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# RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY

SUPPORTING DATA AND STORIES THAT FIGHT AUTHORITARIANISM

Edited by Suhasini Yeeda



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# A message from the President and CEO

Dear Reader,

The current administration has created a whirlwind of uncertainty, fear, rage, anxiety, and harm – including in philanthropy, the nonprofit sector and in movement spaces.

In spite of it all, I believe deep in my bones that another world is possible. It is the grassroots movement groups that hold the wisdom to get us to that world. In this edition of *Responsive Philanthropy*, we hear from experts on how stories of courage and data-driven narratives that provide cold hard facts have historically helped fight authoritarianism – and still do today.

As my NCRP colleague Ryan Schlegel reminds us, authoritarianism is not made by accident. It is explicit, well-conceived and well-funded. His piece highlighting the increasing anti-democratic funding serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to counteract these forces through the strength of community-held power.

This issue of *RP* offers a diverse and thoughtful look at our current political climate and the dire call to action to fund democracy. We hear from authors and co-authors Scot Nakagawa, Ludovic Blain, Ryan Schlegel, Arthur Larok and Niranjali Amerasinghe, and Eric Ward. These authors challenge us to look at the tools that have helped authoritarian regimes succeed and what the left must do to fight back now using the power of storytelling and cold, hard facts. Because as NCRP Board Member Eric Ward says, “If philanthropy is to be relevant in this moment, we must treat narrative, data, and story not as supplements to our strategy, but as central pillars of it. This isn’t the first time regimes have tried to erase truth and control meaning. In fact, we’ve seen this story before – and we’ve seen how resistance rises.”

The way that we address increasing authoritarianism will have a lasting impact on the world we are envisioning: a world safe for immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and communities of color. The ways that funders specifically support movement groups, which have already been doing the work of creating diverse counter-authoritarian narratives, has the ability to reshape the sector entirely.

Now is not the time to be meek.



Be courageous,  
**Aaron Dorfman**  
NCRP PRESIDENT AND CEO

# Seeing the whole battlefield: Why philanthropy must fund data and story like democracy depends on it

By Eric K. Ward

In this moment of mounting political repression, too many in philanthropy are still asking “is this really happening?” when they should be asking “what are we willing to do about it?”

We are not in a cycle of backlash. We are not experiencing a wave of polarization. We are facing a deliberate, coordinated, and accelerating authoritarian project – one that targets not only civil rights protections, but the very possibility of a multiracial democracy.

If those of us committed to the work of bridging, making democracy work, and securing an inclusive America want to be on the right side of history, we must stop acting as if these are disconnected issues. The attacks on trans rights, voting rights, public education, birthright citizenship, reproductive justice, environmental justice, and nonprofit legitimacy are not isolated events. They are linked by design – powered by a shared worldview that sees inclusion as a threat and equity as subversion.

And yet, much of philanthropy still operates in silos – responding to each threat as a separate fire rather than seeing the arsonist at work. And if you want to know where the fire starts, look at who controls the story. One of the first targets of any authoritarian movement isn’t the vote – it’s the voice.

## THE WAR ON STORY, THE ERASURE OF DATA

Authoritarian movements understand something we in philanthropy sometimes forget: Narrative is power. Data is power. Stories are how people make meaning – and meaning is how they decide what’s just, what’s normal, and what’s worth fighting for.



Eric K. Ward

That’s why disinformation isn’t just a symptom of authoritarianism – it’s a core strategy.

We’re watching the deliberate erosion of truth:

- School boards across the United States have banned over 10,000 books in the past year alone – many featuring LG-BTQ+ and Black protagonists, which is an unprecedented surge that targets identity, memory, and belonging.
- Data collection is being gutted – from bans on race and gender data in some states to restrictions on public health reporting around maternal mortality and climate impact.
- Culture workers and storytellers are being targeted, labeled as “radical” or “un-American,” defunded, or intimidated into silence.

This isn’t new. Every authoritarian regime begins by going after artists, educators, and record-keepers. They understand the stakes. Do we?

If we don’t fund the storytellers, data collectors, culture organizers, and narrative

strategists, we cede the battlefield to those who will. This erosion of narrative and knowledge isn’t happening randomly. It’s part of a larger strategy – one drawn from a well-worn authoritarian playbook.

## A PLAYBOOK OF SUPPRESSION

The opposition isn’t improvising. It’s operating from a tested playbook refined over decades and modeled globally in places like Hungary, India, Brazil, and Russia. That playbook includes 3 main tactics:

- **Roll Back Gains.** We’re witnessing the dismantling of civil rights infrastructure like the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* and over 30 states introducing anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion laws in 2024 alone. These moves are often packaged as neutrality or fairness, but they are designed to obscure disparities and silence demands for justice.
- **Erode Legitimacy.** Right-wing campaigns have rebranded educators as indoctrinators, nonprofit leaders as foreign agents, and equity itself as extremism. In *The American Prospect*, Aaron Dorfman documented that authoritarian-supporting donors and foundations have spent over \$1 billion to suppress voting and dismantle social movements—especially those led by Black, brown, and immigrant communities.
- **Fracture Mutual Accountability.** The goal is to isolate and exhaust each group before moving to the next by targeting specific communities—trans people, undocumented immigrants, and pregnant women of color—the goal is to isolate and exhaust each



group before moving to the next. These attacks become wedges used to divide movements and limit public empathy.

## WHAT WE'RE REALLY UP AGAINST

Let's connect the dots:

- Voter suppression now includes targeting trans communities. According to the Williams Institute, over 200,000 transgender adults in states with strict voter ID laws could face barriers to voting because their IDs do not reflect their gender identity, which disproportionately affects their access to the ballot box.
- Birthright citizenship, grounded in the 14th Amendment, is under renewed attack. Trump's 2018 executive order attempt signaled a broader movement to redefine who qualifies as "American."
- Reproductive justice is being criminalized. The Guttmacher Institute reports that 13 states now ban abortion entirely, and in several states, laws intended to restrict abortion have been used in ways that open the door to investigating or even prosecuting pregnancy outcomes like miscarriages – creating a chilling effect, especially for Black and brown women.
- In at least 17 states, "critical infrastructure" laws have been used or proposed to increase penalties for protests often aimed at environmental and Indigenous organizers challenging pipelines and fossil fuel projects.
- Bills like the Stop Terror-Financing and Tax Penalties on American Hostages Act threaten to undermine the credibility of social justice nonprofits by using broad definitions that could be weaponized under the guise of national security.

All of this is happening while diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are rolled back, movement leaders are surveilled, and entire communities are painted as "extremists" in media echo chambers.

This isn't fearmongering – it's a pattern. If philanthropy is to be relevant in this moment, we must treat narrative, data, and story not as supplements to our strategy, but as central pillars of it. This isn't the first time regimes have tried to erase truth and control meaning. In fact, we've seen this story before – and we've seen how resistance rises.

## LESSONS FROM PAST AUTHORITARIAN CRISES

If we need historical proof that story and data are essential to resisting authoritarianism, we don't have to look far.

In apartheid South Africa, underground newspapers and rogue radio broadcasts kept hope alive for generations of Black South Africans. They provided counter-narratives that exposed the violence of the regime and connected people across isolated townships.

During the Jim Crow era, the Black press – outlets like the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier – not only reported on lynchings and racist laws but also organized national campaigns for justice. These were not just newspapers, they were organizing tools, lifelines, and resistance infrastructures.

In the former Soviet Union, dissident intellectuals and artists created "samizdat" – a clandestine publishing network that spread censored literature, political critiques, and moral witnesses. It was illegal. It was dangerous. And it was critical to the eventual collapse of state-controlled ideology.

We are not facing the same context – but we are facing the same logic: Control the story, and you control the future. Philanthropy must recognize that to fund storytelling and data is to fund resistance.

## Voices Under Attack – Who's Being Targeted and Why It Matters

If you want to know where the authoritarian playbook is being tested, follow the storytellers under fire.

- In Florida, a Black history teacher was fired after showing a documentary on civil rights and voting suppression.
- In Texas, educators and districts are being investigated for allegedly teaching banned materials, including lessons from the 1619 Project – part of a broader crackdown on race and gender education.
- In Georgia, data scientists analyzing voter suppression patterns are being sued or sanctioned.
- In 2024, a senior data reporter at ProPublica was subpoenaed in an IRS lawsuit, raising alarms about growing efforts to chill investigative reporting and suppress public-interest data.

These aren't outliers, they're indicators of where this project is heading. When state power is used to criminalize research, censor art, or silence educators, it's not about protecting the public. It's about shrinking the space for collective truth-telling.

Philanthropy cannot afford to watch this from the sidelines. These are the canaries in the coal mine – and if we don't act quickly and boldly, we won't just lose information. We'll lose infrastructure, memory, and the very idea of accountability.

## WHAT PHILANTHROPY MUST DO

Narrative and data must be invested in with foresight and cannot become afterthoughts of the resistance. These must become front-line strategies. That means:

- Funding storytellers, artists, and independent media: We already have powerful story workers like the Black Trans Media collective in New York and Indigenous youth running TikTok campaigns in the Pacific Northwest. Fund them. Trust them. Let them lead.
- Funding data infrastructure: Projects like the National Equity Atlas and the COVID Black data initiative show what's possible when data is gathered by and for communities. These efforts need to scale – not shrink – especially as government data becomes increasingly politicized or inaccessible.
- Funding narrative strategy: Institutions like the Pop Culture Collaborative, MediaJustice, and ReFrame are building long-term narrative power across movements. These aren't just “comms shops” – they are architects of belonging, resilience, and hope.
- Funding long-term organizing: Too many groups are forced into survival mode. Imagine if we funded narrative and data like we fund electoral cycles, with multi-year commitments, full cost coverage, and alignment with base-building strategies.
- Funding boldly: Let's reward risk. Let's protect leaders who speak uncomfortable truths. And let's build infrastructures – legal, digital, and cultural – that make it safer to tell the truth and harder to erase it.

## CLARITY AND COURAGE

I often ask myself: What's the difference between those who shape history and those who react to it?

It's not intelligence.

It's not resources.

It's not even intention.

It's clarity—about what's really happening.

And it's courage—to act accordingly.

The opposition has both. They are unapologetically funding their vision of the world. They're not afraid to offend. They are thinking in decades.

So the question is: Will we?

This isn't just a political fight. It is a moral one—about whether we believe in the dignity of all people. About whether we believe that data and stories, in the right hands, are tools of liberation—not threats to be silenced.

Philanthropy has the power to make that difference. It has the power to protect the truth—and the people who carry it.

History is being shaped. The only question is: Will we fund the future—or flinch in the face of it?

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# Nothing siloed can save us: Why nonpartisan nonprofits alone aren't the solution

By Ludovic Blain

There's no question about it: nonpartisan organizations defending human rights, providing direct services, and uniting communities – along with funders who keep their staff paid – represent some of the strongest safeguards protecting vulnerable Americans in our increasingly authoritarian landscape. In addition to these organizations, we're depending on a crucial set of politicians and policies to fight back. We all know that politicians and policymakers who are doing things because we are holding them accountable are not as effective as those who are actually aligned with us and doing those things based on their own values.

Too often, nonpartisan funders comfort themselves by saying “elections can't save us.” By saying this we discredit the very real work that is being done. That the last 100+ days have not been improved by California Attorney General Rob Bonta and New York Attorney General Letitia James slowing Trump's machinations down by suing him left and right, California Secretary of State Shirley Weber refuting Trump's lies about voting systems, and Los Angeles Karen Bass pushing back on Trump. It's not hard to imagine that incoming Oakland Mayor Barbara Lee will also be an important bulwark against looming fascism. And if those examples don't sway you, all of us who were disappointed at Cali-



Ludovic Blain

fornia Governor Newsom uncritically platforming fascists like Charlie Kirk or watching Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and New York City Mayor Eric Adams acquiescing to Trump have certainly experienced the reality that elections do indeed make a difference.

## THE TRUTH IS: NOTHING SILOED CAN SAVE US.

For the last 20 years, California Donor Table (CDT) has mobilized more than \$60 million from individuals and foundations across all tax statuses – 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and PACs – and created a positive power-building feedback loop that's turned Republican districts blue. Hundreds of successful initiatives powered by our grantee network of organizations, candidates, and elected officials culminated in one of the only federal bright spots of the 2024 election: California, delivering a third of the country's flipped

House of Representative seats. Through co-founding Battleground California PAC with many of the (c)(4) affiliates of the community organizing groups we helped seed more than a decade ago, we ensured Democrats picked up 3 more seats in the House of Representatives and defended 1 vulnerable Democratic seat. With \$5 million in mostly unrestricted funds, community-based groups in Battleground California PAC directly reached over 100,000 low-propensity voters. In 2026, California may have 10 to 11 swing districts – more than any state in the country, concentrated in the same 4 regions we've been investing in for decades. Here's how collaborative multi-entity funding made this possible and how continued funding will guarantee more and more success.

## A DONOR (SOCIAL) JUSTICE LEAGUE ASSEMBLES

The 2010 Census revealed what we already knew: California crossed the threshold to becoming the country's third new American majority state. But in San Diego, Central Valley, the Inland Empire and Orange County, where Black, Latino and Asian populations were exploding, voter turnout and political representation were completely mismatched.

With a shared interest in rebalancing governing power in California at regional, state, and federal levels to advance a

*“Progressives and progressive donors are eminently justified in feeling that the country is in the throes of authoritarianism and that many communities are in turmoil. However, we are not currently justified in thinking we are doing everything we can to protect vulnerable communities and advance the cause of equity and justice.”*

"California [delivered] a third of the country's flipped House of Representative seats...[With] \$5 million in mostly unrestricted funds, community-based groups in Battleground California PAC directly **reached over 100,000** low-propensity voters."

– Ludovic Blain

In the 2024 California State Assembly elections, nine races were decided by **< 20,000** votes



Source: [https://ballotpedia.org/California\\_State\\_Assembly\\_elections,\\_2024](https://ballotpedia.org/California_State_Assembly_elections,_2024)

people-centered democracy reflecting its population, 4 funders came together to see what could be achieved when they applied every funding vehicle available to a shared mission: A nonpartisan 501(c)(3) foundation, a donor adviser, a PAC connected to a donor, and the predecessor of CDT. We worked to align funding across tax statuses to establish an infrastructure we're still utilizing today.

With all our chips on the table, we zeroed in on these 4 regions where demographic change was outpacing local infrastructure. Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and Black Californians who were getting priced out of Los Angeles were moving into new neighborhoods with no established networks to address shared social, economic, or political needs. As seasoned community organizers, we know voter turnout and political power depends

on strong local organizing. With strong community infrastructure, a more inclusive democracy would follow.

We knew no single anchor organization could drive transformation alone. Like us on the funding side, progress would depend on strong, strategic practitioner coalitions. In San Diego, for example, rather than sink all our investments to the biggest game in town – the labor federation – we invested heavily first in a handful of community groups and then in Engage San Diego, their collaboration. We supported Andrea Guerrero in launching what became a multi-tax status group of organizations centered around Alliance San Diego.

We also know that while (c)(3) funding was essential for foundational civic engagement and long-term power-building, it wasn't going to build longstanding power

efficiently on its own. Our unique collaboration made us see how organizations couldn't simply "(c)(3) accountability their way out" of xenophobic policies or unfair elections. To create real change, these organizations also needed political dollars to help shift who held office in the first place. This strategic realization hit hard: Sometimes it's easier to change *who* the officials are than to change their minds.

## THEN THE FUN REALLY BEGAN.

In order to prepare for the 2012 San Diego mayoral election, local civic engagement organizers learned essential data tools from political organizers. Political operatives taught community organizers how to use voter files to track how gentrification affected their member base. They discovered that their field teams were knocking on the wrong doors: They needed to follow their members to the new districts they had relocated to. The vulnerability of this shared "aha" moment built relationships between the group leaders and enabled unprecedented work.

Before long, the same multi-tax status investment strategy spawned people of color-centered power centers in Orange County (via OC Action), Inland Empire (IE United), and the Central Valley (Communities for a New CA). Bit by bit, progressive Democrats overtook these formerly Republican strongholds in just a 15-year span. The same model helped progressives beat police, real estate, fossil fuel and tech money-backed corporate Democrats in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland and Contra Costa County.

## WHAT WE BUILT THEN IS STILL STANDING – AND HELPING US WEATHER THIS TERRIBLE STORM.

At CDT, we're not donor advisers – we're donor organizers. We've discovered our role is to help donors figure out how they

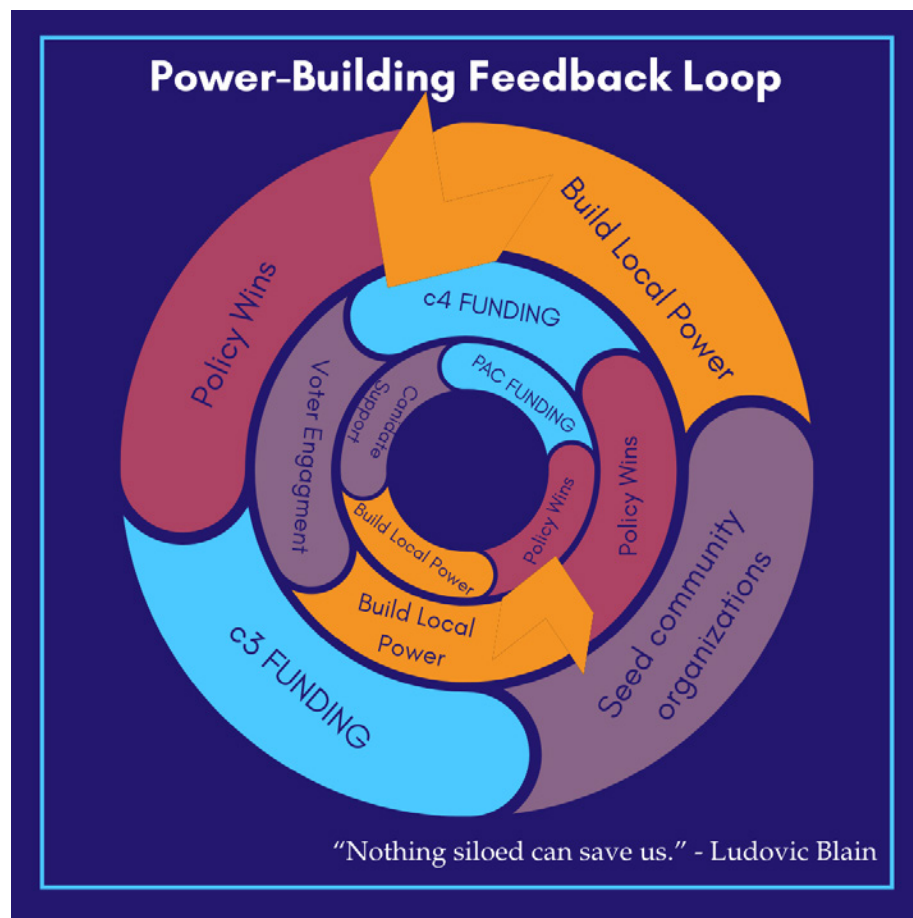


can most effectively support communities of color in our state to build their power and voice in elections and governing.

This is a significantly different approach from that of the financial industry, which myopically seeks to build wealth for donors above all else and compartmentalizes social change work in communities as a “nice to have.” Investment advisers, estate planners, tax accountants, and lawyers are not only far removed from system change strategy, but also tend to be less informed and more risk averse than this moment requires. None of them help donors see that they are taking completely unrestricted funds from their bank and investment accounts – money that they could spend on literally anything! – and are placing heavy limits on what their donations can be used for just to take advantage of a tax deduction. Such an approach is not really allowing donors to reflect their values and political leanings in how they grant. Or at least, their giving is not delivering the results it truly could.

Individual philanthropists like CDT board members Quinn Delaney, Steve Phillips, Karen Grove, Michael Stubbs, and Bill Resnick understand the assignment. Their social change portfolios are expansive – funding tax-deductible nonpartisan 501(c)(3) activities like leadership development, community organizing, voter engagement, supporting reform-oriented elected officials, and non-tax-deductible 501(c)(4) and PAC projects like legislative advocacy as well as candidate, initiative, and independent expenditure campaigns.

With this strategy, CDT has grown California’s progressive infrastructure exponentially. We helped create the California Working Families Party, the state Legislative Progressive Caucus, and the progressive state lobbyist table, Building the California Dream Alliance. Each entity has played essential roles in advocating



Katherine Ponce, NCRP

for and passing popular policies including anti-discrimination, tenant protection, reproductive freedom, immigrant rights, worker rights, and criminal justice reform.

In these traumatic times, when the bedrocks of our government are teetering and under threat, it may seem like a reach – but we have a critical role to play in rebuilding a society where the government works for the people – not the powerful – and where we protect everyone’s basic rights and their opportunity to thrive. We just need to put our money to work more strategically and in ways that truly reflect our values and

convictions. This means forgoing tax deductions and expanding our giving to political organizations and advocacy work.

Progressives and progressive donors are eminently justified in feeling that the country is in the throes of authoritarianism and that many communities are in turmoil. However, we are not currently justified in thinking we are doing everything we can to protect vulnerable communities and advance the cause of equity and justice. We can do so much more, and it starts with rethinking how we use our money to get better results.

***Ludovic Blain** is the CEO of the California Donor Table, where he organizes donors to shift power to progressive communities of color. In its 20th year, it has distributed \$60 million across all tax statuses to strengthen political power and community well-being for the majority of the state’s population: Black, Latinx, Asian American Pacific Islanders, Indigenous, and people of color.*

# Data and Democracy in America

By Ryan Schlegel

*“In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or more unsparingly applied to a multitude of different objects, than in America.”*

– Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

The quote above is from a 19th century French bureaucrat who turned a treatise on the early USA’s supposedly exemplary prison system into an explanation of the unlikely, especially from the standpoint of the chaos of 19th century France, success of America’s relatively representative democracy. His theories developed into the vacillating but prescient “Democracy in America.” Civil society in the United States has never been hegemonically liberal or universalist. It has, since the early republic, contained in it currents of well-funded and well-organized illiberal, even violent, collective action. In 2025, we at NCRP see this clearly taking shape in our research into increasingly authoritarian civil society, not made by accident but rather by long-term, strategic funding by deep-pocketed foundations all over the country.

## REGRESSIVE PHILANTHROPY

Using tax filing data and policy advocacy keywords, NCRP has identified over 1,800 non-profit organizations in 50 states and Washington, D.C. that reported more than 30,000 staff and 655,000 volunteers. These organizations are working diligently to undermine the civil and human rights of immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and women and pregnant people – hard won in the century since the fall of Jim Crow. To many of their wealthiest patrons, these organizations are part of a multi-pronged strategy to transform



Ryan Schlegel

American democracy into something more autocratic and illiberal – although not at all un-American.

As part of our effort to better understand the donor ecosystems behind these non-profits, NCRP developed a set of linked data processing and analysis scripts in Python using IRS Form 990 data structured and published by Giving Tuesday. More than 1,300 regressive organizations – voluntary associations whose activities are permitted by current 501(c)3 limits but whose goal is to roll back human and civil rights protections won in the US’s post-1965 multi-racial democracy – have filed 990 forms since 2021.

NCRP research found a network of 9,996 foundations sent \$3.6 billion to support 1,836 regressive organizations

since 2010. 90 percent of all foundation funding for these regressive organizations came from the 15 percent of foundations (around 1,500) that gave more than \$500,000 since 2010, and more than one-third came from 10 large donor-advised fund (DAF) sponsors.

While many organizations led for and by marginalized people are collecting donor-restricted project grants, a majority (52 percent) of regressive organizations received at least 90 percent of their foundation support as general operating support.

Half of the regressive organizations NCRP has tracked so far had at least 1 funder relationship that lasted more than 6 years, and more than 1 in 4 had at least 1 funder relationship that lasted 10 years or more. Those organizations with at least 1 decade-long funder relationship received more than 75 percent of all regressive foundation funding. The nearly \$500 million per year foundations gave to these regressive organizations is enough to cover a whole year of their travel, legal, advertising, office, and occupancy costs, or half of the year’s entire staffing costs.

Between 2010 and 2022, these 1,836 regressive organizations listed more than 34,000 individual organizational officers, which includes officers and highly paid employees (OHPE). The top-compensated 1 percent (about 340 OHPE) alone took home nearly half (48 percent) of all

reported officer compensation – each receiving more than \$1 million individually over the period.

To examine the overlap between political power and nonprofit leadership, NCRP researchers matched standardized OHPE names against a national dataset of state legislator names and district information. We used both exact and fuzzy name matching algorithms filtered by state for geographic relevance. Out of more than 34,000 nonprofit officers and over 7,000 state legislators algorithmically assessed, manual validation confirmed 13 current state legislators in 11 states who have served or are serving as officers at organizations aligned with anti-human rights agendas.

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Distraught by the turmoil around him in post-Revolution France, de Tocqueville observed that “the unrestrained liberty of political association” in the infant United States had “not hitherto produced those fatal consequences which might perhaps be expected from it elsewhere.” He attributed this quiescence in American civil society to the political culture’s lack of mi-

noritarian factions “diametrically opposed to the majority” and to what he called “Universal Suffrage.”

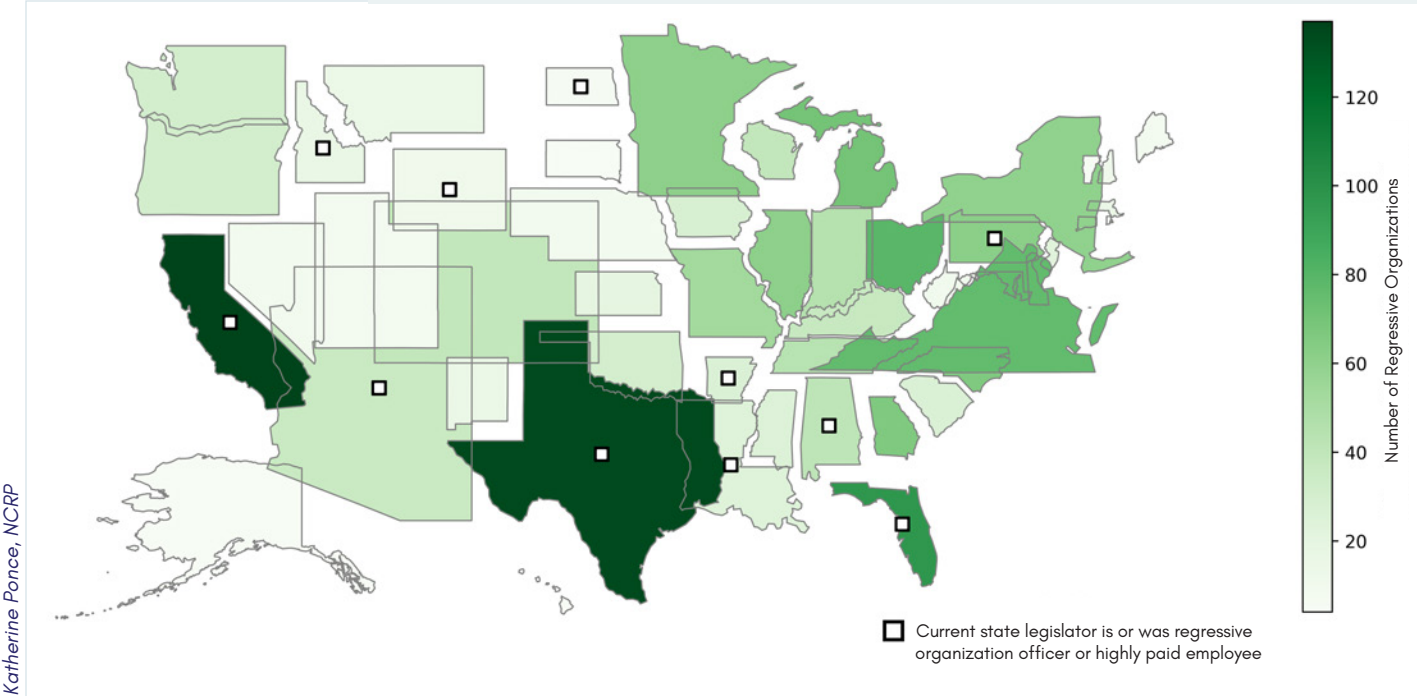
Of course, we know that de Tocqueville, who was himself European nobility, wrote at a time when most people living in the United States – defined either by its borders then or now – could not vote or exercise their other constitutional rights without fear of violent state or private repression. In “Democracy in America,” de Tocqueville expresses a shockingly cold (even for its time) view of the contemporaneous forced removal and effective genocide of Indigenous people in the United States and near its borders. And not all associating followed de Tocqueville’s model, where the liberty of association allowed the “moral authority of the minority” to protect against the “tyranny of the majority.” In the 1830s, one of the country’s most prominent voluntary associations was the African Colonization Society, founded by white clergy, business leaders, and even slave owners to solve the “problem” of race-mixing in communities with growing population of free Black people. As Nicholas Guyatt, a lecturer in American history

at Cambridge University, has put it in his account of the Society’s founding, “[In December 1816] dozens of the nation’s most powerful men met in the Davis Hotel in Washington to plot the removal of African Americans from the United States.”

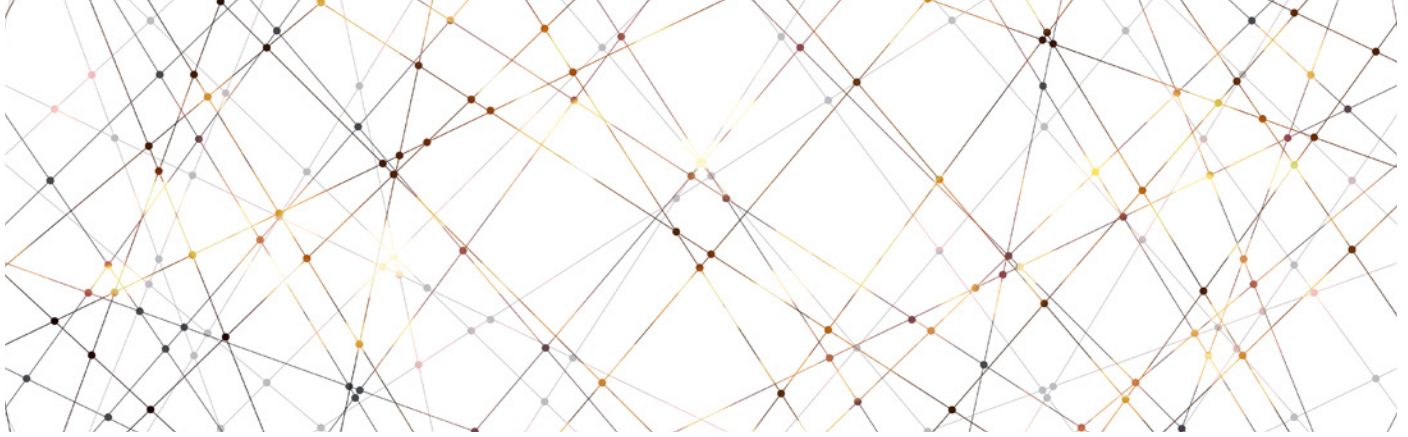
Moral reform organizations flourished in 19th century United States, in what Stuart Blumin, emeritus professor of American history at Cornell University, calls “an era of voluntary institutional innovation without parallel in American history.” By the end of the 1800s, temperance leagues with anti-Black and anti-Catholic politics had proliferated, and avowedly nativist associations like the American Protective Association and the Immigration Restriction League were objecting loudly and sometimes violently to a changing America.

By the 1920s, one of the country’s largest voluntary associations was a reincarnated, newly nationalized Ku Klux Klan, with deep ties to the anti-immigrant moral reformers in the Anti-Saloon League and thousands of Christian churches. Throughout the association’s history, it mobilized volunteers, paid staff, and built

UNCIVIL SOCIETY: State size scaled to funding per capita



Katherine Ponce, NCRP



community in nearly every state around objecting to the voting rights of its neighbors, enforcing the patriarchy and prohibition, and preserving the country's white demographic majority with a campaign that included eugenics, intimidation, violence, and banal policymaking. 1924's Immigration Act was the culmination of decades of anti-immigrant policy change stretching back to the Chinese Exclusion Act. liberty" of association in the USA has, throughout the country's history, led to sometimes counterintuitively illiberal coalitions capable of building and wielding power to change policy.

## A CENTURY OF ASSOCIATIONS

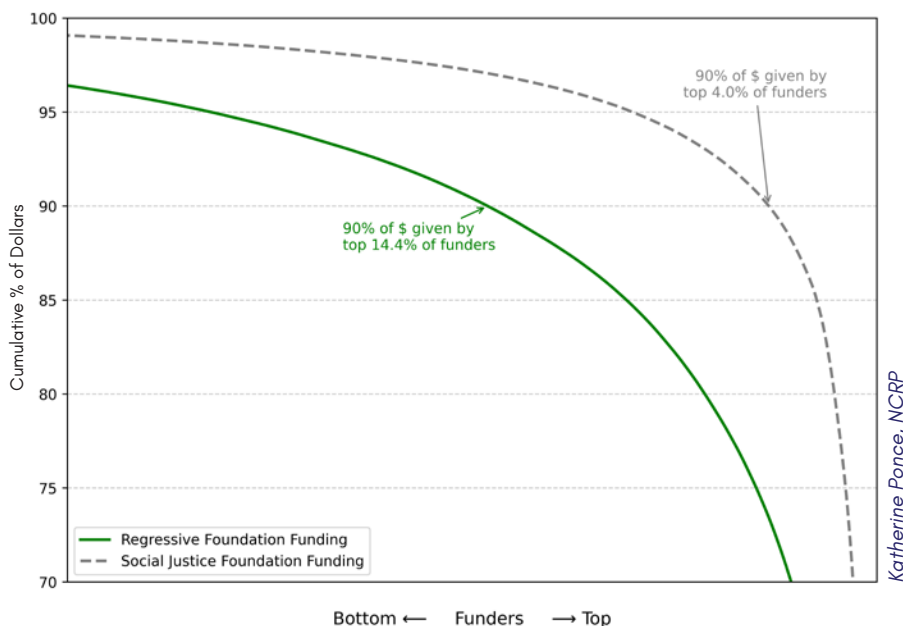
The speaker pro tempore of the Florida House of Representatives was a trustee at

a local anti-abortion center before he was elected in 2018, and since then has sponsored 2 bills, both of which became law, limiting civilian oversight of police. The 5th most conservative Texas House of Representatives member, according to the "Texas Tribune," is a 37-year-old who was on the board of a local anti-abortion center for 5 years before he was elected. During his sophomore legislative session in 2023, he personally advocated for and won \$80 million in funding for anti-abortion centers in the state budget. The director of development for anti-LGBTQ advocacy group Family Research Council won a Wyoming Senate seat in 2024 and co-sponsored all 5 of the anti-trans bills that became law in that state this year as well as bills that have not yet become law, such as bills prohibiting electronic voting machines, sanctuary cities,

and DEI trainings and promoting conspiracy theories about non-citizen voting and chemical abortion medicines polluting water supplies. Altogether these 12 legislators are responsible for sponsoring, co-sponsoring, or authoring at least 50 bills restricting the civil and human rights of immigrants, pregnant people, and queer people – at least a dozen of which have become law.

The erosion of our shared democratic, republican values in the last decade and more – impossible to ignore now in the midst of a hostile takeover of the federal government by race- and gender-obsessed fanatics – is the result of the labor of many donors and organizers across the country. Hundreds of grassroots and grassroots organizations can rely on the trust – and dollars – of thousands of institutional donors who operate under the shelter of the tax exemption, subsidized by us all. There is much we still don't know about this universe of nativist, patriarchal, and reactionary donors, but tax filings make clear they are deeply invested in the longstanding American tradition of transforming our communities through a robust civil society, though not always for the betterment of all.

Regressive Foundation Funding is Less Top Heavy Than Social Justice Foundation Funding



**Ryan Schlegel** is Director of Research at NCRP where he leads the organization's analysis of Form 990 data. He has written on the ideas driving a new generation of techno-philanthropists, the philanthropic landscape for progressive social change in the U.S. South, and the challenges facing civil society in an age of rising extremism. Ryan studied government and politics at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is an Ohioan living in Virginia.



# Act now before it's too late

By Arthur Larok and Niranjali Amerasinghe

*"We have had our own version of Trump for decades."*

*- Arthur Larok*

For many in the world, what is happening in the United States is eerily familiar. Countless people who have lived through repressive and authoritarian regimes know all too well how the rule of law can be dismantled. As civil society leaders who grew up in authoritarian states, we witnessed dictators using government apparatuses to attack political opponents and dissidents, disregarding judicial accountability and destroying social programs while propping up wealthy elites and corporations. Though the specific drivers that result in leaders like this coming into power vary from country to country and understanding those drivers is important, there is one tactic they all use to bring people into line – fear.

Fear is powerful. We can already see how, in the United States, many universities, law firms, and others threatened by the administration are falling silent or cutting deals in a shortsighted attempt to stay afloat. These kinds of choices are made in rational self-interest, but history shows us that collectively, they lead straight to authoritarianism.

We're here to tell you that anticipatory compliance is not the answer. Bullies like to test the limits of their power – and the more you give, the more they will take. Do we need to prepare? Yes. Must we adapt to protect the values we all hold dear? Of course. But what we cannot do is give in to fear. We must not censor ourselves.



Arthur Larok



Niranjali Amerasinghe

So how do we tackle this abuse of power and lack of humanity? It's a question that comes up a lot at ActionAid – a global federation working for a world free from poverty and injustice. We work with communities in some of the most challenging contexts imaginable. We know that

together, people have power. In an era of repressive regimes, movement organizing is essential. Where traditional advocacy has failed or fallen out of touch with the struggles of people, movements give us a source of hope.

## STORIES OF RESISTANCE

### Uganda – Power Grabs Cast Long Shadows

In 1986, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni captured political power and became president of Uganda. At first, his ascension to power was considered by some – including Europe and the United States – a welcome departure from the “typical” authoritarian and military dictatorship. He was described as a new kind of African leader. Now, 38 years later, President Museveni is not only one of the longest-serving presidents in the world, but his reign has turned out to be as authoritarian, if not more than, those of his predecessors.

His long reign was made possible by two amendments to Uganda's constitution: the removal of presidential term limits in 2005 and the removal of an age cap for presidential candidates in 2017. Together, these changes mean that Museveni can run for president as many times as he wants, and he can rule till he dies.

Herein lies the lesson for the United States: To protect your institutions from President Trump's authoritarian instincts,

you must rise and defend your constitution, Congress, and judicial branch before they become too weak to defend you. Once a dictator has a firm grasp on power, it becomes much more difficult and costlier to remove them.

## Bangladesh – Movements Can Bring Change

*“Every person who is fighting against oppression ... must believe that the power of oppression can be overcome.”*

—Manzur Al Matin

For years, the idea of moving beyond the dictatorship of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a meaningful multi-party democracy felt out of reach. But in the summer of 2024, a wave of massive street demonstrations – dubbed Bangladesh 2.0 – swept across the country, sparked by deep public frustration with corruption, economic instability, and escalating restrictions on democratic freedoms. The protests, led primarily by young people, students, and grassroots organizers, were unique in their scale as well as their decentralized leadership and coordination.

Despite brutal and lethal crackdowns by the government, young people stood strong. In a matter of weeks, Prime Minister Hasina, widely criticized for her increasingly authoritarian rule over the course of 15 years, fled the country. Rath-

er than trying to be safe by remaining silent, our youth demonstrated the courage – and took the risks – that were needed in order to win a new chance at freedom.

During the height of the protests, members of ActionAid’s youth network acted as mediators on the ground, helped keep demonstrations aligned with their core demands, fostered inclusive participation, and promoted unity across diverse activist groups. Today, activists are shaping what comes next and choosing a former Nobel laureate to lead an interim government. At ActionAid, we keep working to anticipate risks, safeguard activists under pressure, and ensure that the momentum and impact of movements like Bangladesh 2.0 can be sustained in the long term.

## Haiti – Continuing to Speak Out for a Future Free from Violence

Across the Americas and the Caribbean, a growing wave of authoritarianism has deeply challenged democratic values, civic freedoms, and the rights of marginalized communities. In Haiti, the collapse of the state has led to gangs effectively ruling the country while silencing journalists and civil society.

ActionAid works with communities, women, and youth centers on reclaiming democratic space. At the heart of this work lies a deep belief in the power of people

speaking up – especially when equipped with resources, political education, and international solidarity – and even if that can sometimes come with deep personal risk.

*“The women and girls we work with do not hide.”*

—Angeline Annesteus,  
ActionAid Country Director, Haiti

Recently, 200 displaced women and girls held a sit-in to demand the protection of their rights after we held an awareness-raising day with them and partners. These women are mobilizing their communities and offering hope for a future free from violence. They are the backbone of Haiti and need our collective support to do their work.

So many people across the globe are living under authoritarian regimes. The courage demonstrated by youth activists, feminist networks, and movement organizers cannot be overstated. Movements are showing us the way in places like Myanmar – with its unyielding struggle for democracy, Zimbabwe and Kenya – through unapologetic demands for economic justice, and Georgia – with a fight for rights. The United States is by no means exceptional in what it is facing today, but as a major global power, the fallout is felt by us all.

## U.S. FUNDERS MUST NOT BACK DOWN

*“Your endowments mean nothing if our society collapses.”*

—Yu Le

Funders must recognize that this moment is an existential crisis for democracy and freedom in the United States. But we are neither exceptional nor alone. The lessons we have learned from others who have faced authoritarianism tell us clearly that this is not the time to “wait and see,” develop a new strategy, hold back funds in the hopes of being able to support future efforts, or avoid funding specific kinds of work because the administration is threatening to shut down that work. Civil society organizations will run out of money



2024 protests in Bangladesh erupt after frustration with corruption, economic instability, and restrictions on democratic freedoms. © Mamunur Rashid | Dreamstime.com.

from the combined effects of funder caution, the need to double down on organizing and campaigning work, the unforeseen expenses associated with shoring up digital and physical security, and the potentially crippling costs of defending against legal challenges. Soon enough, there will be nothing left to fund.

Such times call for partnership, for trust, and for *money*. Now is the moment to dig into reserves and endowments. It's great that foundations are increasing flexibility for existing grantees, but that is not enough. When an organization comes to you with a plan for supporting a vulnerable community, fighting the latest executive power grab, or engaging more people in the movement, fund it! Even if it doesn't fit squarely in the 5-year strategy, fund it anyway! That strategy will likely be meaningless in 5 years if you don't. If said social justice organization is under direct threat from the administration, fund it! That's a sure sign the work it is doing is effective and needed.

Leaving those who are pushing back without sufficient funding to do so effectively is counterproductive, irresponsible, and dangerous. There is inherent risk for everyone involved in resistance – both for those on the frontlines and those funding them – but the self-censorship of progressive actors, inspired by fear, is precisely the instrument that authoritarians rely on. The administration is waiting for just the right opportunity to crush our movements. But if we resist, if we stand together, it is hard for even the most powerful authoritarian to reach everyone.

## COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS, ACTION IS NECESSARY

Ultimately, the task of defending democracy requires a completely different risk appetite than many institutions and individuals are accustomed to. As we've seen from the examples of other countries that have struggled with authoritarianism, this moment in U.S. history must be met with a new level of courage and solidarity. Our international colleagues have emphasized how a willingness to take risks is absolutely necessary to break the hold of a fear-based regime. They have also taught us that breaking through fear is much easier *before* a dictatorship really settles in and firms up its grasp on power.

In other words, now is the time to stand together and stand strong. Many movement organizations, leaders, and individuals are beginning to do so. They urgently need the support of the progressive funding community.

Courage is contagious. We stand with those who dare to resist – and those who dare to dream of a more just, inclusive, and democratic world. Will you?

*Arthur Larok is the Secretary General of ActionAid International, a global federation working to achieve social justice, gender equality, and poverty eradication. Arthur was born and lived in Uganda all his life. He is currently in Johannesburg, the Head Office of ActionAid. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science and Sociology from Makerere University and a master's in governance and development from the University of Sussex.*

*Niranjali Amerasinghe is the Executive Director of ActionAid USA. She is an expert in climate justice, economic justice, and human rights. Niranjali previously worked at the World Resources Institute and the Center for International Environmental Law. She holds an LL.M. in International and Comparative Law from The George Washington University Law School and an LL.B from the University of Bristol. She is a classically trained musician and avid gardener, born and raised in Sri Lanka.*

## Select Publications

### *NCRP Research on Funding for Anti-Democracy Organizations*

NCRP tracked \$1 billion in total foundation funding from around 3,500 private and public funders between 2020 and 2022.

In that time, \$1 billion in total foundation funding went to 155 election denial and anti-voting rights organizations. These anti-democracy organizations control more than \$7 billion, more than each of the well-known conservative funders combined.

### *Playing It Safe Won't Save Us*

NCRP's Field Director, Ben Barge shares his response to a recent Chronicle of Philanthropy op-ed calling for pluralism and an end to resistance.

### *Rethinking Evaluation and Philanthropy for a Just and Liberated Future*

NCRP's former Evaluation Manager Adrienne Glover reflects on two thought-provoking articles that challenge traditional methods rooted in capitalist ROI frameworks, which often prioritize the perspectives and interests of white people.

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



# Building the democratic world we want through anti-authoritarian storytelling

By Scot Nakagawa

*“People tell stories in order to live.”*

— Joan Didion

After nearly 4 decades tracking the rise of authoritarianism in American politics, I’ve reached an inescapable conclusion: The battle for democracy is not won or lost not solely at the ballot box, but also in the stories we tell. The authoritarian right understood this decades ago. Those of us committed to democracy are still catching up.

What I’ve observed is both alarming and instructive. The authoritarian transformation of our politics didn’t happen overnight or by accident. It succeeded because its architects mastered the art of strategic storytelling long before they gained electoral power.

Consider how meticulously crafted their narrative strategies have been. Make America Great Again isn’t merely a catchy slogan; it’s a powerful story of national decline. It taps into nostalgia for a mythologized past that conveniently existed before civil rights, feminism, and multiculturalism challenged traditional hierarchies.

But perhaps their most brilliant move was redirecting legitimate economic pain toward cultural scapegoats. As globalization and deindustrialization hollowed out communities across America, authoritarian forces offered a compellingly simple explanation: Your suffering isn’t because of corporate power or policy failures, but because “those people,” groups like immigrants, so-called “coastal elites,” and the “woke mob,” are taking what’s rightfully yours.



Scot Nakagawa

Through these moves, the authoritarians framed their movement not around policy, but around identity, grievance, and belonging, turning political participation into a form of cultural solidarity rather than an engagement with governance. The effectiveness of this approach stems partly from narrative discipline. While progressive movements debated nuance and complexity, the right hammered simple, emotionally resonant messages across multiple channels. Through relentless repetition, they naturalized an “us versus them” framework that proved remarkably resistant to contrary evidence.

They also mastered what I call “strategic provocation and victimhood inversion” – deliberately provoking outrage then framing the response as persecution. When called out for attacking vulnerable

communities, they cry “cancel culture” and position themselves as martyrs for free speech, transforming accountability into oppression.

What’s crucial to understand is that these weren’t reactive tactics. These moves represented sophisticated strategic foresight. The authoritarian right anticipated how globalization, automation, and financial capitalism would reshape communities and create economic anxiety and cultural displacement. They developed explanatory frameworks and villain narratives ready to activate when these crises emerged.

They built alternative media infrastructures, like right-wing talk radio, before the digital transformation made such efforts profitable. For instance, evangelical authoritarians created the 700 Club, which was the communications organ and chief fundraising vehicle of the Christian Coalition, a national group that provided training, strategic support, and public opinion research to local evangelical authoritarians so that they could punch above their weight class. Similar media outlets like the Trinity Broadcasting Network served both as soft entry points into the evangelical movement and as the means by which to amass resources in order to expand the networks, with occasional specific fundraising appeals to build transmitters to “lift the darkness” over countries like Haiti where they also supported missions.



They also crafted epistemic frameworks like “fake news” and “liberal bias” that would allow their audiences to reject unfavorable information once their narrative foothold was established.

In essence, they didn’t just respond to economic transformations. They prepared the narrative ground to exploit them, investing in storytelling infrastructure with long-term rather than immediate payoffs.

## BUILDING COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY COURAGE

So how do we counter these narratives without adopting their manipulative approaches? The answer lies in building better stories and narratives that energize democracy rather than authoritarianism.

We can draw inspiration from movements that have successfully challenged authoritarian power through strategic storytelling. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Highlander Folk School created story circles where sharecroppers and domestic workers shared experiences of both oppression and resistance. These weren’t therapy sessions but strategic spaces that surfaced forgotten tactics and built collective community courage.

Chile’s 1988 campaign against former President Pinochet shows how joy can defeat fear. Rather than focusing solely on the dictator’s brutality, they created forward-looking messaging celebrating democracy’s possibilities. Their rainbow symbol and testimonials from ordinary

Chileans portrayed democracy as abundance rather than scarcity.

The human rights organization known as Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina demonstrate distributed storytelling’s power. During the Dirty War, each mother became a bearer of her disappeared child’s story, their white headscarves symbols that carried their narrative even when words became dangerous. This approach meant the government couldn’t silence their movement by targeting any single leader.

What unites these examples is that they didn’t merely oppose authoritarianism, they embodied democratic alternatives through the very way they told stories.







that connect divided groups through shared values.

Most importantly, we must recognize that counter-authoritarian storytelling isn't just about better messaging, it's about building the Democratic world we want through the very practice of telling stories together.

When people gather to share experiences of struggle and resistance, they form what narrative expert Liz Manne calls “constellations,” meaning narratives that connect diverse stories to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Narratives of this sort are a critical component of the infrastructure of democratic power.

The authoritarians have treated narrative as warfare and invested accordingly. If we hope to counter them effectively, we must take storytelling just as seriously – not as manipulation, but as democracy’s fundamental practice.

The stories we tell in the coming years will determine whether authoritarianism continues to rise or whether we can yet build a democracy worthy of the name. This is a battle we cannot afford to lose.

*Scot Nakagawa is a political strategist and organizer with over 4 decades of experience exploring questions of structural racism, white supremacy, and social justice. He is the co-founder and director of the 22nd Century Initiative, a national strategy and action hub building power at the intersection of opposition to authoritarianism and expanding democratic governance in the United States.*

Drawing from these lessons, our narrative strategy must balance complexity without confusion. Authoritarian narratives offer simple solutions to complex problems. Our challenge is developing clear frameworks that hold multiple perspectives while still driving toward action.

We must center agency, not just victimhood. Stories documenting suffering without highlighting resistance create a sense of powerlessness. Effective democratic narratives balance acknowledging harm with showcasing the power of collective action, demonstrating that change is possible.

We need tactical narrative diversity. No single story type will reach all communities. We need personal testimonials building emotional connection, analytical stories explaining systemic patterns, cultural expressions transcending rational barriers, and yes, humor that deflates authoritarian pretension.

## INVESTING IN COUNTER-AUTHORITARIAN STORYTELLING

This work requires serious investment. Funders must support narrative infrastructure beyond election cycles, including community media controlled by movements rather than corporations, physical spaces for thousands of story circles, and documentation systems preserving movement histories for future inspiration.

Organizers must treat storytelling as a core strategy. We often share ideas rather than stories and present those ideas as sales pitches for participation in issue campaigns and candidates. These tactics are still valuable, but we must adapt to the challenge before us by centering storytelling. We need to create spaces where people can connect personal experiences to systemic analysis, build storytelling capacity across diverse communities, and craft bridge narratives



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