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The Chilling Effect

A tabletop exercise in civic space, risk,
and coordination

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CONVERGENCE



**NEW
PLURALISTS**



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About the Exercise



The Chilling Effect is a tabletop simulation that explores how pluralistic organizations — those who promote healthy engagement of difference through a variety of functions from social connection to civic engagement and exercise of First Amendment rights — make decisions during periods of democratic stress. Participants assume the roles of leaders from different types of institutions working to strengthen pluralistic civic life. As a fictional scenario unfolds, they must interpret ambiguous events, weigh competing responsibilities, and decide whether — and how — to respond.

The view of the game’s developers is that coordinated civil society action at a time of democratic stress is necessary to maintain pluralistic, functioning democracy. However the game itself is meant to allow participants to better understand field dynamics, rather than to drive them toward specific types of actions.

Further, by asking participants to inhabit organizations with different missions and constraints, the exercise encourages them to reason from institutional responsibilities rather than personal political preferences.

The exercise is designed around a central challenge for pluralistic leadership in a moment of partisan democratic stress: organizations rarely make decisions with complete information or shared interpretations of unfolding events. Leaders must balance their missions, relationships, legal obligations, reputations, and tolerance for risk while recognizing that their choices may shape the broader civic environment. It is intentionally designed with an organizational rather than personal orientation as a leadership development tool.

Although participants represent different organizations, they are not expected to reach consensus. Organizations may act independently, coordinate privately, take collective public action, or decide that restraint is the most appropriate course. The simulation is intended to illuminate the tradeoffs associated with these different approaches.

Throughout the exercise, participants will consider questions such as:

- How do organizations recognize when isolated events have become a broader pattern?
- When is it prudent to wait, and when does waiting carry its own risks?
- What responsibilities do organizations have beyond their own missions?
- What enables or prevents organizations from coordinating under pressure?
- How do individual organizational decisions accumulate into broader effects on civic life?

The scenario is fictional, but it is grounded in patterns that have emerged across many societies and historical periods. It is not intended to represent any particular administration, organization, or current event. Instead, it provides a structured environment for exploring how uncertainty, institutional incentives, and strategic choices interact over time.

Initially designed as a tool to promote collaboration within the ecosystem of pluralistic civil society organizations, it has been adapted here for wider use but retains a pluralistic grounding. We encourage the free use and adaptation of this exercise, with appropriate attribution.



Why this Scenario

The simulation centers on a fictional organization called **Hearthland Community Alliance**.

Hearthland was intentionally designed to occupy an ambiguous space.

It is:

- Lawful
- Imperfect
- Somewhat controversial
- Broadly legitimate
- Not itself a pluralism organization

Participants are not being asked whether they agree with Hearthland.

Participants are being asked to consider what responsibilities civic actors have when lawful organizations come under increasing pressure despite the absence of evidence of wrongdoing.

This design helps keep attention focused on principles, incentives, institutional behavior, and field dynamics rather than partisan loyalties.

Secondly, the scenario depicts a democratic administration pursuing increasingly coercive measures in response to genuine concerns about extremism.

This design choice is deliberate.

Contemporary discussions of democratic stress are often filtered through familiar partisan examples. Locating the scenario within a democratic administration creates distance from some of those expectations and invites participants to apply principles across partisan contexts to examine:

- Institutional incentives
- Civic norms
- Democratic principles
- State power
- Field behavior

By shifting the setting away from familiar partisan narratives, participants can focus more directly on underlying dynamics.

The simulation is intended to encourage examination of:

- Principles rather than tribes
- Dynamics rather than personalities
- Systems rather than current events





Facilitator Preparation

Before You Begin

This exercise is designed for groups of **8–60 participants** and works best when participants are seated at tables of **four to eight participants** plus a facilitator. Each table represents a fictional ecosystem of organizations whose work influences pluralistic civic life.

The complete exercise takes approximately **2½–3 hours**, including briefing, gameplay, and debrief.

Materials

Each table should receive:

- One Participant Packet for each participant
- One Role Card for each participant - each of 8 roles in a different color
- Scratch paper or flip chart for notes

The facilitator should have:

- The Facilitator Guide
- Scenario script copies for each participant printed one-sided
- Pressure cards (in the same color as their roles)
- Timing guide
- Observation Guide for each table (optional if using table observers)

Assigning Roles

Assign one role to each participant before the exercise begins.

Whenever possible, distribute roles so that each table includes a mix of organizational perspectives. Participants do not need professional experience in the sectors represented by the role cards.

If there are fewer participants than roles, omit roles while maintaining as much organizational diversity as possible.

Participants should read their role cards silently before gameplay begins.

Setting Expectations

Before introducing the scenario, explain the following:

- Participants are making decisions as their assigned organizations, not expressing their own views.
- The role cards describe organizational incentives, responsibilities, and constraints. They do not dictate specific decisions.
- There are no correct strategies or preferred outcomes.
- Organizations may act independently, coordinate with others, or decide not to act.
- The objective is to make decisions that are consistent with the role and to explain the reasoning behind them.

Encourage participants to remain in role throughout the simulation.

Facilitator Posture

Your role is to guide the process rather than influence participants' decisions.

Avoid signaling approval or disapproval of particular strategies, including public action, coalition-building, restraint, or neutrality. Instead, help participants clarify:

- What assumptions are they making?
- What risks are they weighing?
- What organizational responsibilities are driving their choices?
- What consequences do they anticipate?

When participants disagree, encourage them to explain their reasoning before persuading one another.

Participants may notice parallels to real events across different administrations and political movements. Acknowledge the connection without turning the exercise into a test of factual agreement about current controversies. Ask participants to return to the information available within the scenario and identify which underlying principle they are applying.



During Gameplay

For each round:

- 
1. Read the scenario aloud.
 2. Allow participants time to review any new information or pressure cards.
 3. Invite discussion within each table.
 4. Ask each participant (or organization) to record its action(s) decision and brief reasoning.
 5. Invite tables to share decisions only when indicated in the Facilitator Guide.
 6. Proceed to the next round.

Keep the exercise moving. Participants will rarely feel they have enough information, and that uncertainty is an intentional part of the design.

Debriefing

The debrief is where most of the learning occurs.

Invite participants to stay in role during initial debriefs, while examining:

- How different organizations interpreted the same events.
- What incentives or constraints shaped organizational behavior.
- Which actions became easier or harder as the scenario evolved.
- How individual organizational choices affected the broader civic ecosystem.
- What participants learned about coordination, institutional responsibility, and pluralistic leadership under conditions of uncertainty.

Participants do not need to reach agreement. Differences in interpretation are an important source of insight.

During final debrief, participants may fully drop out of roles and debrief with their personal responses.

Encouraging Curious Disagreement

The scenario addresses politically sensitive issues and asks participants to inhabit perspectives that may differ from their own.

Remind participants to critique ideas and decisions rather than individuals.

Encourage curiosity about why different organizations reached different conclusions.

Participants may step out of role during the debrief to reflect on how the experience differed from their own beliefs or professional practice.

Adapting the Exercise

This simulation can be used with nonprofit leaders, students, public officials, funders, faith leaders, community organizations, and cross-sector networks.

Facilitators may adapt discussion prompts or timing for their audience, but the core sequence of the exercise should remain intact:

1. Receive new information.
2. Discuss within roles.
3. Make organizational decisions.
4. Observe how those decisions interact over time.
5. Reflect on the cumulative effects during the debrief.



THE CHILLING EFFECT

Facilitator Guide



Purpose of the Exercise

The Chilling Effect is a field simulation designed to help participants explore organizational decision making when democratic stress begins to constrict civic space.

Participants will encounter tensions around:

- Civic space
- Democratic norms
- Institutional legitimacy
- Coordination
- Risk
- Public narrative
- Collective action

The simulation is designed to surface these tensions, not resolve them.

Participants may leave with disagreement, uncertainty, or competing interpretations. That is expected.

Dynamics This Exercise is Designed to Explore

By the end of the simulation, participants should have a deeper appreciation for:

1. Chilling Effects

How institutions change behavior in response to perceived risk even when formal rules change very little.

Participants may observe:

- Anticipatory compliance
- Self-censorship
- Organizational caution
- Coalition fragmentation
- Isolation
- Reputational risk

The simulation is intended to help participants see how democratic stress often spreads through incentives and expectations before it spreads through formal restrictions.

2. Coordination Challenges

Organizations that broadly share values often possess:

- Different risk tolerances
- Different incentives
- Different timelines
- Different theories of change
- Different institutional responsibilities

Participants should experience how difficult coordination becomes when uncertainty is high.

3. Silence, Caution, and Delay

The simulation invites participants to consider the cumulative consequences of silence, caution, and nonparticipation.

Participants may:

- Wait
- Delay action
- Remain private
- Avoid involvement
- Decline coordination

These may be reasonable choices for individual organizations.

Participants should also observe how such caution changes the broader ecosystem

4. The Distinctive Role of Pluralistic Principles and Organizations

Participants should begin exploring whether pluralistic organizations possess responsibilities and capabilities that differ from:

- Advocacy organizations
- Political actors
- Litigators
- Journalists
- Government institutions

The simulation creates conditions that allow participants to explore the question through experience.

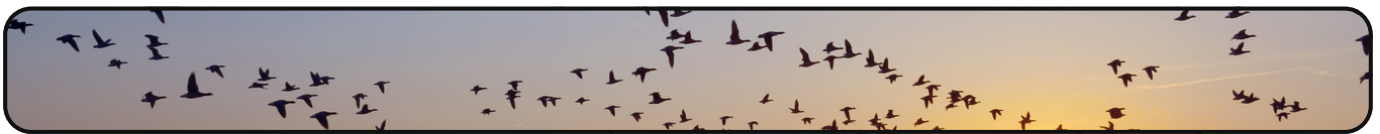
A successful table may:

- Coordinate
- Remain divided
- Act collectively
- Act independently
- Remain cautious

Success is reflected in whether participants:

- Wrestle with difficult tradeoffs
- Notice chilling effects
- Examine the possible consequences of silence, caution, and delay
- Better understand coordination challenges

If participants leave with richer observations, deeper questions, and a stronger understanding of the ecosystem represented in the simulation, the exercise has achieved its purpose.



Facilitator Role

You are not:

- A judge
- A referee
- An evaluator
- An expert witness

You are:

- A guide
- A pattern spotter
- A discussion steward

Your primary responsibility is helping participants notice:

- Why they made choices
- What assumptions shaped those choices
- Where coordination emerged
- Where coordination failed
- What interactions among organizations reveal

Do not push participants toward a preferred answer. Do push participants toward deeper reflection.

Timing Overview

Segment	Duration
Welcome and role assignment	0:15
Act 1	0:30
Act 1 Debrief	0:15
Act 2	0:30
Act 2 Debrief	0:20
BREAK	0:15
Act 3 and Final table reflection	0:25
Plenary Debrief (Optional)	0:30

Total: 150 to 180 minutes (2 1/2 to 3 hours)

Keep track of timing throughout. You may use less time than allotted when the table is ready to move on, but do not allow the group to regularly exceed each segment.

Welcome and Role Assignment (15 min)

Facilitators distribute role cards OR allow participants to choose a role that they do not normally represent.

Do *not* distribute pressure cards.

Read aloud:

Today your table represents a miniature version of the pluralism ecosystem in a time of democratic stress.

Each of you has been assigned a role and we will encourage you to remain in role throughout the exercise.

You do not represent your actual organization.

Instead, you represent a type of actor commonly found in the field.

Throughout the simulation, you will respond from the perspective of that role and observe what happens when many organizations face uncertainty and pressure simultaneously.

Coordination, disagreement, waiting, and collaborative actions are all possible.

There is no winning strategy. The purpose is to better understand how a field behaves under pressure.

Then, ask participants to:

1. Read through the strategic action menu.
2. Read their role card, paying close attention to goals, fears, biases, incentives and actions they are well positioned to take.
3. Introduce themselves in their role and put up their table tent if they haven't already.
4. **Share only the goal** on their role card.
5. Keep their role's fear, bias, and incentive to themselves.

Act I (30 min)

- Distribute Act I scenario
- Read, or have a participant read aloud, Act I
- Distribute Act I Pressure Cards to each role

Act I Scenario THE SIGNAL (2 min)

A newly elected democratic administration enters office following a period of political violence, rising distrust in institutions, and several highly publicized incidents involving extremist groups.

During the campaign, administration leaders argued that democratic institutions had been too slow and too cautious in responding to growing threats.

They promised a more proactive approach to protecting democracy, reducing political violence, and preventing extremist movements from gaining influence.

Many Americans welcome this shift.

Polling shows broad public support for stronger action against extremism.

In its first months, the administration launches initiatives aimed at identifying and disrupting what officials describe as "extremist ecosystems."

The First Action

Federal agencies announce investigations into Hearthland Community Alliance, a large nonprofit that provides workforce development, addiction recovery services, family support programs, leadership training, and civic engagement opportunities in struggling rural communities.

Hearthland has become one of the most visible civic organizations in several economically distressed regions.

The organization is politically controversial.

Supporters describe it as one of the few institutions still serving communities that feel abandoned by national leaders.

Critics argue that Hearthland has increasingly become a gathering place for nationalist sentiment and grievance-based politics. They point to controversial speakers, partnerships, and rhetoric that they believe contribute to anti-democratic sentiment and institutional distrust.

Hearthland's leaders insist they do not endorse these views and argue that hosting controversial speakers is consistent with their commitment to open dialogue and community engagement.

Federal officials announce they are examining whether organizations like Hearthland play a role in sustaining environments where extremist ideas can spread.

No criminal charges are filed. No evidence of illegal conduct is presented.

The investigation itself becomes the story. A liberal-leaning national news organization reports on the investigation, garnering rapidly expanding social media attention. Staff at Hearthland report at least one doxxing attempt.

Several major foundations quietly suspend grants. Media attention grows.

The administration insists it is protecting democracy.

Critics warn that lawful civic organizations are being targeted based on association rather than conduct.

Individual reading and reflection (6 min)

Role-based discussion (14 min)

The facilitator should:

- Encourage participants to react to one another.
- Allow disagreement.
- Allow coalition formation.

- Allow persuasion.
- Do not push toward consensus.

Prompts:

- Is this a moment that requires response?
- If so, from whom and of what kind?

Additional prompts if necessary:

- What concerns seem most important?
 - What information feels missing?
 - Does this feel like a normal democratic response?
 - What would make your role more confident in acting?
-

After discussion:

Action Decisions (8 min)

Ask each participant to state:

- What action they are taking, if any.
- Why.

Facilitator notes the actions and roles on a flip chart.

Act I Debrief (15 min)

Purpose: Surface assumptions.

Avoid rushing toward conclusions.

Ask:

- What uncertainties mattered most?
- Who felt pressure to act?
- Who felt pressure to wait?
- What role did fear play?

- What role did credibility concerns play?
- Did any role feel responsible for the broader field?

Facilitator captures major themes visibly on a flip chart.

Act II (30 min)

- Distribute Act II scenario
- Read, or have a participant read, Act II Scenario
- Distribute Act II Pressure Cards to each participant

Act II Scenario THE SPREAD (2 min)

Three months later, federal scrutiny expands.

Banks close several Hearthland accounts.

Government contractors are quietly advised to avoid partnerships with organizations under investigation.

Two additional organizations are investigated.

Neither is accused of illegal conduct.

Federal tax authorities announce a review of Hearthland's nonprofit status and issue extensive requests for records related to programming, partnerships, donors, communications, and events.

Administration officials describe the review as routine and necessary given concerns about possible connections between civic organizations and extremist networks.

No violations are alleged.

Social media picks up additional journalistic reporting, prompting additional viral individual accusations and more doxxing incidents.

Across the nonprofit sector, leaders begin consulting attorneys, reviewing communications, reconsidering partnerships, and reassessing public activities.

Several organizations cancel planned events.

Others quietly withdraw from coalitions.

Insurance providers, financial institutions, and corporate partners begin asking additional questions of organizations perceived as politically sensitive.

A phrase begins circulating privately:

"Don't become the next Hearthland."

Many organizations are changing their behavior without receiving any direct government order.

Individual reading and reflection (6 min)

Role-based discussion (14 min)

Encourage participants to challenge one another.

Allow coalition-building conversations.

Allow participants to test possible collective responses.

Action Decisions (8 min)

Record on the flip chart:

- Coordination attempts
- Public actions
- Private actions
- Delays
- Silence

Pay particular attention to reactions to the IRS inquiry. The IRS review is intended to illustrate how chilling effects spread through uncertainty, compliance costs, reputational concerns, and anticipatory behavior.

Act II Debrief (20 min)

Purpose:

- Explore chilling effects.
- This is one of the most important conversations in the exercise.
- Allow it to breathe.

Read aloud:

- Notice how the incentives facing organizations are beginning to shift.
- Pay attention to how institutions respond to uncertainty, risk, and the behavior of other organizations.
- Consider how changing expectations can reshape a field even when formal rules remain largely unchanged.

Ask:

- What changed between Act I and Act II?
- How did the IRS inquiry affect your thinking?
- Did anyone feel less free to act?
- Did silence become more attractive?
- Did coordination become easier or harder?
- What made collective action difficult?
- Were participants responding primarily to government actions or to one another?
- What was happening to the ecosystem?

Listen for:

- Self-censorship
- Risk avoidance
- Isolation
- Fragmentation
- Coalition-building
- Anticipatory compliance

Take note of major themes on the flip chart for Act II debrief.

BREAK (15 min)

No formal instructions.

Participants may remain in role if they wish.

Act III (25 min)

- Distribute Act III Scenario
- Read, or have a participant read, Act III Scenario

Act III Scenario THE NEW LANDSCAPE (1 min)

One year later:

No major organization has been formally shut down, no large-scale prosecutions have occurred, and the legal environment appears broadly similar to what it was before.

However, the civic environment feels very different.

Hearthland and other directly investigated organizations have shrunk in size and struggle to fundraise, though partisan backlash has increased some private donations.

Partnerships have weakened, organizations increasingly avoid risk, and funders have become more cautious. Many institutions are less willing to host difficult conversations and leaders report heightened concern about attracting scrutiny.

Looking back, many observers conclude that the transformation emerged through thousands of individual decisions.

Some leaders acted out of fear or caution. Some believed stronger evidence was needed before responding and some assumed others would take the lead.

Collectively, those decisions contributed to reshaping the boundaries of civic life.

Many now describe the result as a chilling effect.

Leaders across generations are learning new informal rules:

- Certain topics are safer to avoid.
- Certain partnerships carry new risks.
- Certain public positions require greater caution.

The formal rules changed only modestly.

The expectations surrounding civic life changed substantially.

And for younger generations of leaders, the introduction of new rules only excites the possibility to bend, break, or further change them.

Individual reflection (6 min - optional facilitator notetaking)

No action selection required. Ask participants to focus on interpretation.

**Optional* for larger groups where collective learning is important:*

While table is reflecting silently, facilitator captures in very quick notes:

Which of the eight roles were represented at the table?

- 1.Pluralism Field Researcher
- 2.Bridgebuilding Organization Leader
- 3.Transpartisan Pro-Democracy Organizer
- 4.Democracy And Civic Culture Funder
- 5.Solutions Journalism Leader
- 6.Community Convener
- 7.Narrative And Advocacy Strategist
- 8.Faith Community Civic Leader

Table #:	
Observation	Notes
<i>What overall posture emerged?</i> <i>E.g., collective action, independent action, fragmented action, caution, wait-and-see, mixed, etc.</i>	
<i>What enabled or constrained action?</i> <i>E.g., trusted relationships, shared interpretation of events, moral clarity, strong leadership, existing coalitions, access to information, perceived safety in numbers, etc.</i>	
<i>What inhibited action?</i> <i>E.g., fear of reputational damage, uncertainty about facts, desire for stronger evidence, resource constraints, legal concerns, fear of being isolated, concern about mission drift, belief that another actor should lead, etc.</i>	
What changed after escalation?	
<i>What missing coordination capacities were identified?</i> <i>E.g., trusted communication channels, shared risk assessment, rapid response mechanisms, legal support, funder coordination, shared narratives, convening capacity, cross-sector relationships, etc.</i>	

Final Table Reflection (18 min)

This is the most important part of the exercise. Protect this time.

Participants should remain in role during this reflection and speak from the simulation rather than on behalf of their actual organizations.

Discuss the most relevant of the following:

- What most influenced your decisions?
- What role did fear play?
- What role did silence play?
- What surprised you?
- What capacities were missing?
- What relationships were missing?
- What conditions would have made coordination easier?
- What responsibilities, if any, do pluralistic organizations have in situations like this?
- Under what conditions would collective action become justified?
- What capacities, relationships, or infrastructure would have made the field more effective?

Encourage participants to speak from the simulation rather than from their actual organizations.

Optional Additional Reflection

Optionally, at the end of the final table debrief, have the table begin to consider the fears, incentives, goals, and biases of their own, real life, organizations.

Ask them to name their organizational type and what comes up for them when they consider these types of constraints.

Plenary Debrief (optional 30 min)

Depending on the size and purpose of the simulation, it may be helpful to have a plenary debrief. Allow participants to speak as themselves and drop out of the simulation.

This must be tailored to specific needs of the simulation group, but we suggest a focus on:

- How the internal and external pressures interacted to shape the dynamics of the table's response.
 - How participants felt about the overall outcome of the game.
 - What, if anything, participants would have done differently in their roles if they had to do it again, and why.
-

Facilitator Watch-Outs

If Participants Immediately Coordinate

Ask:

- What made coordination possible?
- What assumptions were shared?
- What conditions supported trust?

Explore the dynamics.

If Participants Choose Not To Act

Allow the choice.

Do not rescue the group.

Ask:

- What made caution feel appropriate?
- What consequences might emerge if many organizations make similar choices?

The simulation treats silence, private action, caution, and delay as distinct strategic choices, each with possible benefits and consequences.

If Participants Ignore Internal Pressures

Prompt for full reasoning.

Ask:

- What might ignoring those pressures cost?

If Discussion Shifts Toward Current Politics

Redirect gently.

Ask:

- What dynamics are participants noticing?
- What institutional incentives are shaping behavior?
- What lessons might generalize beyond this specific scenario?

If One Person Dominates

Go role-by-role.

Ask each participant:

- What is your role's perspective?

Make Space For Introverts

Pay attention to who is speaking. Give longer pauses to allow introverts to speak up.

If some folks are not speaking, or not speaking much, call on them for their thoughts.

If Participants Ask For The Right Answer

Say:

- The exercise is exploring tradeoffs, incentives, and consequences.
- Multiple interpretations are expected.
- The goal is to understand the field more deeply, not arrive at a single preferred response.

THE CHILLING EFFECT

Scenario



Act I

THE SIGNAL

A newly elected democratic administration enters office following a period of political violence, rising distrust in institutions, and several highly publicized incidents involving extremist groups.

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A phrase begins circulating privately:

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Act III

THE NEW LANDSCAPE

One year later:

No major organization has been formally shut down.

No large-scale prosecutions have occurred.

The legal environment appears broadly similar to what it was before.

The civic environment feels very different.

Partnerships have weakened.

Organizations increasingly avoid risk.

Funders have become more cautious.

Many institutions are less willing to host difficult conversations.

Leaders report heightened concern about attracting scrutiny.

Looking back, many observers conclude that the transformation emerged through thousands of individual decisions.

- Some leaders acted out of fear.
- Some acted out of caution.
- Some believed stronger evidence was needed before responding.
- Some assumed others would take the lead.

Collectively, those decisions reshaped the boundaries of civic life.

Many now describe the result as a chilling effect.

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THE CHILLING EFFECT

Participant Packet

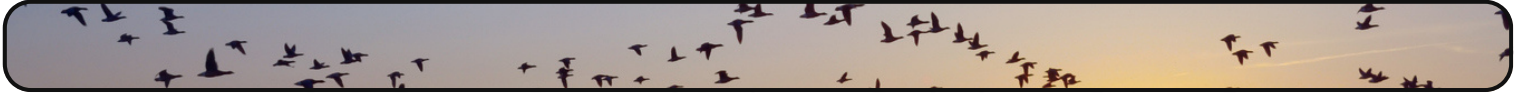


TABLE INTRODUCTION

Your table represents a miniature version of the American pluralistic civil society ecosystem. Each participant has been assigned an organizational role within a broader civic ecosystem.

Together, your table reflects many of the organizations and leaders who influence how pluralistic civil society responds during periods of democratic stress.

Throughout the simulation, you will face a series of escalating developments involving government action, institutional response, public narrative, and civic trust.

Participants should consider:

- How would your role interpret what is happening?
- What responsibilities does your role have?
- What risks are worth taking?
- What consequences might follow from action, inaction, coordination, or silence?

Field-level outcomes emerge from the interaction of many decisions made by many organizations under pressure.

- Some participants may coordinate.
- Some may disagree.
- Some may choose to wait.
- Some may act independently.
- All are realistic possibilities.
- There is no winning strategy.
- There is no required consensus.

The purpose of the exercise is to explore how a pluralistic ecosystem functions when civic space begins to narrow.

HOW THE SIMULATION WORKS



During each round:

1. Read the scenario.
2. Read your role-specific pressure card.
3. Consider how your role interprets the situation, taking the influence of scenario and role pressures seriously.
4. Discuss with your table.
5. Decide whether your role will take action.
6. Observe how decisions interact across the ecosystem.

Remember:

Your role represents one actor within a larger ecosystem.

The group's response emerges from the accumulation of many individual choices.

STRATEGIC ACTION MENU

At any point in the simulation, you may choose to pursue up to two of the following actions, with or without partnering with other organizations at the table.

You may also propose your own actions.



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND MESSAGING

Shape how the pluralistic ecosystem, institutions, and broader public understand the situation.

- ☐ Publish an organizational statement articulating pluralist principles.
- ☐ Sign onto a joint public statement with other organizations.
- ☐ Convene a private briefing for field leaders to share analysis and align messaging.
- ☐ Launch a coordinated communications effort through op-eds, social media, webinars, or network communications.
- ☐ Recruit and elevate trusted messengers to communicate pluralist principles to key audiences.

POLICY & LEGAL ADVOCACY

Protect civic freedoms, democratic legitimacy, and the institutional conditions necessary for pluralism.

- ☐ Consult with legal advocacy organizations regarding potential litigation.
- ☐ Join or organize an amicus brief.
- ☐ Publicly support or oppose a specific policy, executive action, or piece of legislation.
- ☐ Advance a specific policy proposal intended to strengthen civic freedoms, democratic participation, or pluralism.
- ☐ Defend the independence of nonprofit, philanthropic, or civic institutions.

BUILD A SUSTAINABLE PRO-PLURALISM AGENDA

Strengthen the long-term policy and institutional infrastructure necessary for pluralism to thrive.

- ☐ Develop a shared pro-pluralism policy agenda.
- ☐ Clarify and communicate field-wide priorities.
- ☐ Launch a long-term initiative to strengthen civic norms and democratic culture.
- ☐ Invest in research, strategy development, or field-building infrastructure.

PROTECT CIVIC FREEDOMS & INSTITUTIONS

Defend the organizations, freedoms, and institutions that enable pluralistic democracy.

- ☐ Organize a coalition to defend freedom of association, expression, or religion.
- ☐ Coordinate with organizations already responding to perceived threats.
- ☐ Create new infrastructure to address gaps in civic freedom protections.
- ☐ Provide direct support to organizations experiencing pressure or retaliation.

CONVENE COALITIONS & COUNTER CHILLING EFFECTS

Reduce isolation, strengthen coordination, and build collective capacity.

- ☐ Convene a private cross-sector coordination meeting.
- ☐ Establish shared principles or thresholds for collective action.
- ☐ Create a rapid-response coalition.
- ☐ Develop a shared strategy for supporting organizations experiencing pressure.
- ☐ Build relationships and communication channels for future coordination.

KEEP BRIDGING

Continue the core work of building social trust and constructive engagement across differences.

- ☐ Launch a bridgebuilding or dialogue initiative.
- ☐ Convene leaders from communities experiencing conflict or polarization.
- ☐ Strengthen relationships across political, racial, religious, or cultural divides.
- ☐ Support local efforts to maintain trust and cooperation during periods of tension.

WAIT & OBSERVE

Delay action while gathering information or preparing for future action.

- ☐ Monitor developments before responding publicly.
- ☐ Conduct additional research or analysis.
- ☐ Conduct private outreach to key stakeholders.
- ☐ Prepare contingency plans while taking no public action.

OTHER

Create your own action. If none of the above options fit your role's assessment of the situation, propose another strategic action and explain why.



Role Cards

Print each role and its pressure cards on a different color paper, with enough for all tables. Cut the role and pressure cards apart before the game, and separate into Roles, Act I pressure cards, and Act II pressure cards.

PLURALISTIC FIELD RESEARCHER



You lead a respected research organization studying polarization, democratic resilience, civic trust, and pluralism.

Goal: Help civil society understand what is happening while preserving credibility and trust.

Fear: Being perceived as partisan and losing legitimacy across ideological divides.

Bias: Tends to overvalue certainty and may underestimate the costs of waiting.

Incentive

Your influence depends on being viewed as credible by a broad range of audiences. Funders, journalists, policymakers, and practitioners rely on your organization's reputation for rigor and neutrality.

Natural Responses

- Gather evidence.
- Produce analysis.
- Clarify uncertainty.
- Build shared understanding.
- Resist acting on incomplete information.

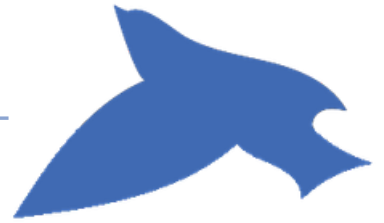
ACT I Pressure card:

Researcher: Your board urges caution. "Do not jeopardize our credibility by rushing to judgment."

ACT II Pressure card:

Researcher: Several funders privately indicate they may reconsider support if your research is perceived as political.

BRIDGEBUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL LEADER



You lead a national bridgebuilding organization.

Goal: Maintain relationships and civic trust across differences.

Fear: Escalating polarization and damaging the social fabric.

Bias: Tends to prioritize relationship preservation even when stronger intervention may be warranted.

Incentive

Your effectiveness depends on maintaining relationships across ideological, religious, racial, and geographic divides. Public alignment with one side of a conflict can reduce your ability to convene others.

Natural Responses

- Convene dialogue.
- Maintain relationships.
- Reduce escalation.
- Look for common ground.
- Avoid forcing binary choices.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Bridgebuilder: Several partners ask, "Why should we defend Hearthland?"

ACT II Pressure Card:

Bridgebuilder: Communities most affected by the investigations increasingly distrust dialogue-focused organizations and demand stronger action.

TRANSPARTISAN PRO-DEMOCRACY ORGANIZATION



You lead a coalition focused on democratic resilience.

Goal: Protect democratic norms and civic freedoms.

Fear: Normalization of anti-democratic behavior.

Bias: Tends to interpret ambiguity as a warning sign requiring action.

Incentive

Your organization is judged by whether it recognizes threats early and mobilizes effective responses. Waiting too long can feel like failure.

Natural Responses

- Build coalitions.
- Organize collective responses.
- Publicly defend democratic principles.
- Push institutions to act.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Democracy Organizer: Allied organizations demand an immediate public response.

ACT II Pressure Card:

Democracy Organizer: Coalition partners disagree sharply about whether collective action is justified.

DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC CULTURE FUNDER



You oversee significant grantmaking.

Goal: Maintain a healthy and resilient field.

Fear: Allowing critical institutions and capacities to weaken.

Bias: Tends to prioritize infrastructure, capacity, and sustainability over confrontation.

Incentive

You are accountable for stewarding resources wisely. You must balance risk-taking with protecting grantees and maintaining confidence among donors, trustees, and peer funders.

Natural Responses

- Fund.
- Convene.
- Support field infrastructure.
- Create space for coordination.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Funder: A board member warns, "We do not want to be associated with controversial organizations."

ACT II Pressure Card:

Funder: Peer funders are choosing caution and reducing visible involvement.

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM LEADER



You lead a civic journalism organization.

Goal: Improve public understanding.

Fear: Contributing to misinformation or polarization.

Bias: Tends to believe better information can solve more problems than it actually can.

Incentive

Your organization survives by attracting attention while maintaining trust. Stories that are nuanced and responsible often compete with stories that are simpler and more emotionally compelling.

Natural Responses

- Investigate.
- Explain.
- Clarify.
- Elevate constructive responses.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Solutions Journalist: Editors question whether the story deserves sustained coverage.

ACT II Pressure Card:

Solutions Journalist: Stories focused on conflict dramatically outperform stories focused on complexity.

COMMUNITY CONVENER



You organize local civic leaders and institutions.

Goal: Keep communities functioning and connected.

Fear: National conflict overwhelming local trust.

Bias: Tends to focus on practical local solutions even when structural forces are driving events.

Incentive

You are accountable to people who need communities to work today. Local leaders often value stability, functionality, and trust more than national political positioning.

Natural Responses

- Build local coalitions.
- Maintain relationships.
- Coordinate practical responses.
- Protect community trust.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Community Convener: Local leaders ask you to stay focused on community issues.

ACT II Pressure Card:

Community Convener: Organizations decline invitations out of concern about reputational risk or scrutiny.

NARRATIVE & ADVOCACY STRATEGIST



You help civic organizations shape public narratives.

Goal: Influence how people understand events.

Fear: Allowing harmful narratives to become dominant.

Bias: Tends to see narrative change as a primary driver of social outcomes.

Incentive

You are rewarded when issues gain visibility, attention, and salience. You often see opportunities for intervention earlier than organizations focused on institutional process or research.

Natural Responses

- Frame.
- Message.
- Communicate.
- Mobilize attention.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Narrative Strategist: Potential allies disagree about what this situation represents.

ACT II Pressure Card:

Narrative Strategist: Your most effective message is also your most polarizing message.

FAITH COMMUNITY CIVIC LEADER



You lead a national faith-based civic organization.

Goal: Protect human dignity and strengthen moral community.

Fear: Abandoning vulnerable people or becoming politically captured.

Bias: Tends to interpret events through a moral lens before an institutional lens.

Incentive

Your legitimacy depends on maintaining moral credibility with diverse communities while remaining faithful to your values. Constituencies may expect both courage and restraint.

Natural Responses

- Provide moral witness.
- Mobilize community care.
- Build solidarity.
- Convene across differences.

ACT I Pressure Card:

Faith Leader: Your network is divided on Hearthland itself.

ACT II Pressure Card:

Faith Leader: Several congregations threaten to withdraw if you become publicly involved.

Logistics, Adaptations & Troubleshooting

Successful implementation of this game requires careful planning from organizers, and advance preparation for table facilitators.

Printing & Materials

We recommend the following:

- Each participant should have their own packet, a writing utensil, and scratch paper.
- There should be one scenario set per participant, printed single-sided, to be distributed act by act.
- **Each role should be printed one-sided on its own color paper.** For example, role and pressure cards for Bridgebuilding Organization Leader could be on green while those for Democracy and Civic Culture Funder on blue paper, etc. Pressure cards should be cut or printed apart in advance. This will help facilitators manage paper during the game.
- Facilitators need Facilitator Preparation and Guide, and a way to take notes, either on a flip chart or some other shared document.

Preparation

- Convenors and facilitators should ideally run a test in advance.
- Facilitators must review materials in advance.
- Participants should not receive materials about the game in advance but only during the game.
- The number of tables and facilitators should be planned in advance based on the total number of participants, available facilitators and space.
- No prior knowledge of or experience with the roles is required of facilitators or participants.

Group Size & Location

- Each table needs its own facilitator. If significant note-taking is required, a dedicated notetaker would be helpful.
- The game can accommodate four to eight participants per table, but is better with seven or eight than with four or five participants.
- The game can be run in-person or virtually.
- For virtual versions, we recommend that facilitators have an additional support person who can privately message each participant with role and pressure cards.

Adaptations

- We encourage the free use and adaptation of this tool, so long as proper attribution is given.
- All permutations of role presence are workable. If the game is being adapted to specific purposes, it may be wise to mandate certain roles' presence among each group.
- Accessibility requirements for facilitators and participants should be ascertained in advance so that any accommodations can be planned.
- If the game needs to be shortened due to time constraints, cut the third Act rather than the time allotments.
- When adapting the game to new audiences or situations, consider:
 - What organizational ecosystem are you trying to simulate?
 - Which roles are essential?
 - What kinds of pressure matter most in your context?
 - How much ambiguity is appropriate for your audience?
 - What learning objectives matter most?

Design Assumptions

- Events are compressed for playability.
- Participants receive only the information presented in the exercise.
- Legal and political details are intentionally incomplete.
- The scenario is designed to create plausible ambiguity.
- No action on the action menu guarantees a particular result.

Timing Overview

Segment	Duration
Welcome and role assignment	0:15
Act 1	0:30
Act 1 Debrief	0:15
Act 2	0:30
Act 2 Debrief	0:20
BREAK	0:15
Act 3 and Final table reflection	0:25
Plenary Debrief (Optional)	0:30

Total: 150 to 180 minutes (2 1/2 to 3 hours)

Acknowledgements

This game was originally designed to promote collaborative action at a convening for pluralistic organizations, itself one step in a larger project examining the implications of increased punitive state power for the pluralism field.

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This game was designed by Allison K. Ralph of Cohesion Strategy, with the help of generative artificial intelligence and generous feedback and comments from Mary Ellen Giess of Interfaith America, Mariah Levison and Monika Glowaki of Convergence, Shannon Green and Siri Erickson of PACE, and Lauren Higgins of New Pluralists.

For further help implementing or adapting the game, reach out to Cohesion Strategy.



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.

Cohesion Strategy LLC

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