

Catalyzing Alignment and Action on Threats to Pluralism

June 26 Convening Summary

This document synthesizes the core insights, strategic tensions, and actionable outputs from the *Catalyzing Alignment and Action on Threats to Pluralism* convening held on June 26 at [Stand Together](#) in Arlington, Virginia. The gathering brought together more than 60 cross-ideological practitioners, researchers, funders, and other leaders from across the pluralism and pro-democracy ecosystem to build shared understanding of growing threats to pluralism and identify opportunities for collective action. Participants generated more than 40 potential actions to strengthen and protect pluralism, while post-event feedback indicated that the convening successfully fostered a shared analysis of key threats and their implications, deepened participants' sense of connection to a broader national effort and helped bridge relationships across previously siloed networks.

The convening was part of a broader effort led by [Convergence Center for Policy Resolution](#), [Interfaith America](#), [New Pluralists](#), [Cohesion Strategy](#), and [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement \(PACE\)](#) – including listening sessions, [research](#), and a [memo](#) outlining the top threats to pluralism – to build alignment around and catalyze action to address these growing threats, particularly amid increasing concerns about executive overreach and the abuse of government power.

Participants found meaningful alignment around the top threats to pluralism and broad areas for action, while differing on priorities and the role the field should play. The convening centered on an important question: **How can the pluralism ecosystem respond to threats to democratic norms and civic space without abandoning the very principles and practices that make pluralism distinctive?**

A key insight was that the field's distinctive contribution may be to **bring pluralism itself into the work of protecting democracy**. Rather than simply joining traditional pro-democracy efforts, pluralism organizations can make that work more relational, cross-ideological, community-rooted, and attentive to the dignity of people with whom we disagree – bringing the field's **mindsets, heartsets, and skillsets** into both the **blocking work** of responding to immediate threats and the **building work** of creating healthier civic and governing institutions.

Participants differed, however, on what this should require in practice. Some felt a clear moral imperative to act more visibly and collectively; others worried about partisanship, credibility, or the ability to maintain relationships across deep divides. Still others were willing to act but **unsure which actions would be effective or how to act authentically and pluralistically**.

Rather than resolve these differences, the field can create **multiple pathways for engagement** – practical opportunities for those ready to act, alongside trusted spaces for those who are uncertain or still working through what principled action should look like. The goal is not uniformity, but the shared understanding, trust, and infrastructure needed to make informed choices about when and how to act.

At the same time, **bringing pluralism into pro-democracy work can strengthen the pluralism field itself** by connecting its principles to the urgency of the current moment and making the work more action-oriented and responsive to threats to civic space.

The Tabletop Exercise: Making the Chilling Effect Visible

The heart of the morning was **The Chilling Effect**, a tabletop exercise designed by Allison Ralph of Cohesion Strategy. Participants played out a fictional but familiar scenario of escalating government pressure on a community organization, surfacing the trade-offs and consequences of action and inaction.

Reactions varied across tables. Some repeatedly chose caution as concerns about credibility, funding, reputation, and organizational continuity made inaction feel reasonable. Yet collectively, those choices produced a shrinking civic space. Others were willing to act but lacked clarity about what would be effective, what role they should play, or how to act without compromising their ability to bridge across differences. The problem was not simply fear; it was lack of practical models for pluralistic action under pressure.

Together, the exercise highlighted two challenges the field must address – **the psychology of anticipatory compliance and the practical challenge of knowing how to act well and pluralistically**.

What the Convening Made Clear

1. The pluralism field has a distinctive role to play, but it must bring pluralism into the response itself.

The key question is not simply whether pluralism organizations should respond to democratic stress, but **what a distinctly pluralistic response looks like**. Traditional pro-democracy efforts like supporting free and fair elections, protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, and strengthening the rule of law remain essential. And the pluralism field can add something distinctive – demonstrating that expanding democratic space and maintaining relationships across profound disagreement need not be competing goals.

This creates an opportunity to make traditionally pro-democracy activities more pluralistic through broader coalitions, more expansive language, more skillful engagement with legitimate critiques and disagreement, and a commitment to working with people of

diverse views. We believe that pluralists can offer these skills while maintaining the credibility that enables the field to bridge divides.

This exchange can work in both directions – pro-democracy work can benefit from pluralism’s emphasis on relationships, disagreement, and community, while pluralism can benefit from the pro-democracy field’s experience translating values into concrete action.

There was no universal agreement about the field’s role or its boundaries, but this tension may be among the most important questions for continued exploration.

2. The biggest risk may be acting, or not acting, without a way to do so collectively and pluralistically.

The tabletop scenario planning exercise and afternoon discussions surfaced a fundamental dilemma – **inaction can allow fear and anticipatory compliance to shrink civic space, while poorly coordinated action can undermine trust and make it harder to bridge divides**. Some participants needed greater confidence to act; others were ready to act but lacked clarity about what would be effective or how to do so without compromising their bridgebuilding role.

The field therefore needs more than shared principles. It **needs infrastructure for discernment and action**, including trusted relationships, practical tools, spaces to work through tough questions, and opportunities to learn what effective pluralistic responses to anti-democratic activity look like.

3. The field should create multiple pathways for engagement rather than seek a single collective position.

The convening revealed a spectrum of readiness. Some participants see an urgent moral imperative to respond. Others remain cautious or uncertain. Treating either group as the definitive voice of the field risks losing important perspectives.

A more productive approach may be to create several pathways that meet pluralism actors where they are at:

- **Ready to act:** Concrete opportunities for coordinated action, including letters, legal efforts, rapid-response communications, policy advocacy, and mutual-support mechanisms.
- **Ready but seeking clarity:** Practical guidance, scenario planning, toolkits, and legal and communications support to identify effective, pluralistic approaches.
- **Uncertain or concerned:** Trusted cross-ideological spaces to test assumptions, surface concerns, and explore the boundaries of principled action.

Funders can support all three pathways by supporting rapid-response capacity and the longer-term relationships, experimentation, and learning needed to build effective action.

The objective is not to manufacture consensus. It is to **create the conditions for principled choice, coordinated action where there is sufficient alignment, and continued relationship-building where differences remain.**

4. Trust and relationships need to be built before the next crisis.

The tabletop exercise made visible how quickly organizations can become isolated under pressure. Without **trusted relationships, shared information, and confidence** that others will stand with them, fear can become self-reinforcing. Organizations anticipate consequences for their funding, reputation, staff, or ability to serve their communities and adjust their behavior accordingly, even before anyone explicitly asks them to do so.

The field needs to build the opposite dynamic in advance – relationships and networks that make it possible to say, “I am seeing this too. What can we do together? How can we support each other?”

5. The broader democracy ecosystem needs greater visibility, coordination, and legibility across fields.

The convening surfaced a broader challenge beyond the pluralism field itself – the democracy ecosystem remains fragmented, with limited visibility and coordination across fields, organizations, and networks working on related challenges. Participants may be pursuing complementary efforts without knowing who else is working on similar questions, what capabilities exist elsewhere, or where greater coordination could strengthen impact. This fragmentation can reinforce silos across related fields, making it harder to translate complementary efforts into a more coherent collective response.

Addressing this does not necessarily mean creating a single strategy or structure. Rather, the field may benefit from **greater connective capacity – better visibility into who is doing what, stronger relationships across fields, and shared spaces for learning and coordination.** This could help reduce duplication, surface complementary efforts, and enable more focused collective action when shared priorities emerge.

6. The field needs connective tissue between local experience and national dynamics.

Participants repeatedly identified the challenge of connecting local events to broader patterns and of helping people understand what national developments mean for their own communities and spheres of influence. Organizations working directly with communities tend to focus on immediate needs. Without trusted translators, storytellers, and navigators, they may not see how a local experience connects to a larger national trend, why responding beyond their immediate constituency is part of their role, or how national threats and opportunities translate into concrete action locally.

The field needs **connective infrastructure that can help organizations and communities recognize patterns, share information, and translate between local, state, and**

national contexts. This should work in both directions – surfacing local experiences and lessons to inform broader strategies, while helping local actors understand national dynamics and identify where they can exercise influence within their own sphere.

7. Funders have an outsized role in creating permission to act.

Organizations assess risk not only through the lens of mission, but through practical questions: “What happens to our funding? Will our partners stand behind us? Can we absorb the consequences if we become a target?”

Funders can help change those calculations by providing credible commitments to organizations aligned with their missions but facing political or governmental pressure or anticipating smaller but consequential forms of pressure. For many organizations, this may not mean direct scrutiny or intervention, but rather concerns about funding, reputation, partnerships, staff safety, or whether certain work could draw unwanted attention. Funders can help by providing flexible funding, pooled emergency resources, communications and legal support, and explicit conversations about what they will, and will not, expect grantees to do during periods of democratic stress.

Breakout Sessions: Potential Areas for Collective Action

The afternoon shifted from diagnosis and alignment to action, with participants exploring five areas: thought leadership and communications, policy and advocacy, coalitional work, culture change, and capacity-building. Rather than a single prioritized agenda, the discussions **surfaced complementary opportunities for both immediate response and longer-term field-building.**

“Building a bigger we” emerged as one framing that could invite more Americans into the work, while First Amendment protections offered potential cross-ideological common ground. Participants also recognized the need to do both **“firefighting and construction work”** – responding to immediate threats while continuing to build the civic culture and institutions the field wants to see.

Thought leadership and communications

- Develop shared language and audience-mapping tools, with more testing of how pluralism resonates with different constituencies.
- Build an emergency communications toolkit that organizations can adapt during moments of crisis.
- Invest in storytelling that demonstrates pluralism in practice rather than relying primarily on abstract explanations of the concept.

Policy and advocacy

- Explore the First Amendment and other civil liberties as a potential area of cross-ideological collaboration and develop practical tools, potentially including shared legal resources or amicus templates.
- Connect policy, legal, and government affairs staff across pluralism organizations through an ongoing working network.
- Identify policy opportunities where coordinated action can protect civic space without needing consensus on political questions.

Coalition and community of practice

- Develop a mechanism for coordinating support to smaller organizations facing government pressure or other crises, including legal assistance, crisis communications, and scenario planning.
- Strengthen the field's connective tissue through regular cross-ideological convenings and principle-based coalitions.
- Create mechanisms for sharing intelligence about emerging threats and lessons from organizational responses.

Culture change

- Invest in local media and storytellers to surface stories of pluralism in action, particularly during periods of democratic stress.
- Develop a stronger “civic innovation” ecosystem connecting local media, influencers, community organizations, and funders.
- Examine whether the language of “pluralism” itself creates unnecessary barriers to participation, particularly among conservatives and other constituencies that may share the underlying values but not the terminology.

Capacity-building

- Coordinate and scale training in skills such as violence prevention, resilience, conflict engagement, and bridgebuilding.
- Adapt existing tools, such as the YMCA's Bridgebuilder Blueprint survey, to help individuals understand themselves as bridgebuilders and identify opportunities to practice pluralism.
- Develop practical guidance for organizations trying to determine whether and how to engage during moments of democratic stress.

Moving Forward

The convening crystallized a clear opportunity – **to build a pluralism ecosystem capable of principled action to address anti-democratic and anti-pluralistic activities without sacrificing its commitment to pluralism.** That means building the relationships, tools, funding, and spaces that enable people to act where there is alignment while remaining in relationship when there is uncertainty.

The next phase should **create multiple pathways for engagement** – concrete opportunities and infrastructure for those ready to act, alongside trusted spaces for those still wrestling with what principled, pluralistic action should look like. The challenge is to make these pathways complementary rather than competing – **action without reflection risks losing the field’s distinctive contribution; reflection without action risks allowing civic space to contract.**

The invitation now is not simply to ask whether the pluralism field should act. It is to ask **what it would look like to act in a genuinely pluralistic way, and what infrastructure we need to make that possible.**

The June convening is a starting point for continued field-building and next steps are already in motion. Over the coming year, we will synthesize and share these insights, facilitate meaning-making conversations with practitioners and funders, and support learning and alignment around the most promising opportunities. Building on this work, a **community of action** will bring together a diverse group of pluralism leaders to assess the evolving landscape, share experiences, develop practical tools and resources, and identify opportunities for coordinated action, both reactive and proactive. The community will not seek consensus on every issue, but will build the relationships, shared understanding, and practical infrastructure needed to identify areas of genuine alignment, act together where possible, and learn what effective pluralistic action looks like in practice.