy, the conclusions were unsurprising: 1) Despite BAMEMSA communities growing rapidly and their canary in the coalmine status within social justice movements, they remain chronically underfunded. In fact, for every \$100 spent by social justice philanthropy, only about \$1 is being spent in BAMEMSA movements. 2) BAMEMSA movements are not just under-resourced, they are also outspent on 2 fronts: by an active network within philanthropy that specifically funds anti-Muslim projects, personalities, and propaganda; and by federal government funding to programs and initiatives that harm BAMEMSA communities under the guise of “national security.” Anti-BAMEMSA forces outspent BAMEMSA movements by at least 5 to 1.

## CHOOSING A DIFFERENT PATH

These tactics together are being used to exploit fault lines within our social justice movements, creating fissures that will ultimately slow progress. They are a part of a larger pattern of authoritarian strategies used to silence dissent. In the past decade, the government has undercut progressive activists and movements using the full force of the law across the country. For instance, anti-boycott legislation intended to quell Palestinian solidarity boycotts is being copied to stop states from doing business with those who divest from fossil fuels undermining key climate justice efforts. Legislators in more than 20 states have significantly enhanced penalties for some

protesters, including those challenging Cop City, have been charged with domestic terrorism. Immigration and Customs Enforcement created a list of 59 immigration activists, journalists, lawyers and Facebook group administrators to target while traveling through the border who'd face greater scrutiny and harassment. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, supposedly designed to collect intelligence on people outside of the United States, was abused by the FBI to investigate Black Lives Matter protesters domestically.

The attacks on our movement organizations and activists, including Palestinian solidarity organizations, are a warning sign of the fragility of our democratic institutions. Acting now to support and protect these organizations upholds the principles that underpin our democracy. Only by coming together – and through our differences – can we resist authoritarianism and build a more just and inclusive society for all. It is not too late for us to change course, support our movements and begin to heal. In fact, just as the current climate of threats facing BAMEMSA movement organizations and their allies is intense, so is the support. Funders, especially intermediaries like RISE Together Fund, are hearing movement calls and invite our partners to:

**Challenge Funder Threats and Apathy:** Encourage philanthropy to invest in these movements and resist the pressure to withdraw funding due to political attacks. Funders must recognize their role in perpetuating harm and instead commit to supporting organizations without imposing political litmus tests or undue constraints. We must provide robust and sustained financial and logistical support to BAMEMSA organizations well into the future.

**Advocate for Legal Protections:** Push for reforms to terror financing laws, ensuring they include basic guardrails to prevent government abuse and overreach.

Legal protections must be established to protect nonprofits from politically motivated attacks. We must support our nonprofit organizations in building compliant systems, processes and practices to weather unprecedented scrutiny.

**Support Funder Advocacy and Solidarity:** Educate our partners about the historical and ongoing suppression of BAMEMSA and specifically Palestinian solidarity organizations in the United States. Build alliances across social justice movements and have tough conversations. Recognize that our movements for justice are interconnected, interdependent and require collective action. An attack on one is an attack on all.

**Challenge False Narratives:** Actively counter misinformation and smear campaigns. Promote accurate narratives that reflect the legitimate and vital work of Palestinian solidarity and BAMEMSA organizations.

Our social movements are complex living and breathing formations with the capacity for growth and contraction. The existential threats to democracy that we are facing demand that we grow in this moment. By castigating, threatening and defunding one group, in this case Palestinian human rights voices, we have not only set a precedent for the targeting of others, but we have made our movement smaller, effectively weakening our collective power and in turn impeding our own progress toward a just, inclusive and multiracial democracy.

By safeguarding our movement organizations in this crucial moment, we continue to ensure that a vibrant 5th state helps catalyze the democracy that we deserve.

*Rana Elmir is the director of RISE Together Fund an initiative of Proteus Fund that is committed to strengthening BAMEMSA movements to break the interlocking cycles of violence fueled by racism, surveillance, and criminalization.*

# The philanthropic strategies and networks attacking our democracy

By Katherine Ponce

More than 250 right-wing 501(c)(3) nonprofits spent over \$1 billion per year in the 7 years between 2015 and 2021. That 7-year period begins when Donald Trump's anti-Black, anti-immigrant social media sideshow began its transformative takeover of the Republican Party into a national neo-fascist movement and ends when hundreds of far-right rioters stormed Congress in an attempt to overturn the results of the presidential election.

Between Trump's infamous "rapists and drug dealers" speech in 2015 and January 6, 2021, a subset of more than 2 dozen nonprofits focused specifically on undermining electoral, liberal and economic democracy increased their fundraising 3-fold to over \$500 million per year.

Simply put, nearly 30 years after the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) first documented the "strategic philanthropy of conservative foundations" in Sally Covington's landmark study "Moving a Public Policy Agenda," and 15 years since the Supreme Court demolished election spending rules in favor of corporate personhood with *Citizens United v. FEC*, the space for right-wing donors to finance anti-democratic civil society has exploded.

## AN ATTACK ON DEMOCRACY

Organizing in the workplace, voting and protesting are fundamental pillars of a democratic society. With all 3, citizens are not only participants in the electoral process, but also active agents in shaping the policies and practices that affect their daily lives. The rights to free expression



Katherine Ponce

and bodily autonomy guaranteed by liberal democracy are meaningless without the electoral and economic power to back them up.

Over the past decade, we have seen the fruition of a well-financed 60-year campaign to roll back major movement-won advances made on racial, gender and economic justice that culminated in *The Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*. These attacks are not random explosions of frustrated or economically excluded populists, but the deliberate work of various networks of philanthropic actors who seek to roll back or undermine efforts for a more democratic and just society.

Building power like the far right has done requires trust from philanthropy. Past NCRP research has documented the ways "regressive philanthropy" has been highly effective in supporting the goals of funders and organizations that want to take us backwards as a society, primarily through multi-year unrestricted funding focused on messy, nonlinear change led by movement-

nurtured leaders. In building awareness about who is behind these well-resourced attacks on democracy, it is essential to recognize how right-wing donors have used philanthropy to maintain their own disproportionate wealth and power. Perhaps most importantly, it is essential to connect the consequences these attacks have on grassroots organizations and the communities they represent.

## WHAT GRASSROOT ORGANIZATIONS ARE WORKING AGAINST

Last December, the entire staff at NCRP traveled down to Miami, Florida for our biannual work planning trip together. In addition to connecting with each other inside and outside of our office space, we also connected with organizations in our nonprofit membership program. During a particular presentation by a nonprofit member working to broaden and deepen democracy in Florida, our staff heard things that were cause for alarm.

Doing deep engagement work in democracy has always been difficult in the United States, but the growing opposition to progress in our federal and state legislatures continues to threaten grassroots organizations engaged in this work. Legislative trackers suggest that thousands of pro-democracy legislation from both parties get introduced every year, and about 10% of bills pass. Much of this largely goes unnoticed by the public, but the slow and subtle shifts of power in American democracy add up with large implications. Conversations with NCRP's national membership of grassroots organizations has surfaced 3 recent threats to our democracy:

**1. Undermining the Power of Worker Organizing.** Despite a 2023 worker's strike receiving historical presidential support and an overwhelming majority of public support, labor union membership reached an all-time low in 2023 with only 10% of U.S. workers being part of a union. This movement away from union membership has had increasing impacts on stagnating wages, rising income inequality and dangerous working conditions. But in addition to the economic disadvantages, lower union membership has weakened the middle-class voice in democracy.

Unions have always held space for information sharing and collective bargaining for the common interest of a group of people. It is in the fabric of their existence to support voting as a fundamental right because it allows workers to have a say in decisions affecting their lives and workplaces. Unsurprisingly, these values led to labor playing a central part in the passage of 2 landmark pieces of legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while in Memphis supporting a public employee strike. The American labor movement has followed up that initial support by increasingly recognizing that workers are more powerful when they are not divided by racial, ethnic, gender or religious backgrounds. Research shows that over time, union membership can reduce wage inequality across race and gender. Today, Black workers have the highest union membership rate at 11.8%, and Latinx and Asian American workers are the fastest-growing sets of union members.

The labor movement, already undermined by the expansion of so-called right to work laws in many conservative states, took a huge hit in 2018 when federal courts ruled in *Janus v. AFSCME* that public employees no longer have to pay fees to unions to cover the costs of collective bargaining. Since this ruling, unions have

been forced to represent nonmembers for free, threatening their ability to survive if too many members opt out of receiving the benefit of the union for free. Since 2019, states have filed 200 lawsuits in state and federal courts and introduced legislation that prohibits paycheck deductions for dues, mandated high membership thresholds and introduced automatic decertification. These anti-union bills continue to contribute to the fall in union membership and public perception, which ultimately has a direct effect at all the polls. An Economic Policy Institute study of the 2022 midterm elections found that local labor union power is associated with greater access to ballot drop boxes. This study found that a “1 percentage point increase in union density was associated with a 9.8% increase in the number of ballot drop boxes per capita.”

**2. Restrictions on 3rd Party Voter Registration Drives.** Voter Registration Drives, also referred to as 3PVRO, are often thought of as community efforts

to encourage and assist people in registering to vote. Yet to date, 57 % of the population live in states that restrict registration drives.

All citizens having the agency and access to vote is painful and recent history. Since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the law extending the right for Black Americans to vote, Congress has had to extend the law's provisions in 1970, 1975, 1982 and most recently in 2007. Before and certainly after 2013, when a key provision of the law was invalidated by a Federalist Society-influenced Supreme Court, local attacks at the state level have increased barriers at the ballot box. With few exceptions, new restrictive bills have been introduced in each election cycle. With every bill passed, frontlines workers' landscape shifts, uprooting how they can legally and safely do their work. In 2021–2022, 400 legislative proposals were introduced to undermine our election system. Since 2020, only 18 states have become more expansive in providing equal access to the ballot and combating





violence and divisiveness, while 24 states became more restrictive.

In total, 23 states have laws restricting 3rd party voter registration drives, while 2 states do not allow them at all. In addition to introducing complicated time-bound laws for voter registration drives, Florida has successfully passed laws to increase fines on groups who do not keep up with these restrictions.

In 2021, the maximum fine a voter registration group could receive was \$1,000. In 2023, that grew to \$250,000. After this law took effect in 2023, registrations through drives fell by 95%, compared with the same months 4 years earlier. This shortfall has and will disproportionately affect communities of color. Since 2012, 12.8% of Black voters in Florida had used voter registration drives to register or update their registration as compared to 10.3% of Latinx voters and just 2% of white voters.

**3. Criminalizing Dissent.** Since 2017, hundreds of anti-protest bills have been introduced, including an uptick in bills following the 2020 uprising in defense of Black lives. Multiple successful wins among conservative candidates now show explicit model practices that have been implemented across states. These new bills have criminalized protestors, silenced organizers and ultimately created an environment where funders believe it's appropriate to cut ties with nonprofit partners

based on their beliefs, even when those beliefs are aligned with the same mission funders originally agreed to support.

The federal right to protest has historic roots in Washington DC. In 1938, the New Negro Alliance (NNA) took on the Sanitary Grocery (now Safeway) after the store sued protestors for picketing as part of a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. The NNA went on to win the case in the Supreme Court, marking an important victory in the right to protest that was instrumental later during the Civil Rights Movement.

While the federal government has largely remained unsuccessful at revising the precedent of this law, states have continued to slash individual First Amendment freedoms. Following the 2020 uprisings, the anti-Black response of new laws was not a new move but an old trick. After an unarmed Black 19-year-old was fatally shot, Florida passed an "anti-riot" law in 1967 designed to stop Tampa's Black community from protesting.

Public attention has been heightened as we watch these most recent laws silence and criminalize Atlanta activists participating in the #StopCopCity movement and grassroots organizations for solidary with Gaza. Movement leaders, organizations and grantmakers have been sounding the alarm: It is only a matter of time before this kind of repression reaches other social justice fights like

abortion funds, migrant support funds or mutual aid.

**WHO IS BEHIND THESE REGRESSIVE POLICIES?**

All 3 of these anti-democratic efforts follow the same fundamental approach: Attack court precedents won in the mid-1900s through mass movements of oppressed people, introduce model legislation at the state level that chips away at legal rights, and radically polarize the public around divisive issues with a flood of messaging spending. Political leaders of the conservative movement have been out in front of these strategies that are used against grassroots organizations and communities. However, this type of coordination takes a lot of behind-the-scenes work.

Between 1997 and 2007, NCRP published a series of reports detailing the strategies and influence of conservative philanthropy. In 1997's "Moving a Public Policy Agenda," NCRP observed \$210 million total in grants for conservative causes from 12 well-known conservative foundations, or \$154 million per year in 2024 dollars between 1992 and 1994. NCRP's analysis expanded in 1999's "\$1 Billion for Ideas" which included the spending data for 20 of the largest conservative think tanks from 1996 and 1997 – totaling \$321 million per year in 2024 dollars grantmaking. In 2004's "Axis of Ideology," NCRP included the grantmaking of more conservative



foundations (77) from 1999–2001 – \$157 million per year in 2024 dollars. When these statistics were published, they were among the first attempts at quantifying the power and reach of conservative nonprofits, and by their nature, NCRP underestimated both.

In light of the current successes of anti-democratic forces, NCRP decided it was time to examine the giving by donors and foundations who seek to move our nation backwards with fresh eyes. From 2015–2021, NCRP estimates that regressive public policy organizations spent on average over \$1 billion per year. Their fundraising and spending increased by more than 50%, and their assets and re-granting doubled in those 7 critical years.

In addition to their sheer size and power, these foundations have also remained consistent in how they fund. In our 1990s reporting, NCRP concluded that conservative foundations were more likely to provide their grantees with general operating funds. Today one of the largest regressive philanthropic funders, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the largest platform for conservative Donor-Advisor Funds, Donors Trust – a giving trend that exploded in NCRP’s most recent research – continue that pattern. Combined, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and Donors Trust have granted out over \$1 billion since 2015. A majority – 58% – of these grants were general operating support grants. From a best practice standpoint, grantmaking like this outperforms most philanthropic organizations. While NCRP encourages funders to provide at least 50% of their grant dollars for general operating support, the Center for Effective Philanthropy reports that of the 58% of foundations who do provide multi-year general operating support, only 11% of foundations reach that benchmark.

Through website, annual reports and tax return (Form 990) keyword searches, NCRP’s research has so far identified a

group of over 2 dozen well-networked 501(c)3s that have missions to develop model legislation, messaging, and/or leaders that will limit rights and regress democracy. These organizations have adapted themselves to the Trumpist turn within the conservative movement away from free market neoliberal politics and toward post-liberal, explicitly nationalist politics, including a new and renewed focus on policies that criminalize dissent, constrain workplace democracy and corrupt our electoral processes in order to preserve minority rule. Between 2015 and 2021, the expenses of the 20 conservative think tanks whose rise to power is documented in 1999’s “\$1 Billion for Idea’s held steady at just over \$400 million per year, while the expenses of the newly anti-democratic vanguard of the right doubled from \$200 to \$400 million.

Testing our legal system takes power. Shifting the narrative arc to catalyze successful wins takes consistent long-term funding. When you are an organization that is trusted to try new things and resourced well over multiple cycles, you start to see the wins.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

NCRP is continuing to update our research about right-wing donors and foundations with new tracking and analyses about regressive philanthropy. We expect to have a report out in 2025 that will detail our findings and shine a light on the donors, foundations and nonprofits that seek to undermine democracy and turn back the clock on our freedoms.

And while the anti-democratic movement has grown in size and sophistication, much of the through lines we reported on 30 years ago have remained the same. Regressive philanthropy is modeling how effective trusting aligned, grassroots issue-focused leaders can be for conservative funders in achieving right-wing goals.

How does this compare to mainstream or traditional funders? Consider this observation from a grantmaker in a report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy that documented funders’ perspectives on the \$14 billion in unrestricted grants that MacKenzie Scott has given (with at least \$567 million of that racial equity organizations):

*“This funder said that grassroots organizations often have an emphasis on lived experience, which has encouraged them to make some sort of nonprofit to support people similar to them. While the funder noted that starting grassroots nonprofits is ‘wonderful,’ they also suggested that, for these organizations, ‘Sometimes managing the dollars is a little more difficult, because it’s not necessarily their background...’”*

For too many, a deep mistrust exists between those with the money and will to resource progressive movements and communities impacted most by regressive policy. This mistrust is so deep that even well-intended philanthropic actors go so far as to criticize a donor who devolves their leadership to those closest to the issue. Beyond this quote, the lack of trust is evident in grantmaking practices that lean on a one-time or yearly programmatic-based funds, instead of flexible, multi-year investments.

In order to work toward a shared vision with clear goals supported by consistent narratives, we need progressive intellectuals and funders to work with and be led by movement demands. We want deep investment in progressive infrastructure directed toward a shared vision.

Certainly, one way to not just reverse the erosion of our rights but to build toward an inclusive world is to model the trust and deep pockets that regressive philanthropists show toward their grantees. Or at the very least, we should begin to ask why it’s so easy for them to do so.

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# New and Renewing Members and Supporters

*A Black Education Network (ABEN)*  
*African Communities Together*  
*Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice*  
*Allegany Franciscan Ministries*  
*Alliance for Justice*  
*Alliance for Youth Organizing/Alliance for Youth Action*  
*American Jewish World Service*  
*The Annenberg Foundation*  
*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*  
*Apiary for Practical Support*  
*The Arca Foundation*  
*Arch Community Fund*  
*ArchCity Defenders*  
*Arcus Foundation*  
*The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation*  
*Barr Foundation*  
*Black Alliance for Just Immigration*  
*Blandin Foundation*  
*Blue Shield of California Foundation*  
*Bonfils-Stanton Foundation*  
*Borealis Philanthropy*  
*Bush Foundation*  
*Butler Family Fund*  
*The California Endowment*  
*The California Wellness Foundation*  
*Capital & Main*  
*Carnegie Corporation of New York*  
*Catalyst California*  
*CHANGE Philanthropy*  
*The Children's Defense Fund*  
*Climate Mental Health Network*  
*The Colorado Health Foundation*  
*The Colorado Trust*  
*Community Foundation of Tompkins County*  
*Compton Foundation*  
*Conrad N. Hilton Foundation*  
*The Cricket Island Foundation*  
*The Daphne Foundation*  
*The David and Lucile Packard Foundation*  
*Delaware Community Foundation*  
*Demos*  
*Denver Arts & Venues*  
*The Dyson Foundation*  
*Ella Baker Center for Human Rights*  
*The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund*  
*Faith in Public Life*  
*Families of Color Seattle*  
*Family Agriculture Resource Management Services (F.A.R.M.S.)*  
*Fetzer Institute*  
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*First Nations Development Institute*  
*Florida Access Network*  
*Florida Immigrant Coalition*  
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*The Seattle Foundation*  
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*SisterReach*  
*Solidaire Network*  
*Southeast Immigrant Rights Network*  
*St. David's Foundation*  
*The Stupski Foundation*  
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*Texas Equal Access Fund*  
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# First trans rights, then all rights

By Rye Young

As progressive philanthropy responds to rising authoritarianism in the United States and around the world, we cannot afford to ignore that anti-trans attacks have become the right's power tool of choice.

Broadly speaking, progressive funders have treated trans issues as outside of their purviews. Despite how politically relevant trans rights have become, funding for trans issues does not yet reflect its strategic significance. It is not uncommon for progressive funders to avoid trans communities by treating us as a fringe political distraction.

But if we consider why the right has centered trans communities in prime-time speeches, funding and policy campaigns reveals many hard truths that should be of great concern to progressive funders. We start to see that trans communities are ground zero for how political power wins on the right despite shrinking margins, how cracks in our solidarity are easily exploited, and how progressive funders play into a highly funded right-wing strategy.

We cannot protect civil rights if we don't recognize where the frontline of that legal and ideological battle is being waged.

## HOW ANTI-TRANS ATTACKS THREATEN DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Barbara Geddes, an American political scientist and leading scholar of authoritarianism, found that in previous generations, dictatorships were typically established through regime change or violent overthrows. In modern times, "Democratic backsliding orchestrated by a leader who was originally elected in a fair competitive



Rye Young

election is now the most common way of establishing dictatorship." In the United States, authoritarian tendencies have become part of the fabric of mainstream politics at an alarming rate.

It is not a coincidence that this rise in authoritarianism coincides with an exponential increase of political attacks against LGBTQ communities, the bulk of which are targeting trans people and trans youth in particular. In 2024, a new record for anti-trans bills was set, and it is the 5th consecutive record-breaking year. At the time of writing this article in late August 2024, the Trans Legislation Tracker is actively tracking 638 anti-trans bills across the country, 45 of which have been signed into law.

These laws are facing strong legal challenges thanks to the hard work of organizations including Transgender Law Center, the ACLU, TLDEF and Lambda Legal, but the social, legal and political repercussions are massive and broad in their scope.

Prior to 2018, the bulk of anti-trans legislation was focused on so-called "bathroom bills" that sought to limit trans

access to public facilities, including restrooms. After 2019 and through to today, there has been a shift toward legislation that targets health care, education and sports – in other words, legislation that tests the roll-back of civil rights in more segments of society and public life.

Recent research from the Williams Institute finds that attacks on LGBTQ rights can be a precursor to democratic backsliding in the United States and globally, and attacks on gender and sexual minorities contribute to the weakening of democratic institutions. Pamela Shifman of the Democracy Alliance agrees, writing that the rise of the anti-gender movement and its threats to bodily autonomy "are the tip of the spear in a campaign against our democracy itself."

## ANTI-TRANS ATTACKS, RHETORIC AND POLICY EMBOLDEN FAR RIGHT NATIONALISTS

Over this last year, I've interviewed key democracy funders and heard several leaders express the challenge that progressive funders tend to want to stay out of messy "culture wars" as they treat them as distractions from the "real issues." However, these "culture wars" are actually the frontlines of social and political power building that are currently dominated by the right and increasingly a site of populist-style messaging that demonizes trans people. As we try to roll back authoritarianism, we can't ignore the role populism plays in democratic backsliding.

Whether anti-trans policy attacks pass and get adopted into law or not, they serve a number of roles that strengthen the right. They normalize the rollback of civil rights,

make inroads with voters they otherwise lack a message for, and unite distinct factions of the far right, including white nationalists and Christian nationalists.

“We have to understand that the volume of the bills actually underscores where the momentum is,” Imara Jones, journalist and trans movement strategist, said. “Usually what I have seen from my reporting on this is that you’ll have certain years where it seems that there are less bills passing, but what’s actually happening is an experimentation about the types of bills that will become the models for the surge in subsequent years.”

Anti-trans attacks build the power and momentum that the right need to enact a broader agenda. They can also stump and confound progressives, exposing weaknesses that are regularly exploited.

Before conservatives united around an anti-trans strategy at the national level, they tested and honed it in state for years, if not decades. Time after time, they learned that progressive policies, even highly popular ones, could be defeated by turning them into a debate about trans people.

#### Case study – The HERO Act: How Transphobia Helps the Right Leverage Power

On May 28, 2014, The Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) Act passed in Houston’s City Council with an 11-6 vote. Introduced by popular lesbian Mayor Anise Parker, the HERO Act was a run-of-the-mill equal rights ordinance. Conservatives were determined to overrule the bill, and this opposition became referendum 1, which put the future of the HERO Act in the hands of the voters.

The LGBTQ community had a period of relative political strength in 2014. The Defense of Marriage Act had just passed the year prior, and national momentum was building that would lead to national marriage equality the following year. Twelve days after HERO Act passed,

Laverne Cox graced the cover of TIME Magazine and declared 2014 “the Transgender Tipping Point.”

The HERO Act was popular when it passed. It protected all citizens from discrimination on the basis of 15 characteristics that applied to the vast majority of people, including women, veterans, people with disabilities, people of color and LGBTQ people. Houston’s City Council was keen to put itself on par with all other

major cities that already had equal protection laws. In this context, the HERO Act seemed bound to survive the referendum.

The opposition cast the law as a devastating threat to the safety of women and children by claiming that gender identity protections would allow predators into bathrooms. This message was so effective, and the progressive side was so woefully unprepared for this to become a referendum on trans communities, that the



“Love Is Love (Love In a Blue Time)” by Gregg Chadwick

referendum won in a 2-to-1 margin. The HERO Act failed to win support from most voters in 10 of the city's 11 council districts. On top of that, the conservative campaign had far less funding than the progressive side: \$400,000 vs. \$1.9 million.

Conservatives even learned how to get registered Democrats to turn against civil rights in large numbers. It's no wonder that after the HERO Act was overturned, conservatives invested billions to scale up their attacks on trans people. It is essential that the progressive movement and funders figure out how to talk about and defend trans rights and authentically harness the potential power of trans justice, feminism, reproductive justice and sexual liberation. The conservative movement is not afraid of wielding that power.

## FIRST TRANS RIGHTS, THEN ALL RIGHTS

In order for voters to embrace authoritarianism, enough people need to be convinced to vote against their own interests. According to Tarso Ramos, Executive Director of Political Research Associates, "Misogyny is a uniting force of a right-wing alliance between conservative subgroups."

At the same time, no party can win an election without the support of women voters. How can a far-right alliance that embraces misogyny win over women voters? Trans attacks offer a blueprint for getting women to vote against their self-interests. Despite being the same movement that effectively shut down abortion access in much of the country, the bathroom argument has been salient with women voters.

Conservatives have been extremely strategic in choosing which anti-trans messages to embrace. The bathroom bill rhetoric that evolved into what we have now was directly lifted from the transphobic faction within the second wave feminist movement, which feared that men would "pose as women" and cause harm to women and their movement. Sound familiar?

The highly effective "bathroom playbook" that casts trans people as pedophiles and rapists is meant to speak directly to women who feel anxious and vulnerable. If transphobia can build alliances between radical feminists and the proudly misogynist extreme right, it can certainly make inroads with mainstream women voters. While there are many feminist institutions and foundations that embrace trans communities to varying degrees, the nature of our electoral system allows for a small minority to make drastic policy changes. Conservatives don't need to convince many people to win the power they need to carry forth their ambitious policy agenda as defined most recently in the Heritage Foundation's [Project 2025](#).

Movement Advancement Project's report "[Freedom Under Fire: The Far Right's Battle to Control America](#)" shows that the current political efforts of the right seek to restrict and control all aspects of a free and democratic society including:

- health care and the right to make decisions about one's body
- the freedom of ideas and the ability to get a comprehensive education
- the freedom of travel and the ability to be in public places
- accurate legal recognition of people's identities
- freedom of the press and freedom of expression
- the right to vote and participate in free, fair elections

This conservative vision is being tested on trans communities in every corner of the country and is gaining momentum. It is part of a broader policy agenda that seeks to curb the civil liberties and rights of immigrants, women, people with disabilities and people of color – essentially all groups that have fought for their current rights. It's no coincidence the right tests radical policies on communities that are highly marginalized and whose institutions are deeply underfunded.

## FUNDING FOR ANTI-GENDERISM ECLIPSES FUNDING FOR TRANS RIGHTS

The anti-gender movement has benefited from investments of political, economic, social and financial capital over a long period of time. The movement is financially backed by a highly motivated network of individuals and organizations.

While precise figures are hard to obtain, the Global Philanthropy Project found that United States-based organizations associated with the anti-gender movement earned an aggregate revenue of \$6.2 billion between 2008 and 2017, and the right has invested far more heavily since then.

The movement for trans rights has made enormous strides, but as of 2021, U.S.-based foundation support for transgender and gender nonconforming youth communities totaled just over \$36 million and accounted for only 4 cents of every \$100 awarded by philanthropy that year.

## HOW CAN PHILANTHROPY RESPOND?

The future of democracy disproportionately depends on whether we energetically and unequivocally stand with and invest in trans communities. How can philanthropy make moves to protect democracy and stand with trans communities?

Here are some ways philanthropy can help:

**Get involved.** This summer, Funders for LGBTQ Issues launched a new initiative to fill a gap at the intersection of trans justice and democracy. Funders United for Democracy and Trans Justice (DTJ) is a working group that brings together the collective knowledge, strength, and power of both democracy and LGBTQ-focused institutions. Funders Committee for Civic Participation is the DTJ co-chair and answers the call for new partners in this fight. [Learn about DTJ and fill out this interest form to participate.](#)

# Select Publications

## *NCRP's Voter Registration Brief*

There's no one better equipped for transformational investment than a community-based issues organizing group with established relationships in and knowledge of its own communities. Groups like these are uniquely qualified to reach and mobilize voters who are underrepresented in the electorate. They are equally – if not more – important to the civic engagement ecosystem as groups that are only focused on voter registration.

## *Pride is a Protest*

At its core, pride is a protest against the criminalization of our identities. It is a refusal to be confined to the shadows, to be denied our humanity, and to be stripped of our rights. In countries where being LGBTQ+ is still illegal, pride takes on an even greater significance, serving as a beacon of hope for those living under the shadow of persecution.

## *Fund Organizing Like Our Democracy Depends on It... Because It Does*

All elections shape the nature of the communities we live in, and there has been an immense amount of work that went into ensuring that the will of the people was heard. Yet after the votes are counted, there is still the need for organizers after every election to continue engaging their communities. This kind of sustained effort is key – to holding elected officials accountable, passing progressive legislation, and continuing to leverage people power in the struggle for collective liberation.

visit: [ncrp.org/selectpublications](https://ncrp.org/selectpublications)

**Proudly and publicly sign on to the GUTC Pledge!** Funders for LGBTQ Issues has spent years building a strategic and robust LGBTQ funding community and has a program dedicated to proliferating trans funding beyond the LGBTQ issue silo. Grantmakers United for Trans Communities (GUTC) has secured public pledges of support – financial and beyond – for trans communities from a wide range of progressive institutions including the Ford Foundation and the American Jewish World Service, and many others.

**Invest meaningful resources in communities that play an outsized role in advancing and protecting freedom and that are consistently targets of the far-right, including but not limited to trans communities.** There are a handful of trans-led and deeply trans-inclusive grantmakers out there that can make it easy to get resources where they're needed most. Consider supporting the [Trans Justice Funding Project](#), [Third Wave Fund](#), [Black Trans Fund](#) (housed at [Groundswell Fund](#)) or the [Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice](#), for example. The [Trans Futures Funding Campaign](#) is a group of trans funder intermediaries that bring together the collective power and vision of this impressive group of funders.

**Celebrate and invest** in visionary and principled women's funds, women's organizations and a reproductive justice ecosystem that is deeply and meaningfully trans inclusive.

**Encourage your institution and colleagues to learn** about these issues together. Consider providing trainings through Funders for LGBTQ Issues or consultants.

Encourage your institution and the philanthropic networks you're in to **develop a gender justice strategy** if they don't have one.

The trans movement is small but mighty. It has fought for visibility and accomplished incredible changes in a short period of time. But the trans movement and its funders are stretched thin and struggling against an all-out attack that weaponizes that hard-won visibility.

Philanthropy can do a lot, but it must work in coordination with and on behalf of our most important source of hope: our own trans communities. Will enough funders support and invest in trans communities as fiercely and as persistently as conservatives have in their anti-gender movement?

If we do, we can pull the plug on the most effective power tool the conservative movement has.

If we don't, the risks are well established.

*Drawing on fourteen years of experience in social justice philanthropy, Rye Young is the head of Rye Young Consulting, the Director of the Sprocket Foundation, a Trustee of the Freeman Foundation and a Board member of Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity (URGE), and co-creator and co-leader of DIGG (Donor Intro to Grounded Giving), a donor-organizing and political education program for people with wealth to find their grounding in social justice philanthropy. Rye works with individual donors and philanthropic institutions to align their values with their practices and to invest boldly and strategically in social justice movements. He got schooled in social justice philanthropy at Third Wave Fund where he began as an abortion fund intern in 2008 and eventually served as the Executive Director from 2014-2018.*

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