

Executive Summary

Background

While threats to civil liberties long preceded Donald Trump’s second term, since January 2025 the pace, scope, and coordination of attacks on democratic norms have intensified. The strategic “flood-the-zone” approach combining attacks on individual freedoms with the robust dismantling of civil infrastructure has placed philanthropy under increasing pressure, leaving many funders unsure how to respond effectively. This report assesses the sector’s collective analysis and response to the current crisis, what funders are doing and not doing, and how the sector might build a practical playbook to defend democracy.

Methodology

Conducted between July and December 2025, NCRP invited foundation executives to participate in both surveys and interviews to share their assessments and offer insight into progressive philanthropy’s strengths and gaps within the current context. Given the chilling effect on public dissent under the Trump administration, respondents were offered anonymity using encrypted data collection. Respondents were more likely to hold values of equity and democracy; however, among this subset, there was a wide range of funders across geographies, grantmaking sizes, funding priorities, and institutional types.

Findings

Nearly 98 percent of respondents agreed that the U.S. is facing a constitutional crisis. Despite this consensus, many foundation leaders felt the sector’s response had been “uneven.” One interviewee said, “Funders have not met the scale of the democracy crisis with the scale of resources required.”

When asked what obstacles were preventing their institutions from responding to the current climate, the most common answer was “uncertainty about how to respond effectively,” at 41 percent. Respondents described working in the current context as “playing without a playbook.”

In both surveys and interviews, respondents offered a wide range of actions, funding strategies, public statements, and experiments that their institutions have explored.

*Funders spoke at length about a wide range of ways they are **expanding funding and strengthening partnerships**:*

- **Leaning into trust-based philanthropy:** One hundred percent of survey respondents said they had asked or will ask grantees about what support they needed, and 89 percent said the same for loosening restrictions or reporting requirements. Funders noted that these practices, along with multi-year grants, decrease the burden on grantees and increase stability in an otherwise highly unstable context.
- **Capacity-building:** Nearly every funder interviewed mentioned capacity-building as a key component of their response. Some focused on connecting vulnerable grantees with resources for legal protection, digital security, and physical

security, while others focused on helping grantees develop sustainability strategies given massive federal funding cuts.

- **Increasing payout:** About 53 percent of survey respondents said that they had increased or will increase payout, and another 31 percent said they might.
- **Funding protection of civil liberties and mass organizing:** Many funders said they were proactively increasing funding for communities of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ communities, particularly for protection of civil liberties, legal services, litigation, and advocacy. While mentioned less often, several funders made a strong case for a massive increase in funding for mass organizing and movement building as essential for combating authoritarianism and realizing the vision of a more just society.
- **Strengthening local partnerships and advocacy:** Several executives from place-based foundations mentioned that they are deepening collaborations with city and state government agencies. They noted that with federal systems being eviscerated, local government systems can provide a bulwark for preserving social safety nets.

Nearly every funder surveyed and interviewed has taken steps to protect their own institutions from potential risks:

- **Institutional preparation:** Ninety-three percent of survey respondents have consulted or will consult with lawyers about how to protect their institutions, the second most common action step. Over half had also at least considered preparing their leadership for congressional hearings. Foundation executives noted the importance of digital security and updating document retention policies. Some have shifted toward more unrestricted grants, which both decrease risk and offer grantees more flexibility.
- **Protecting employees:** A few interviewees mentioned concerns about risks for employees. One leader from a foundation deeply rooted in marginalized communities said, “I think a lot of foundations have employees who are at risk, but may not realize it.” She noted that her institution has developed an extensive set of practices to protect its employees, particularly immigrants and transgender employees.
- **Engaging board and donors:** Several foundation leaders named the importance of board and stakeholder engagement to both manage risk and build support for priorities. Some executives have engaged their boards and donors in difficult conversations about the realities facing immigrants and other vulnerable communities — laying the groundwork for more proactive work in those areas.
- **Putting values before fear:** Funders deeply rooted in marginalized communities or that have worked in authoritarian contexts internationally offered some of the most clear-eyed analysis of how to manage risk. “We treat the attacks as inevitable,” said one. “We don’t think, ‘If we just say this the right way, they won’t come for us.’ They *are* coming for us, so we should prepare, and we shouldn’t obey in advance.”

Funders were often more reluctant to publicly speak out than to take other action steps:

- **Concerns about communications capacity:** Only 40 percent of survey respondents had spoken publicly against the attacks on philanthropy, and slightly fewer — 36 percent — had spoken about human rights and democratic crises in the country. Some foundation leaders said they saw communications as outside their core role: “Foundations are *not* communications experts, and their messages often get drowned out by people with much more social media savvy.” Several funders noted that they had made the explicit decision to be less public-facing about work related to diversity or racial equity, though they said the substance of that work continued.
- **A need to speak out for more than the sector:** Many foundation leaders praised Unite in Advance, a coalition of funders that have called for preserving philanthropic independence and the “freedom to give.” *Some leaders called for more funders to speak out in a united voice beyond the defense of the sector — particularly in defense of civil liberties, immigrant rights, democracy, and nonprofits under attack.*
- **A call for boldness and solidarity:** Several foundation leaders who are using their bully pulpit to speak out called on other funders to do the same. “Funders’ approach to these issues is often, ‘how do we help everybody lawyer up?’” said one leader. “People do need help for that. But we also need to encourage more solidarity responses. Strong collective action is protective — it makes the administration pause.”

Recommendations

Tentative responses are insufficient; philanthropy is being called to meet this moment with boldness and solidarity. We have synthesized respondents' evolving practices to offer the beginning of a playbook for funders navigating rising authoritarianism:

Fund: *Foundations can move flexible resources in a way that few others can.*

- Increase your institution's payout to deploy more resources. Join the Level Up Pledge, which asks funders to increase their annual grantmaking for at least two years.
- Expand funding for legal services, mutual aid, community organizing groups, long-term power building, and other efforts to advance human rights and democracy.
- Strengthen race-explicit strategies that address the realities of racial disparities.
- Fund mass organizing and coalition building across a diverse range of communities.

Engage: *Funders have their own role to play in organizing by educating and engaging their boards, donors, and peers.*

- Educate trustees around the continued importance of diversity and equity and the realities facing immigrants and other marginalized communities.
- Strategize on all levels of your institution for preparedness and contingency planning.
- Listen to grantees about their urgent needs and develop collaborative resources.
- Take measures to protect vulnerable employees from risks and foster a workplace where staff are welcome to have dialogue and seek support for their specific vulnerabilities.

Speak Out: *Staying quiet about the breakdown of democracy will normalize the crisis. Foundations have a responsibility to speak when others are unable to.*

- Defend the importance of an independent philanthropic and nonprofit sector. Speak out in defence of groups that are attacked or investigated wrongly.
- Take public stances in defense of civil rights and due process as essential values for democracy and in support of immigrants and diversity as part of the fabric of our communities. Form coalitions with other funders who are speaking out on these issues.

Background and Purpose

In the past several years, the U.S. has experienced a wave of attacks on human rights, democratic norms, and civil society. Since the beginning of the second Trump administration, these attacks have expanded in scope and scale to levels that recall dark chapters in the country's history and that build on tactics tested more recently in other countries.

- **Attacks on civil liberties:** The Trump administration has vastly expanded the detention and deportation of immigrants. In many cases, these abductions have taken place without due process and targeted immigrants who have visas. The President has also issued executive orders and other policies seeking to deny transgender people their human rights. In the face of local protest, the President has deployed a federalized National Guard across state lines in a direct affront to Posse Comitatus, the century-and-a-half-old law that limits the use of military personnel domestically. These deployments have been made in the absence of an emergency, primarily to Black-led cities. Along with recent militarized mass deployments of ICE agents, these actions have put millions of Americans' constitutional rights in peril.
- **Attacks on democratic norms:** A riot stoked by the current president made the 2020 presidential election the first time since the secession crisis that grew into the Civil War that the transfer of power between U.S. presidential administrations was not peaceful. The partisan attacks on the people and processes that count our votes have since continued. Most recently, in December 2025, the Justice Department sued four states for refusing to hand over personal voter registration data, while state and local voting officials across the country are preparing for potential interference in the 2026 midterms as if preparing for a "natural disaster."¹ Meanwhile, the future of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act hangs in the balance at the Supreme Court this term, with many observers expecting a ruling to strike it down that could exacerbate racial disparities in elections and reduce the political representation of communities of color.²
- **Attacks on civil society:** In his first week in office, Trump signed an executive order aiming to "deter [diversity, equity, and inclusion] programs or principles" within the federal government and beyond, including at publicly traded corporations, nonprofits, foundations, and universities.³ Since then, the President has followed up with a memorandum calling on the National Joint Terrorism Task Force to investigate groups, including philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, for alleged "domestic terrorism" relating to "extremism on migration, race, and gender." More than 200 nonprofits are being probed for broadly supporting immigrant rights and providing services to undocumented individuals. The Department of Justice also issued a directive to U.S. Attorney offices to probe Open Society Foundations for "the material support of terrorism."⁴ Some of the country's largest institutions in higher education have faced scrutiny and lost federal

funding for their support of diversity, equity, and inclusion or transgender students. The rights to speak, petition, associate, and assemble have not been threatened to this degree for so many Americans since the end of Jim Crow and McCarthyism.

- **Dismantlement of federal funding:** At the same time, the Trump administration has asserted broad presidential power to slash congressionally appropriated federal funding for a wide swath of social services, research programs, and financial assistance, particularly in underserved communities. The so-called Department of Government Efficiency was created with a pledge by Trump-donor Elon Musk to cut \$2 trillion in government waste, and while the department has barely held up to its promises,⁵ it still has led the charge on a dismantling of funding across sectors, including \$3.8 billion in grants from the National Institutes of Health⁶, the complete shuttering of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the end of federal funding for public broadcasting as part of the Recissions Act of 2025.

While these trends have accelerated in the past year, all had their seeds before the second Trump administration. The wake of September 11 also saw rollbacks in civil liberties in the name of national security, as did the McCarthy era of the 1950s. The U.S. has struggled to live up to the full promise of democracy since its Constitution enumerated certain rights and freedoms while codifying slavery. The attacks on civil society itself were presaged in the Reagan-era dismantlement of many New Deal and Great Society programs and the rise of privatization.

Despite these many historical forerunners to the current crisis, it is rare for the nation to experience such wide-ranging regressions of constitutional norms simultaneously — and

with a “flood-the-zone” strategy that combines scapegoating of marginalized communities, criminalization of dissent, and consolidation of executive authority.

Taken together, this siege has left philanthropic institutions facing multiple concurrent challenges. Attacks on marginalized communities have vastly increased the level of need for protection of human rights, mutual aid and services to support affected individuals, and education and organizing to resist repressive policies and shape new paths forward. Massive cuts in federal funding have resulted in drastic reductions in resources for issues ranging from healthcare to international aid, jeopardizing the sustainability of grantees and creating new holes in ecosystems. Threats of potential investigations into foundations have pushed many funders to take defensive postures to safeguard their own institutions in new ways.

This report assesses how institutional philanthropies, particularly at institutions with economic, gender, and racial equity values, have responded to these unprecedented challenges. Specifically, through a survey and interviews, we seek to answer several questions:

- How does institutional philanthropy perceive the current national climate? To what extent does philanthropy believe that the nation faces an urgent constitutional crisis?
- How are funders responding to the rapidly shifting context?
- What are some promising practices for funders responding with bold, adaptive leadership?
- What are the major gaps where philanthropy as a whole is falling short?

Methodology

Data for this project were collected from July to December 2025 and conducted in two phases: an anonymous online survey and interviews conducted by a third-party consultant.

Given the chilling effect among philanthropic institutions about speaking out against the Trump administration's actions, anonymity was of the utmost importance for our data collection. We conducted our first phase through [BlockSurvey](#), a platform with a mission to secure data privacy. Data is end-to-end encrypted and only accessible to the owners of a survey. All responses defaulted to full anonymity; respondents could voluntarily disclose their affiliation at the end of the survey for early access to the report.

Quantitative survey candidates were selected from Candid's F1000 foundations list* to build on the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's 2025 study of F1000 foundation websites in [Hiding in Plain Sight: Are foundation website changes masking their values or pulling off their masks?](#)² To focus on institutions more likely to fund progressive movements and to respond to the survey, we narrowed the list to include only funders whose support for underserved communities — which includes low-income people of all races/ethnicities — is more than 10% of their annual giving. Most, if not all, funders in our sample identify as progressive, focusing on philanthropy as a means “to make American society a better and safer place in which to live” for all, as opposed to philanthropy as “no more than an expression of generosity to the poor and needy.” Within this subsector, we selected a range of institutions spanning geographic regions, foundation size, annual giving totals, and theories of change. Primarily, we targeted senior-level employees of organizations, aiming for chief executive officers, chief program officers, and senior vice presidents who could speak on behalf of their organization's perspectives. Ultimately, 233 institutions were selected for the quantitative survey.

Approximately 200 candidates were invited to take the survey via BlockSurvey and Mailmerge. The remainder were contacted via customized outreach from the consultant and NCRP, although their ability to respond anonymously directly to the survey remained intact. The survey was live from July 15 to September 4, 2025. Seven opted out or were unable to be reached, and 41 individuals responded, leading to an 18 percent response rate. The survey comprised 11 questions, with most multiple-choice, two short answers, and one Likert scale question.

The interview phase of research was conducted from September to December 2025. Selecting interview candidates took a similar approach to selections for the quantitative survey, with a goal to sample a diverse range of foundations in size, annual giving, geographic scope, and mission focus. Ultimately, 12 individuals were invited for interviews; of those, eight completed interviews.

* F1000 is Candid's data collection of the top 1,000 U.S. private and community foundations, surveying grants totaling \$10,000 or more and accounts for 50-60% of all Candid's reported grant dollars. For more information on the F1000, [see here](#).

Individual interview subjects' responses remained anonymous to NCRP and joined a 30-minute to 1-hour interview with the consultant, including the original survey questions and new questions to understand nuanced positions and specific evolving practices beyond the quantitative survey. Interview responses were not recorded, but the consultant took detailed notes, transcribing key findings and quotes from respondents during the interviews.

As with many research undertakings of this type, both the survey and interviews are prone to self-selection bias and non-response bias. In particular, funders may have been more likely to respond if they leaned progressive, had an existing relationship with or positive perceptions of NCRP, were concerned about diversity and equity issues, or believed that the current context presents a constitutional crisis. Funders may have been less likely to respond if they did not feel threatened by the current political environment, were generally risk-averse, had negative perceptions of NCRP, or were simply unfamiliar with the organization. One of the key characteristics of the current climate is the stifling of free speech, which may further exacerbate non-response bias. For example, CHANGE Philanthropy's most recent [Diversity Among Philanthropic Professionals survey](#), which was fielded in 2024, found a statistically significant dropoff in participation from foundations that were less diverse.⁸

These limitations would be more concerning if the goal of this report were to capture a snapshot of the entire field of philanthropy, which encompasses a wide range of ideologies and practical approaches. Our focus here, however, is on those funders that lean progressive and that believe that diversity, equity, human rights, and democratic participation are fundamental values. This target segment of the sector, diverse unto itself, is also the sector that was most likely to participate in the study. Given that, the survey and interviews have provided sufficient data to answer the research questions at hand: what are progressive foundations' analyses of the current context, and how are they responding?

Findings

Near Unanimous Perception of a Constitutional Crisis Without a Commensurately Urgent Response

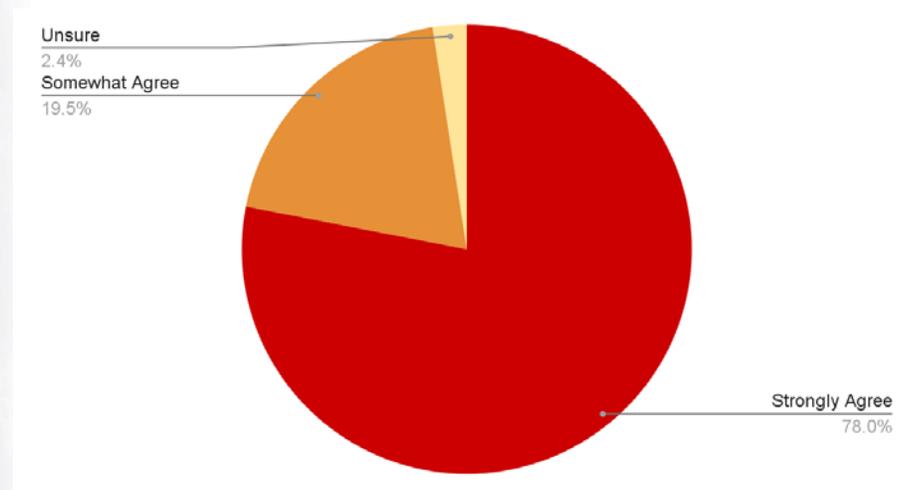
In both the survey and interviews, the overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that the U.S. is facing an unprecedented crisis that threatens civil liberties and democracy. **Nearly 98 percent of respondents agreed that the U.S. is facing a constitutional crisis — including 78 percent who strongly agreed.** Only one respondent said that they were unsure; none outright disagreed.

Foundation executives used emotionally charged words to describe the current context in interviews, saying it was “profoundly disturbing” and “deeply painful.” One community foundation executive said, “Personally, I’m very worried. I’m fearful for the future and what we’re passing on to the next generation. I feel a lot of sadness and grief over what we’re losing as a country.”

Several made dire, and specific, political diagnoses. “We have experienced an authoritarian breakthrough in our country,” one private foundation executive said. “The moral and sectoral imperative is to prevent further authoritarian consolidation.”

Overall, there was a near-unanimous consensus among funders surveyed and interviewed that the U.S. is facing an unprecedented constitutional crisis. This finding stands in stark contrast to the recent data from the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP). CEP’s 2025 foundation survey, which had a sample size of 227 funders across a wide range of ideologies, found that 55 percent of foundation leaders believed the current climate has had a negative impact on their foundation’s progress toward its goals⁹. While the wording of the question is substantively different from our survey question, it offers a useful point of comparison with a broader set of funders and illustrates that many charitable foundations do not see the end of constitutional government as a threat to their ameliorative mission. A “negative impact” on progress

Funders Agree That the U.S. is in a Constitutional Crisis



toward goals is a much lower bar than a “constitutional crisis,” yet a much smaller majority agreed with that assessment. Given the ideological lean of our sample composition, it’s likely that foundations without equity values are responding to the current crisis with even less urgency — or do not see it as a crisis at all.

Our survey and interviews do, however, include multiple types of funders including community foundations, family foundations, corporate funders, and funders based in every region of the country. Many of these funders do not see advocacy and structural reform as central to their theory of change, and some noted that their trustees, donors, and other stakeholders included centrists, conservatives, and supporters of the Trump administration’s actions. In other words, while the “unprecedented crisis” consensus is nearly unanimous among progressive funders, it extends beyond a small cadre of dedicated social justice funders and includes a diverse swathe of foundations.

Despite this consensus, many foundation executives expressed the concern that the response had been “uneven” or “insufficient” given the scale of the crisis we are facing.

Funders said that they felt that the philanthropic sector as a whole had not yet mounted a sufficient response. In the words of one interviewee, “Funders have not met the scale of the democracy crisis with the scale of resources required.”

Some philanthropic leaders felt that the response from

many funders was being hindered by excessive caution. One foundation vice president said, “Most foundations are moving from a place of fear versus a place of surety in their mission.”

Some expressed concern about the inadequate response and preparedness of their own institutions. “We as an institution certainly don’t have a plan for further democratic backsliding,” said one foundation vice president. “We don’t really even have a plan of what we would do if they freeze our assets.”

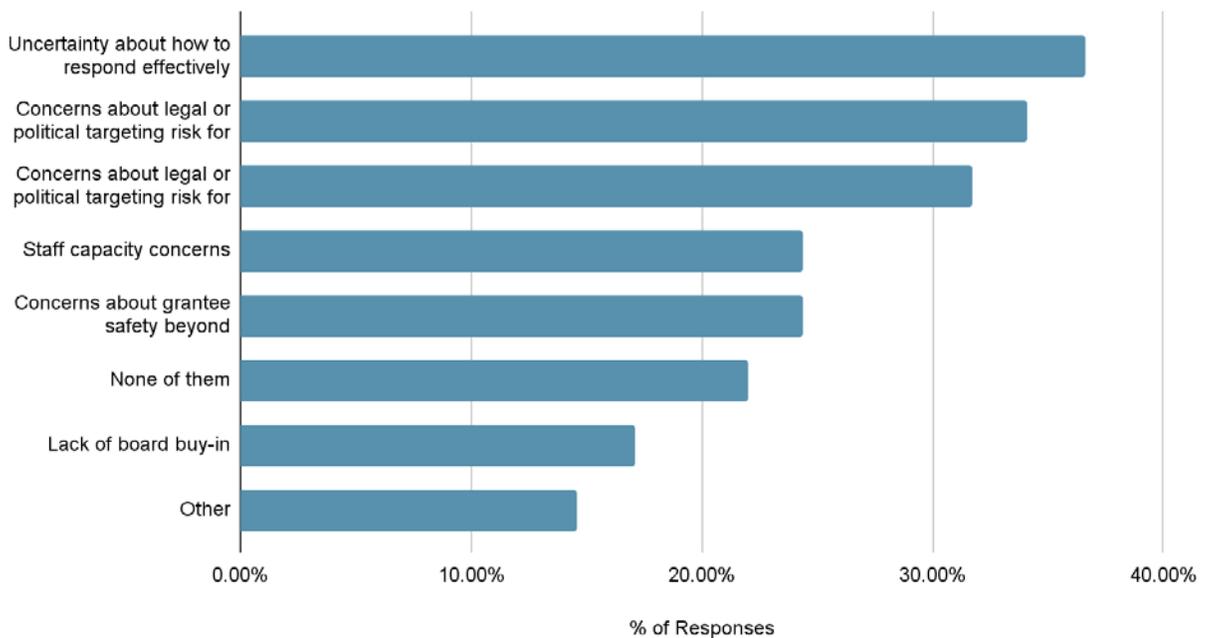
Several executives expressed exasperation that their colleagues and the sector, in general, were responding to such an unprecedented crisis with so little urgency. One executive said, “Sometimes I wonder, are you guys as scared as I am?”

No Playbook: Uncertainty is the Greatest Obstacle

Forty-one percent of funders surveyed said that uncertainty about how to respond effectively was one of their obstacles to taking action in the current climate — the obstacle selected by the largest segment of respondents. This was followed by concerns about legal and political risks for grantees (cited by 34 percent of respondents) and concerns about legal and political retribution for the funders themselves (cited by 32 percent).

Foundation executives used terms such as “uncharted waters” to describe the current context. Many noted that although previous climates had been uniquely challenging — particularly,

Funders’ Obstacles to Taking Action



the COVID pandemic — no other period had as many complex difficulties as the current one. One leader noted that she had been an executive at three philanthropic institutions over three decades and that she “had never seen anything like this.”

More than one executive simply said, “There’s no playbook for this.”

One foundation leader based in the Midwest said, “The aggregate harm is so deep and enduring that it’s hard to know when we need to be in a defensive crouch or when we need to respond to community needs.”

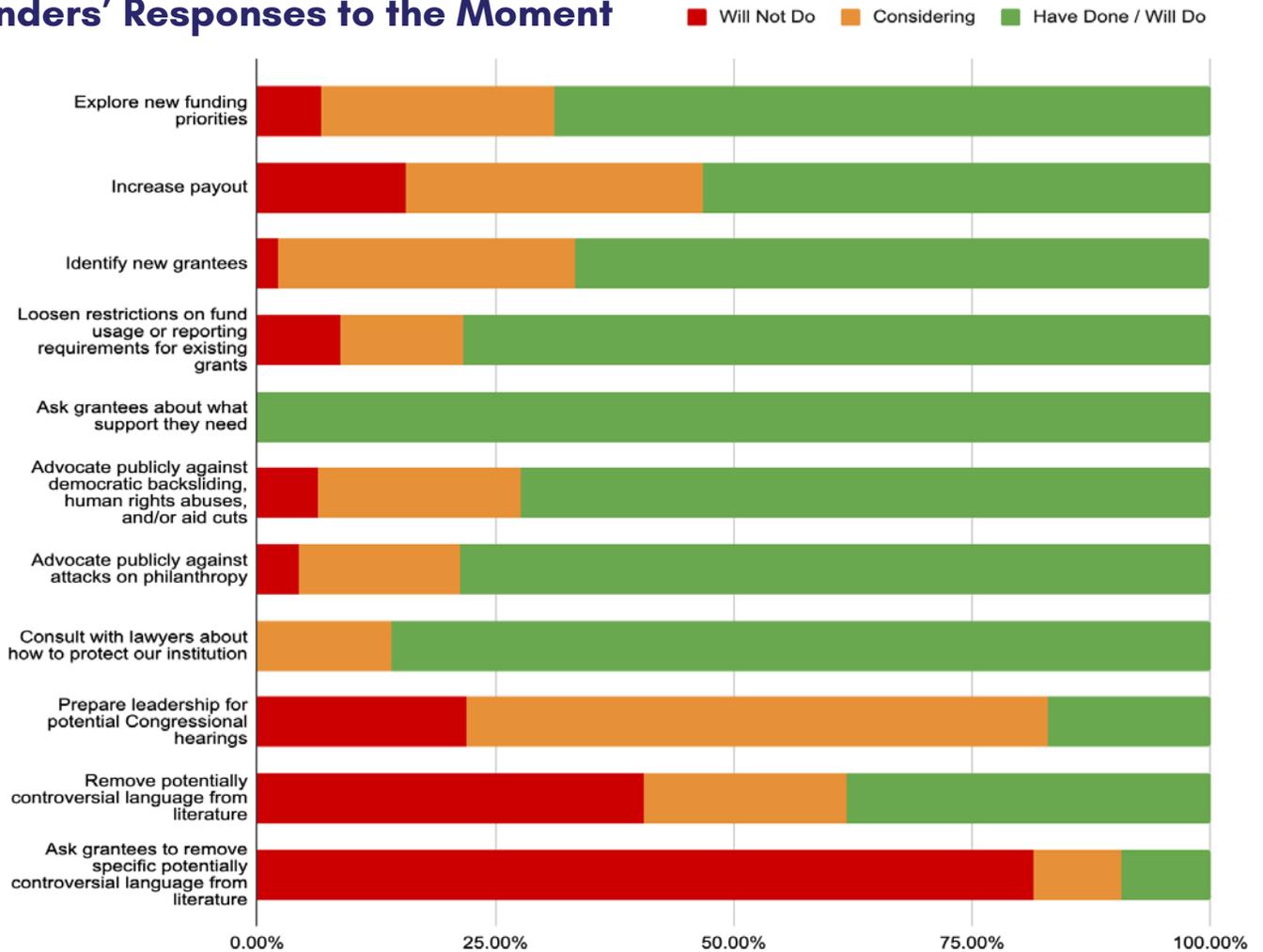
A number of funders expressed worries that philanthropy was not moving enough money because of the uncertainty. “A lot of other funders are uncertain what to do,” one executive from a progressive private foundation said. “They haven’t shown up with the dollars that are needed in this moment. Only a handful of us have increased funding significantly and publicly.”

Tentative steps toward listening, moving dollars, and building partnerships

Leaning into trust: In the survey, we asked funders which action steps their institutions are taking or considering. Several of the top responses aligned with the practices of [trust-based philanthropy](#).¹⁰ One hundred percent of respondents said that they had asked grantees about what support they needed or planned to do so. Another of the most commonly reported action steps was loosening restrictions or reporting requirements for grantees, which 89 percent of respondents have done or are considering doing.

A similar theme emerged in interviews, with several executives noting that listening and relationship-building are more important than ever amidst the many challenges of the current climate. “We’re making sure that we’re really paying

Funders’ Responses to the Moment



attention to needs in our communities and how those needs are changing,” one large private foundation CEO said. “We’re asking our grantees, do they need more support? More safety protection? Some kind of bridging capital so that they don’t have to lay off staff?”

“For us, it means that philanthropy has to be listening to stakeholders,” said the CEO of a family foundation. “We already had a deep participatory process with grantees and stakeholders, with multiple formal channels for listening and connecting. That’s served us really well. That’s key to making sure we’re responding to needs as they shift rapidly, to making sure we’re embedded in an ecosystem rather than behaving like a solo actor.”

Some noted that in such an unpredictable environment, foundations are uniquely positioned to offer grantees stability and reliability, even if they aren’t able to increase dollar amounts. One public foundation leader said, “Part of philanthropy’s role is to provide more certainty in times of uncertainty. What about offering grantee partners much more meaningful long-term commitments to help them weather this storm? What about providing five-year grants?”

Moving money: About 53 percent of survey respondents said that they had **increased payout** or planned to increase payout in response to the current climate, and another 31 percent said they might do so. Even larger percentages had identified new grantees or were exploring new funding priorities, indicating that the majority of funders surveyed were seeking to expand both the scale and the scope of their annual grantmaking in some form.

In interviews, many funders spoke to increasing funding for specific areas where they saw high levels of urgency in the current climate.

One community foundation executive noted that his board had voted for a 20 percent increase in discretionary funding in response to the current climate, with dollars focusing on **protecting civil liberties; supporting communities of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ communities; and building capacity for sector response to legal attacks.**

Nearly every funder interviewed mentioned **capacity-building** as a key component of their response to the current climate. Interviewees noted that private philanthropy is too small to fill the massive gaps left by government cuts, which have already forced some grantees to lay off employees or close programs. But foundations can still provide capacity-building resources to help grantees adapt and identify new strategies for sustainability. “We’re helping our grantees do

scenario planning. We’re giving them resources to help them think through how to structure their work creatively in a more resource-constrained environment.”

Other capacity-building strategies included connecting grantees with legal resources and providing funding or training for healing justice, community care, and digital security. A leader from one foundation that focuses on marginalized communities said, “We’re providing digital security, legal security, and for some physical security as well. I know of a private institution that’s providing top-level legal support for five organizations. What would it look like if they paid for that for all their grantees? If private foundations can’t increase their grantmaking, can they provide capacity-building support that is direct and matches the needs that grantees have clearly articulated?”

Some funders noted that they have increased funding for **legal services**, particularly for immigrant communities who have faced rising numbers of disappearances, detentions, and deportations without due process. Some have also moved more dollars to **litigation** as a key strategy for stopping or at least slowing some of the administration’s most egregious abuses of civil liberties and democratic checks and balances.

Several funders noted that they have increased funding for **advocacy**, but only two progressive funders noted the need for a massive increase in funding for **mass organizing and movement building**. The less frequent mention of base-building compared to other strategies may indicate many funders’ continued preference for safer strategies that focus on defensive work and institution building rather than long-term, transformative change. Mass organizing and movement building, though, are the likeliest way to build public support for restoring the eroded safety net.

One progressive philanthropic leader said, “Our sector and liberal philanthropy in general has overrelied on a sue-protest-vote strategy. But, in this moment, what we most need is a particular type of mass organizing. The research consistently demonstrates that mass organizing has a lasting, persistent impact. *We need sustained protest capable of sustained delegitimization and disruption of authoritarian practices and policies. There has never been enough resources for that kind of work.* A lot of foundations either don’t understand organizing or are uncomfortable with it. There’s a responsibility for those of us who come from organizing to tell the story of how organizing works and why it’s so effective.”

Strengthening partnerships and advocacy at state and local level: Several executives from place-based foundations mentioned that they are deepening collaborations with city and state government agencies in the past year.

These funders explained the importance of understanding the work of their foundations as part of a larger ecosystem. In the words of one CEO, “Traditional private philanthropies are still often reluctant to ‘get political,’ but our experience suggests that you can’t do our work without taking into account what the public sector and private sector are doing. You need to look at the entirety of systems. Particularly when you’re working in cities, you need to look at the entire civic fabric. The [current administration] may have stripped away from us virtually all the tools of the federal government, but more is still possible at the local level. Local agencies can still make sure that some crucial systems endure.”

One executive described a complex series of moves her foundation had made to help preserve the local public health system. The foundation’s donors publicly advocated for a local tax increase to offset the loss of federal resources and made a large personal donation for the health system as well. “We need that kind of responsiveness to preserve vital systems for our communities from being dismantled and leaving enormous holes in the ecosystem,” the foundation’s CEO said.

A community foundation leader described how her foundation had built on its experience serving as a hub during the COVID pandemic. As was the case during COVID, there was a need to bring together various local safety net agencies and nonprofits for real-time coordination, particularly around immigration services. The local city government, which has passed sanctuary policies to protect immigrants, was concerned that freedom-of-information laws would require it to disclose extensive records and potentially create additional risks for service providers or individual immigrants. The local foundation was able to take the lead as the hub instead, deploying a staff person and setting up an online platform for organizations to share and coordinate resources securely, including “Know Your Rights” trainings and other resources, particularly for immigrant communities¹¹.

While some philanthropic institutions have been slow to strategize and execute an external response to the political climate, nearly all have made haste to prepare themselves internally for potential risks.

Preparing for legal challenges when the law is being abused

Institutional preparation: Consulting with lawyers about how to protect their institutions was one of the most popular action steps among survey respondents, with over 93 percent indicating that they had done so or were considering doing so. Well over half were also at least considering preparing their leadership for congressional hearings.

In interviews, many foundation leaders noted taking steps to protect their institutions from potential politically motivated investigations or threats.

One human rights foundation leader said, “We’ve been in more contact with our lawyers than ever before.”

Another said simply, “We’ve lawyered up pretty hard.”

Several foundation executives noted in interviews the particular importance of **digital security** and **updating document retention policies**. Some have shifted toward **more unrestricted grants**, which offer grantees more flexibility and also decrease exposure. (An unrestricted donation is more clearly protected as freedom of speech compared to a grant agreement with conditions, which may be subject to more regulation as a contract.)

Some respondents noted that after a close assessment of the risks faced by their institutions, their legal counsel noted that their risk was relatively low, particularly in comparison to their grantees. One executive noted the particular risks faced by their grantee partners working in immigrant rights and services: “There’s the danger of being labeled as ‘terrorism’ just for doing humanitarian work with immigrant communities.” Several funders noted the importance of being in close touch with grantees about these threats, and some have connected them with legal resources to help them assess and minimize their own organizational risks.

Protecting employees: A few interviewees mentioned concerns about risks for employees, though usually only briefly. One leader from a foundation deeply rooted in marginalized communities noted that her institution has developed an extensive set of practices to protect its employees, particularly those who are transgender or who may have uncertain immigration status. These practices included selecting sites for staff retreats and convenings based partly on assessments of safety; avoiding carrying work laptops or mobile phones across borders; being in open communication about which cities and

conferences are safe for which staff, and planning accordingly; and even offering to be in touch about employees' personal travel for increased safety, if employees so desire. Some of these were practices that the foundation had previously used in authoritarian regimes in other countries, and which it has applied to the U.S. context in the past year.

She explained: "From our work in other countries, we have a certain level of understanding about how these dynamics work. That's helped us to be less surprised around it. I think a lot of foundations have employees who are at risk, but may not realize it. I work at a place where people can say these things, and that's not the case at a lot of foundations. We have an openness to conversations about these vulnerabilities, so employees don't have to hide who they are when we're discussing these difficult things. More foundations need to work proactively to create that kind of environment, where employees are able to talk about these risks honestly and without fear of being judged or penalized."

Engagement of board, donors, and other community stakeholders

Getting everyone in formation: In interviews, several of the more proactive foundation leaders noted that they have deeply engaged their boards and other key stakeholders around the potential risks faced by their institution.

In the words of one family foundation leader, "Governance is huge. We need everyone to be aligned on what the goal is. Boards need to understand the risks and challenges and be aligned when the foundation takes action. I bring all grants to my board that are a little different from the usual or that might carry some risk, even though I have authority delegated to make those grants without prior board approval. Boards are where things will get pulled back if things start getting rough. Foundation executives need to have these conversations *now* so that their boards are prepared for the challenges of the future."

This need was prominent particularly among foundations whose boards run across a wide ideological gamut. One community foundation executive noted that her board "was diverse but leaned center-left" and included a number of prominent Republicans and conservatives, as did their base of donors. "Most of our fund holders and board members are disconnected from our communities on the ground," she said. "They don't know how ICE raids are terrorizing immigrant communities or what it means for families when SNAP is cut. We've been doing lots of presentations and having a lot of

dialogue to help the board understand what realities are for our communities. We've talked with them about the high cost of living and rent compared to average wages. *We talked with them about our work in immigrant communities, and one conservative trustee said, 'but we're not an immigrant organization!' That led to a deeper conversation about how immigrants are part of our communities. It was difficult, but as a result, we've been able to take a stronger stance to protect immigrants."*

In contrast, some philanthropic leaders worried that their own institutions and funders in general were not doing enough to engage a wider set of stakeholders. One noted that different foundations have natural capacities for reaching various audiences: "community foundations could brief their donors, for example." In his assessment, foundations could play a unique role in expanding the base, but few funders were doing so.

Putting shared values ahead of fear while navigating

institutional risk: Funders that are deeply rooted in marginalized communities or that have worked in authoritarian contexts internationally offered some of the most clear-eyed and detailed analysis of how funders should assess and manage risk.

"We treat the attacks as inevitable," said an executive from one progressive foundation. "We don't think, 'If we just say this the right way, they won't come for us.' They *are* coming for us, so we should prepare, and we shouldn't obey in advance."

Another leader from a public foundation said, "We're being really clear about when we're taking risks and careful not to take unnecessary risks. We know the purpose is to create a climate of fear — and yet we're still animals and naturally feel fear when these things happen. We try to have honest conversations as a team to identify when panic is helping us be more careful and when it's not. ... We also know that this administration doesn't care about legality. Even if we follow all applicable laws, the inherent nature of our work puts us at risk. We're not shirking away from that. This is the work we're here to do."

Some funders are speaking out for the sector; fewer are speaking out for open civil society

Some funders are more comfortable doing than

speaking: Only 40 percent of our quantitative survey respondents said their foundations had spoken publicly against the attacks on philanthropy, and slightly fewer — 36 percent

— had spoken about human rights and democratic crises in the country.* The latter figure is slightly lower than the 37.8 percent that had increased payout.

Interviews confirmed this trend, with about half of interviewees saying their institution was not emphasizing communications as part of its response, or was limited in how much they were speaking out.

Funders that had taken proactive steps around funding — even increasing payout — had done so quietly, with no public statements. “There’s a dissonance for me,” said one community foundation leader. “I think I’m doing everything in my power. But we as an institution are not communicating about what my team and I are doing. I have questions about whether we are a messenger, or are we an actor doing everything that we should. I know there are other people who can do the communicating. But would it actually be helpful for us to be louder?”

Some foundation leaders specifically articulated that they saw their role as focused on funding rather than on communications. “Honestly, we’re not speaking out much at all,” said one national foundation executive. “That doesn’t mean we don’t speak. But I think philanthropy is better served by just doing the work. I believe in the classic philanthropic method: elevate the work of grantees. I can’t tell you how many requests we’ve gotten for some kind of statement. But what difference does a statement from us make? You know the adage: ‘Message delivered, message not received.’ Foundations are *not* communications experts, and their messages often get drowned out by people who are much more social media savvy. Having said that, perhaps the middle ground is to speak out for our values, when an issue is directly connected with our mission and areas of funding.”

The focus on “mission-aligned” communications emerged organically in several interviews. One executive said that their foundation had not issued any statements, but did release a letter to key stakeholders about the impact of cutting SNAP, which connected directly to their work funding food banks, farming, and food policy.

Foundations with ideologically diverse boards faced the challenge of making the case to skeptical audiences internally first, which shaped which issues they could speak out on.

One leader said that she successfully won board approval for a statement about being a community that welcomed immigrants, but had been unable to move forward with a statement on the recent military occupation of their city by the National Guard. “It doesn’t feel totally clear yet when we as an institution will stand in solidarity and when we won’t.”

Getting quieter on diversity and equity: Funders expressed a noted reluctance to speak out about diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly in relation to race.

In the survey, about a quarter of respondents noted removing or altering their own language about diversity or equity on their RFPs and websites. This is similar to the trend documented in NCRP’s previous report, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Are foundation website changes masking their values, or pulling off their masks?*¹² which found that nearly 1 in 12 foundations — which, in aggregate, represented roughly \$1 of every \$4 given to marginalized communities from the sample — have made changes to their websites that seem to be attempts to comply in advance. Notably, while only one respondent said they had asked their grantees to do the same, another seven institutions were considering doing so, and a survey of nonprofit leaders conducted by ABFE showed that “15.4% of Black-led nonprofits had received advice to avoid mentioning race.”¹³

Interviews reflected a similar trend, with several funders saying that they were continuing to fund racial equity work at the same level but were “being quieter about it.” In the words of one foundation leader, “Our board has made an explicit commitment to racial equity. We have not changed the dollar amount attached to that. But we have changed the terms we use to talk about that work publicly.”

Uniting in Advance is essential — and more is needed: Several foundations, including both those actively speaking out and those not doing so, praised the efforts of Unite in Advance, a coalition of funders that have called for preserving philanthropic independence and the “freedom to give.”¹⁴ Some even said they felt that philanthropy’s strong collective stance of solidarity had played a role in slowing down attacks specifically focused on the sector, compared to other sectors that were hurt by early capitulators, such as universities and law firms.

Notably, the majority of publicized philanthropy lobbying has been focused on protecting funder institutions. Some

*The original quantitative survey broke institutions’ actions into five categories, including “Will Do/Currently Doing” and “Have Done.” For simplicity when illustrating results, this report rolls up these categories into one segmentation, thus displaying higher percentages for actions taken to publicly advocate for philanthropy and democracy. Answers for these two actions had a relatively high share of “Will Do” responses, compared to “Have Done” at 38% and 36%, respectively.

foundation executives expressed worry that there was a **need for more funders to speak out in a united voice beyond just the defense of the sector**. In particular, they sought action in defense of nonprofit organizations as well as foundations, in defense of immigrant rights and other communities being scapegoated, and in defense of democracy and civil liberties more broadly. Hundreds fewer foundations signed on to the second Unite in Advance open letter in September, after the intended federal investigation of Open Society Foundations was announced, than the first in April after massive federal funding cuts.

A call for boldness and solidarity: Several foundation leaders who are using their bully pulpit to speak out called on other funders to do the same.

“Saying communications is not our lane is an easy way to opt out,” said one public foundation leader. “Some foundations are being attacked by this administration and responding publicly. Not everyone has to do that, but there’s a lot of space between that and silence. A CEO can send an email to grantees recognizing the current context and committing to staying steady. Even if you can’t send an email, program officers can make a phone call and ask about needs and commit to standing by grantee partners.”

Another leader, from a large national private foundation, said, “People are speaking up. *Courage is contagious. Funders’ approach to these issues is often, ‘how do we help everybody lawyer up?’ People do need help for that. But we also need to encourage more solidarity responses. Strong collective action is protective — it makes the administration pause.*”

“Communities have been asking philanthropy to take seriously our role in democracy for a really f***ing long time,” said one leader from a Midwest-based foundation. “The ultimate development in allyship is to understand yourself as part of the system. We need to stop acting like we’re passive agents. We need to flex our muscles seeing ourselves as part of the systems of capitalism and democracy.”

Executives representing community foundations and public foundations that have to fundraise said that they felt their peers sometimes used their donors and boards as a defense for being timid. Notably, those foundations that had taken the most public stances and actions were also the ones that had done the deepest engagement with their boards. The work of organizing internally at a philanthropic institution is the essential groundwork for organizing externally.

“Every time something comes up with my board, I have a choice,” said one community foundation CEO. “Do I push or do I let it go? We need to push more. If you’re not willing to be fired for standing up to tyranny, then what are you willing to be punished for? You have to decide. What is this moment requiring of you as a leader?”

Recommendations

If your institution believes that philanthropy and the United States are in crisis, then you're in good company. But uncertain steps won't get all of us through this dangerous time for U.S. democracy.

To paraphrase the words of one foundation leader, “You can speak or you can act — or you can do both — but you can't do neither.” If your foundation is neither speaking out nor moving dollars to communities in crisis, look for ways to do at least one of those. If your responses to date have largely focused on internal preparedness or funding, consider exploring the strategies related to communication and speaking out. If your institution is taking six or seven of the action steps outlined below, that's excellent. What if you made the push to do eleven or twelve of them?

Experiment and push the boundaries of what's possible at your institution to meet this moment.

NEED OR CHALLENGE

Democracy, civil rights and due process are being eroded and undermined

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS AND RESOURCES

- Expand funding for legal services, mutual aid, community organizing groups, long-term power building, and other organizations that protect and advocate for human rights and democratic participation, particularly rooted in and led by communities of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalized communities.
- Learn from your grantees and philanthropic colleagues who have already navigated authoritarian regimes elsewhere.
- Educate your board about how attacks on human rights and democracy are directly affecting the communities your foundation supports.
- Take measures to protect vulnerable employees (particularly those who are not U.S. citizens or who are transgender) from risks and foster a workplace where staff are welcome to have dialogue around and seek support for their specific risks.
- Speak out for the importance of civil rights and due process as essential values for democracy, not only for the philanthropic sector. Speak out for communities of color, immigrants, transgender communities, and the organizations defending them. Form coalitions with other funders who are speaking out on these issues. This includes when attacks on civil rights have a direct impact on your issue area or geographic focus, such as ICE raids in your region.

NEED OR CHALLENGE*Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work are being attacked and criminalized***POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS AND RESOURCES**

- Continue implementation of intersectional race-explicit strategies that proactively address the realities of racial disparities in your institution's issue area or geographic focus.
- Educate trustees around the continued importance of diversity and equity, the intentionally distracting attacks on these principles, and how affirming them is core to your organizational mission.
- Speak out for the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as essential for achieving the goals of your institution and of the philanthropic sector.

NEED OR CHALLENGE*Foundations and nonprofits are being subjected to politically motivated investigations, hearings, and threats***POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS AND RESOURCES**

- Take steps to protect your institution from attacks with the ability to smartly defend yourself. Update document retention policies, refine IT security, and consult with legal defense experts.
- Engage all levels of your institution in preparedness and contingency planning, including trustees.
- Speak out for the importance of an independent philanthropic and nonprofit sector.
 - › Specifically, speak out not only for foundations, but also for nonprofits and grassroots groups that are attacked or investigated wrongly.

NEED OR CHALLENGE*Massive cuts to government funding agencies and systems***POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS AND RESOURCES**

- Recognize that your institution will not close the funding gap but that increasing your funds will soften the pain for what's been lost. Use your voice to point out this distinction and be an advocate for grantees in crisis.
- Increase spending and endowment payout in order to deploy more resources. You can work with leaders in progressive philanthropy to quickly and equitably move money to the communities most affected in the crisis by joining the Level Up Pledge, which aims to have funders increase their annual grantmaking for at least two years.¹⁵
- Fund nonprofits advocating and raising awareness around the devastating consequences of funding cuts for individuals, families, and communities on a human level.
- Fund capacity-building for nonprofits to explore new revenue models, innovative structures, and alliances in response to the realities of decreased resources as a supplemental strategy, rather than as a replacement for your funds.
- Explore creative public/private partnerships between foundations and local/state government to minimize the damage created by the loss of federal funding streams and resources.
- Speak out for the importance of federal funding programs for your communities, especially those programs that directly relate to your institution's issues and regions of focus.

NEED OR CHALLENGE*Build a shared vision of a vibrant, inclusive society for all***POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS AND RESOURCES**

- Fund mass organizing and coalition building in and across a diverse range of communities working to build a vision for a strong multiracial democracy and shared future.

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BEN FRANCISCO MAULBECK is a philanthropic consultant with two and a half decades of experience in research, writing, and leadership for social change philanthropy. They have authored or co-authored more than 40 reports on philanthropic support for social justice issues, including co-authoring the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) reports *Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice* and *Derailed: Rising Attacks and Retreating Resources for Racial Justice*. During their eight years as president of Funders for LGBTQ Issues, Ben facilitated the launch of large-scale initiatives to increase resources for LGBTQ communities in the U.S. South and for transgender communities, helped found the Contigo Fund in response to the tragic Pulse shooting, and spearheaded a successful strategic plan to expand foundation funding for LGBTQ issues to \$200 million. Ben's other previous work includes service at Hispanics in Philanthropy, The Philadelphia Foundation, and the William Way LGBT Community Center. They hold a bachelor of arts from Swarthmore College and a master of public policy from the Harvard Kennedy School. They write magic realism and science fiction under the pen name Ben Francisco.

TYLER ARMEY is a writer, community organizer, and communications strategist whose work bridges storytelling, social impact, and creative media. Trained as a filmmaker, creative designer, and writer, he has led narrative and research projects at the intersection of culture, politics, and public understanding. Most recently, he co-authored *Derailed: Rising Attacks and Retreating Resources for Racial Justice* for the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity. With past lives at Yahoo, GLAAD, and in creative marketing, his work has spanned local community engagement, global communications campaigns, data analysis in the philanthropic sector, and narrative development for cultural projects. In addition to his consulting and research practice, Tyler is the founder of SLOTH, a New York City-based queer storytelling collective for creative expression and community building, and Dream Journals, a community blog musing on the journeys we take when our eyes close. He earned his Bachelor of Science from Boston University.

Appendix A

Quantitative Survey Questions

Welcome to NCRP’s survey on philanthropic responses to recent changes in the political and cultural landscape. Please complete all required questions to the best of your ability and follow the instructions. This survey will take 8-12 minutes.

All responses are encrypted and anonymous to NCRP and the survey managers. If you have any questions or concerns about your privacy, please contact [EMAIL]

Survey Questions

- Multiple independent academic¹⁶ and civil society observers¹⁷—both U.S.-based¹⁸ and international¹⁹—have expressed concern about democratic backsliding and restrictions on civic space in the U.S., particularly in recent years. Some elected officials²⁰ and legal experts²¹ have warned that a Constitutional crisis could be unfolding, with potential implications for governance²² and civil liberties. To what extent does your institution agree with this assessment?
 - Strongly Agree
 - Somewhat Agree
 - Unsure
 - Somewhat Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

[Logic: Respondents whose Q1 = Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree -> Skip to institutional profile questions]

- What actions has or will your foundation take in 2025-26 to adjust to the current U.S. political situation? Select all that apply.

	Will Not Do	Might Do	Considering	Will Do	Have Done
Explore new funding priorities					
Increase payout					
Identify new grantees					
Loosen restrictions on fund usage or reporting requirements for existing grants					
Ask grantees about what support they need					
Advocate publicly against democratic backsliding, human rights abuses, and/or aid cuts					
Advocate publicly against attacks on philanthropy					
Consult with lawyers about how to protect our institution					
Prepare leadership for potential Congressional hearings					
Remove potentially controversial language from websites, social media, or RFPs					
Ask grantees to remove specific potentially controversial language from websites, social media, or grant reports					
Other [write in]:					

3. Which, if any, of the following obstacles or concerns are preventing or delaying you from making commitments or taking actions like those listed above?
- Lack of board buy-in
 - Staff capacity concerns
 - Concerns about legal or political targeting risk for funders
 - Concerns about legal or political targeting risk for grantees
 - Concerns about grantee safety beyond legal/political risks
 - Uncertainty about how to respond effectively
 - Other [write-in]

4. From an institutional perspective, what is your analysis of the current political situation in the United States? What specific obstacles are constraining your foundation from adapting, and in what way?

[open-ended response, optional]

5. In your own words, what strategies and action steps do you see as most important for your foundation in 2025-26 given the current political climate?

[open-ended response, optional]

Institutional Profile Questions

Please take an additional moment to answer the following questions regarding your institution's background. Answering these questions will help us understand trends among varying organizations in the field. All organizational and individual data will remain anonymous.

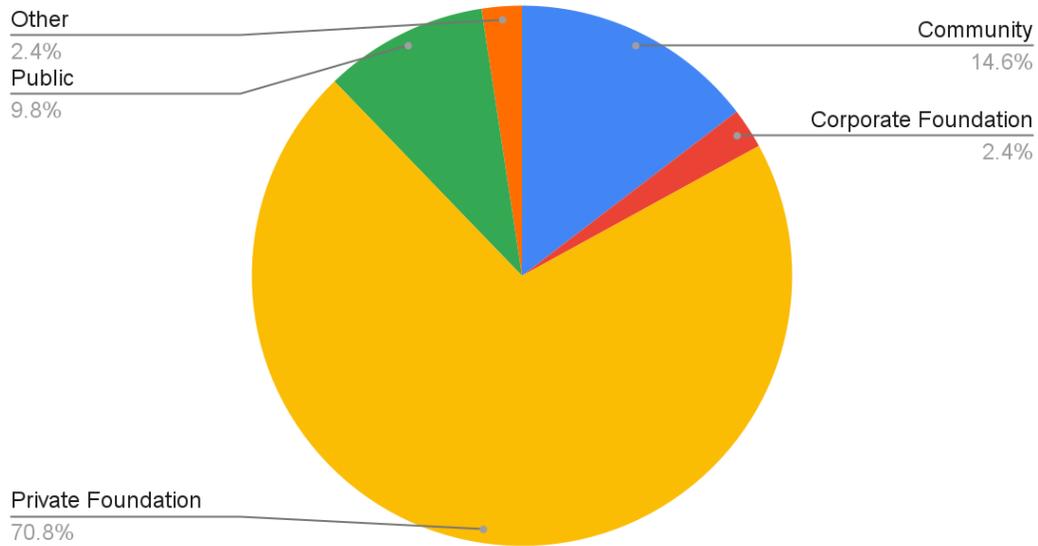
6. What type of foundation/funder are you?
- Community Foundation
 - Corporate Foundation
 - Private Foundation
 - Public Foundation / Intermediary
 - Other [write-in]:
7. What is your position at your organization?
- Trustee / Board member
 - CEO, President, or head of organization
 - Organization C-level executive
 - Vice President or Director of Programs or similar
 - Other [write-in]:
8. What is the range of your organization's annual grantmaking?
- < \$1 million USD
 - \$1 million to \$10 million USD
 - \$10 million to \$50 million USD
 - \$50 million to \$500 million USD
 - > \$500 million USD

9. What is your organization's primary focus area? Check all that apply.
- a. Arts & Culture
 - b. Community & Economic Development
 - c. Education
 - d. Environment and Climate Resilience
 - e. Health
 - f. Human Rights
 - g. International Aid
 - h. Religion
 - i. Research
 - j. Social Justice
 - k. Other [write-in]:
10. In what region of the country is your organization based?
- a. Northeast (ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, DC)
 - b. Southeast (VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, TN, KY, AR, LA, TX)
 - c. Midwest (OH, IN, MI, IL, WI, MN, IA, MO, OK, KS, NE, SD, ND)
 - d. Mountain (NM, AZ, CO, UT, NV, MT, ID, WY)
 - e. West (CA, OR, WA, AK, HI)
 - f. US Territories (Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands)
 - g. International
 - h. Other [write in]:
11. Would you like to share your email with us and preview early insights from this survey? Your other responses will remain anonymous but providing your email will identify your participation in the survey. This question is optional.

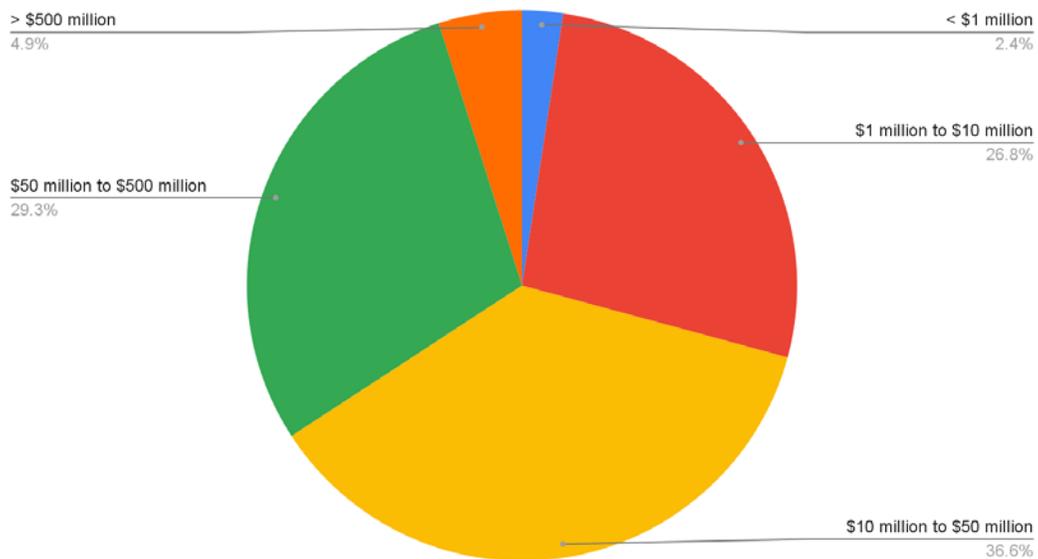
Appendix B

Survey Response Demographics

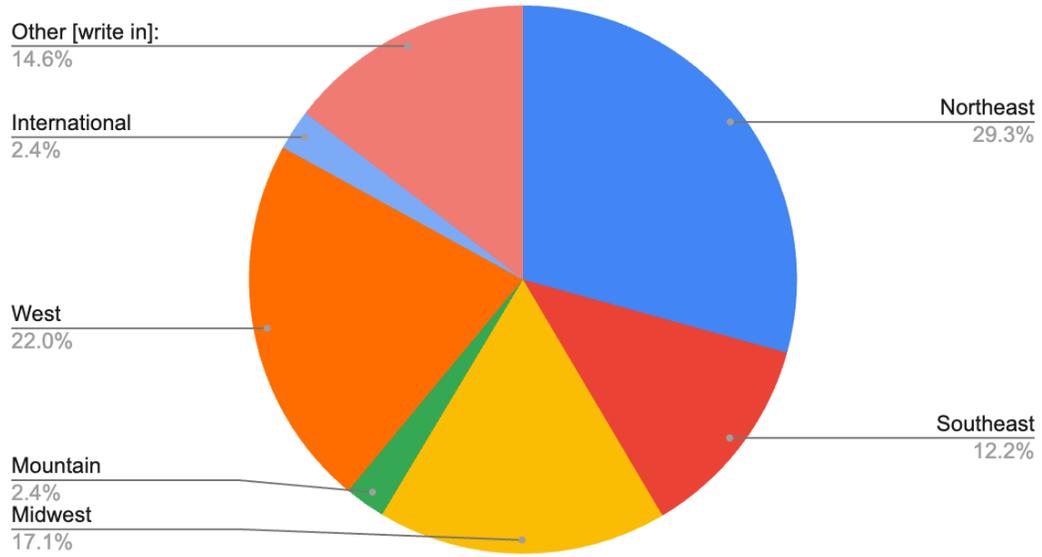
Responses by Funder Type



Responses by Annual Grantmaking Size, in USD



Responses by Geographic Region



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Hide or Speak
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Without a Playbook*

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