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Advancing Pluralism in a Moment of Democratic Backsliding

Research Brief
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Introduction



This memo is part of a larger project examining the implications of increased punitive state power for the pluralism field. The project was initiated by **Convergence Center for Policy Resolution** and **Interfaith America**, is supported by **New Pluralists**, and now includes **Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)** as a key collaborator. Cohesion Strategy leads the research to ground the project in academic thinking across disciplines related to pluralism.

Goals:

1. **understand the situation pluralistic organizations currently face, and**
2. **identify the most effective responses — not only for organizational survival but for advancing pluralistic outcomes.**

The research draws on the scholarly works or media engagements (podcasts, webinars) of, or interviews with over two dozen scholars from pluralism and religious pluralism, classical liberalism, democratic and authoritarian governance and transitions between them, white Christian nationalism, systems of public justice, bridging and contact theory, sociology of social movements, and pluralism in the nonprofit sector.

Key Strategic Implications for Pluralist Organization

The research suggests several practical implications for organizations working to advance pluralism in periods when governments abuse their power:

- **Maintain bridging work even in moments of conflict.** Relationships across difference form the social infrastructure necessary for both social resilience and effective pushback against abuses of power.
- **Pair bridging with action.** Dialogue alone is insufficient; effective responses combine bridging with efforts to build institutions and block abuses of power.
- **Act in broad coalitions.** Successful resistance to the erosion of freedoms involves alliances that consistently span ideological and political divides.
- **Focus locally where possible.** Concrete community issues create opportunities for broad participation in co-creating government and strengthening pluralistic norms.
- **Exercise strategic judgment.** Decisions about when to speak, whom to engage, and how far to bridge require coalition-based judgment rather than universal rules.



Main Findings

Scholars are not equally concerned about the state of democracy in the United States. However, every scholar interviewed — or whose recent work we reviewed — identified an increase in government abuse of power including, for example, retributive investigations, threatened loss of nonprofit status to silence the criticism of nonprofits, or the coordinated installation of loyalists on the boards of institutions heavily reliant on public funds. These and other tactics threaten pluralistic organizations, their work, and citizens' rights to co-create their government.

The most consistent recommendation was to continue bridging.

Allen, Appiah, Derber, Gest, and Talisse argue that such connections are foundational across society are essential to a healthy society at any time.¹⁻⁶ Inazu, Gest and Briscoe-Smith emphasize developing these skills in the next generation.^{4,7,8}

A society “that maximizes bridging ties should minimize the likelihood that social difference articulates with domination.” Allen^{1(p47)}

Scholars writing specifically about abuse of government power stress that pushback must be broadly diverse — including ideologically and politically — to succeed.

Structural reform of a government abusing power cannot occur without participation from people with differing visions of the common good.⁹⁻¹⁸

“[T]he broader the alliances you can make, the more successful anti-authoritarian movements are.” ~ Zunes¹⁸

Relationships built through bridging and cross-difference connections form the social infrastructure needed both for a well-functioning pluralistic society and for effective pushback against abuses of power.

Dialogue alone, however, is not sufficient to address deep divisions, structural injustice, or government abuse of power.

There is clear evidence that dialogue alone, without manipulating socio-political structures, will not have deep impact, and may in fact backfire.¹⁹ The one exception to this rule is in working with youth and young adults, for whom dialogue work can develop life-long, impactful mindsets and skillsets.⁸

Across the scholarship, effective responses combine **three distinct but mutually reinforcing functions: bridge, build, and block**. While the Horizons Forum set out these tactics as different “lanes” and notes that cooperating across them can be difficult,²⁰ scholars consistently highlighted that this cooperation is exactly what makes it most successful.^{1,3,7,10,12-14,16-18,21} One example of a project attempting to address all three lanes is the SHIFT Action Lab, which aims to tie together bridging, organizing, and participatory democracy activities in a single diverse community of participants.²²

Bridging develops relationships, trust, and the sense of a shared “we” across lines of difference.

Building creates institutions, norms, and collaborative solutions that allow communities to govern themselves well.

Blocking resists or constrains abuses of power through collective action.

“If you try to build or to block and you haven’t built genuine relationships, ... using a belonging-based architecture, [including]... equal status and voice and protocols ... Then I almost don’t think it matters whether you try to build or block. It doesn’t last.” ~Argo²¹

BRIDGE-BUILD connections are also practical, leveraging interest convergence.¹⁸ Both Allen and Argo emphasize that concrete local issues provide natural focal points for broad participation in co-creating government. This aligns with Kleinfeld’s argument that locating BUILD work at the local level around concrete goals — even something as simple as renewing a city park — can be powerful.^{13,23}

Kleinfeld also emphasizes that successful BLOCK work must be broad and diverse, a view shared by Derber, Zunes, and Chenoweth and Stephan.^{3,10,24} These scholars focus on protest movements that enable citizens to push back against expanding abuses of power, including strikes, boycotts, tax strikes, and other forms of mass resistance. Street protest alone is insufficient and, as Lederach notes,¹⁴ often ephemeral. Sustained pushback that is diverse in both tactic and participant is more likely to succeed.

Enduring Tensions

Despite broad agreement on the importance of connection across difference, **several tensions remain unresolved.**

1. How much should organizations defend those under attack if doing so risks relationships across difference?
2. How far should bridging extend?
3. Is it wise to shift an organization's purpose to meet the moment?

Pluralists face value conflicts when government abuses silence members of civil society, but speaking out strains cross-difference relationships. **Recommendations differ.**

Gest argued pluralists should **only resist policies “that make bonding or relationships impossible**, such as segregation, or ... anything essentially First Amendment level” rather than play “whackamole” chasing symbolic actions such as Texas Governor Greg Abbot's 2025 designation of the Council on American-Islamic Relations as a terrorist organization.⁴ This action attacks only one organization, but may chill many other organizations that would partner with any organization that could be perceived to be similar.

Kleinfeld, Seiple, and Levitsky argued instead that **pluralists should push back, but do so in coalition**, centering voices ideologically closest to those abusing power, and elevating principles over particular cases.^{12,13,16} In this particular moment, that would mean centering voices with conservative bona fides.

A related debate concerns **how far to engage actors at the ideological fringes**. One strategy is to convert “poachers to guards,” meaning in this case to strategically target those voices or actors who are most aggressively pursuing anti-pluralist ends, seeking to convince them to become, instead, the most vocal proponents of pluralism. While this is a time-honored tactic, the work is morally challenging and resource-intensive.

Jones and Gest largely agree that engaging actors who are fundamentally anti-pluralist or against government by the people offers limited benefit.^{4,25} Jones was most direct: “Bridgers need to develop a more robust reflex to exclude, and learn to feel good about that.”²⁵

Kleinfeld, Argo, and Zunes are somewhat more open to engagement at the margins but emphasize careful resource allocation, distinguishing leaders from followers, and calculating risks thoughtfully.^{13,18,21} Converting “poachers to guards” can be a highly effective strategy, but its resource intensiveness and high potential for failure make it a high-risk, high reward undertaking. Argo argues such decisions about principles and strategy are best made in coalition rather than unilaterally.²¹

Taken together, these tensions suggest that pluralist strategy is less about universal rules than about judgment, coalition decision-making, and careful assessment of where bridging advances pluralistic outcomes and where it may undermine them.



Narrative Challenges

Bridging mindsets and skills are central to successful pushback against abuse of government power. Yet pluralists face significant narrative challenges.

Pluralism itself remains poorly understood as a term.²⁶ Bridging is often conflated with dialogue-only initiatives that are seen as “nice to have” but ineffective for large-scale challenges (a skepticism for which there is some evidence²⁷).

Connecting across difference can also be viewed as morally ambiguous or even harmful, sometimes framed as “a trojan horse” for the other side.¹⁷ For example, critics on the left view bridging as prioritizing civility over justice, papering over abuses of power. Critics on the right view it as intolerant of conservative views, pathologizing conservative norms around religion, gender, and nationalism. Both criticisms are sometimes, but not always, correct.

For pluralism to contribute its full value, the field must address these narrative challenges.

- Get the right messages in the right tone on the right platforms to be heard.²⁸
- Help the left understand the bridging opportunity. If bridging is seen as protecting the status quo, pluralists must demonstrate that pluralistic solutions are more effective and durable.
- Help the right understand the bridging opportunity. If bridging is seen as coded progressivism, pluralists must show solutions built with and for the right too.
- Frame pluralism and bridging as leadership development and self-interest rather than moral obligation.¹⁶
- Show that pluralism does not erase difference or require citizens to abandon identities or beliefs.

“Defense of democracy” is not an effective narrative frame because the term “democracy” is politically contested. Kleinfeld, backed by PACE research, suggests emphasizing freedom and community instead and discussing violence or abuse of power as shared concerns.^{13,26}



Ideas for Philanthropic Leaders

Given the turbulence of the moment, funders — like pluralist and structural reform grantees — are reacting to multiple challenges simultaneously. Scholars offered several initial recommendations as a basis for further thought.

Act in coalition to defend the independence of the philanthropic sector. The Unite in Advance effort, spearheaded by the heads of the McKnight Foundation, Freedom Together Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation, seeks to connect philanthropic organizations and support nonprofits.^{11,17}

Network between funders and grantees, and fund independent grantee networks. “The nonprofit sector and civil society has been shockingly poorly coordinated,” Soskis argues. Although networks often emerge under stress, “these things don’t happen organically and must be developed on purpose and quickly.”¹⁷

Support the cocreation of governance. Funders should lean more directly into supporting the structures that support citizens in co-creating their governance.^{9,16} Citizens assemblies and other deliberative democracy work, transpartisan work on structural reform, and protection of voter rights and trust in elections all serve that end.

Conclusion: Pluralist Agency Under Stress

“Authoritarianism is a project to wipe out your project. ...the only solution to overreaching governments is to maintain a diverse civil society that comes together for their own survival.” ~ Derber³

A central theme of the research is that governments abusing power stop only when citizens collectively refuse that abuse. Kleinfeld argues civic space is already under pressure and that protecting it requires active resistance.¹¹ She argued this specifically for funders in her article “Mitigate Risk Stand Strong” and reiterated in interview that “trying to jettison bits of one’s mission — or distancing themselves from grantees or fellow foundations that find themselves in hot water -- won’t work as a form of protection.”^{13,29}
Putting one’s head down simply cedes power.

Jones makes a similar point: “We’re going to have to defend words like inclusion, diversity, and other words, we cannot cower and find euphemisms for these things. It concedes too much ground.”²⁵

Taken together, the scholarship reviewed here suggests that pluralist organizations face both risk and opportunity in moments of abuse of government power. While scholars differ on the severity of current threats or the precise boundaries of engagement, they converge on several core insights: broad coalitions are essential, bridging relationships remain foundational, and civil society must exercise its agency rather than retreat. In periods when government power expands or civic space narrows, pluralistic organizations play a critical role in sustaining the relationships, institutions, and collective action necessary for self-governance.

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What's with the birds?

At Cohesion Strategy, we believe that a community, like a murmuration, sticks together when each member finds more joy in it than sorrow. Creating that dynamic is collective work.

We are here to help you create that joy.

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