A BIGGER WE

A strategy to foster the belonging, bridging & building of collective agency needed to revitalize our democracy

A REPORT OF: The Faith, Bridging, and Belonging Program of the Freedom Together Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Challenge: U.S. Democracy of Crisis

U.S. democracy is under grave threat. The trends fueling this moment—deepening divisions, widening inequality, growing isolation—have been intensifying for some time, but we now face an acute crisis. For the first time in modern history, America stands on the precipice of an authoritarian future.

Experts tell us that we have limited time to avert that outcome and revitalize our ailing democracy. They are similarly clear that the path forward will depend on large-scale organizing—that is, the building and exercising of people power at a scale that matters. At the Freedom Together Foundation, we agree. But we wanted to know: **what do the most effective pro-democracy organizing efforts look like?**

To answer that question, we interviewed over 65 senior leaders of grassroots organizations from 28 states, as well as 25 leading democracy funders, held focus groups with top practitioners, and conducted a thorough literature review. The evidence is unequivocal: the most effective organizations share a common design composed of six elements—a culture of agency; culturally relevant on-ramps; belonging before belief; a honeycomb structure; a commitment to bridging across the commons; and a shared long-term power project. Coined Bigger We organizing, these six elements combine to generate a commitment to democracy that only comes from the transformative experience of collective human agency. These six elements form a virtuous cycle building exponential leadership at a scale to deliver some of the most spectacular change we've seen in our country.

Yet these efforts are in short supply.

OUR CONCLUSION: Bringing about a durable, pluralist democracy depends on investing more deeply in organizations that embody a Bigger We organizing approach. These

organizations invite people into experiences of belonging, bridging, and building collective agency—elements we see as vital for revitalizing our democracy. We invite funders to join us in considering how we scale this work together.

A Crisis of Agency

We define exercising agency as the act of exerting our will to remake the world around us. Exercising agency is transformative. Not only is it satisfying to bring about the change we want to see, but exercising agency also brings us closer to others. In a multiracial democracy, we have to work together—exercising collective agency across our differences—in order to make change.

Today, there is a crisis in agency in the United States. In 2024, over 90 million eligible people chose not to vote. Too many Americans experience their lives as objects of professional authority, rather than subjects with the agency to shape their own destinies. Alienation is particularly acute among young people, Black people, and the multiracial working class.

Explanations of our agency crisis abound. Over the last quarter century Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam has pointed to declining participation in civic organizations like churches and sports leagues as a driving factor.[1] Elizabeth McKenna of Harvard University and Hahrie Han of Johns Hopkins University take this analysis one step further, arguing that the crisis is not the result of a lack of demand for social participation, but, instead, due to a *lack of supply*—in other words, there are an insufficient number of organizations that explicitly cultivate collective agency.[2]

We agree. As McKenna and Joy Cushman from the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund point out, many civic and advocacy groups today tend to focus on getting people to take discrete, individual actions, such as signing online petitions, contacting public officials, or voting. While such actions can be essential tools for achieving narrowly defined goals, these actions alone fail to generate the sense of collective agency and shared leadership that is required for sustained engagement in public life.[3]

In a multiracial democracy, we have to work together—exercising collective agency across our differences—in order to make change.

We must reverse these trends by fostering organizations whose primary mission is to invite people to participate in community and experience a sense of collective agency. This requires the right organizational design.

Bigger We Organizing

The most successful organizations we interviewed aim to build a "**Bigger We**"—a diverse cross-section of society working together and exercising collective agency and power toward a shared future. These organizations nurture a sense of belonging as they pursue change. Along the way, Bigger We participants learn how to collaborate, bridge differences, share power, negotiate, compromise, and build community—foundational practices for a healthy pluralist democracy.

Bigger We organizations share six essential elements:

1. A culture of agency: They focus relentlessly on developing people as *collective actors* in public life. By organizing nearly everything they do around this, they generate commitment to democracy as people realize they have more power than they thought possible.

2. Culturally relevant on-ramps: Bigger We organizations create social events, campaigns, or even nested organizations designed to meet people where they are, appealing to groups of people based on their shared identity, experiences, or interests.

3. Place "belonging before belief"[4]: To welcome ideologically diverse participants, Bigger We organizations emphasize hospitality over ideology. They create a community rooted first and foremost in relationships and an experience of belonging.

4. A honeycomb structure: Bigger We organizations achieve scale through networking dozens of small groups together to form a powerful whole.

5. A commitment to bridging across the commons: They construct spaces in which different parts of the honeycomb can regularly come together to bridge differences. These can take the shape of a central leadership team meeting or an organization-wide retreat.

6. A shared long-term power project: Bigger We organizations undertake long-term projects to grow the shared power of the honeycomb. These projects are typically structural, ambitious, rooted in a multi-year strategic horizon, capable of delivering meaningful results, and most importantly, fueled by a base of organized people.

Recommendations

Philanthropy has a critical role to play in cultivating collective agency and restoring American democracy. The scale of the crisis calls for a wide range of strategies to strengthen civic engagement. Bigger We organizing is not the only approach, but we believe it is a vital pillar that deserves greater attention and investment.

We offer the following priorities as an invitation for conversation and collaboration with philanthropic leaders.

1. Fund Bigger We Organizing: Today, our country's most promising Bigger We organizing efforts operate on budgets that don't match the scale of their impact, let alone allow them to realize their full potential to change public life. Funders should invest in building and expanding Bigger We organizing organizations.

2. Fund Capacities that Support Organizing: Our scan revealed a need for philanthropy to support the shared capacities required for Bigger We organizations to flourish. This includes organizer development and training, research and data operations, independent revenue generation, and even new operational spines.

3. Measure What Matters: In the spirit of "what gets measured gets done," philanthropy should foster systems of measurement that track collective agency and power.

4. Go Deep, Stay the Course: Evidence suggests that the six elements of Bigger We organizing are interlocking. Philanthropy should make sustained, multi-year investments in implementing the entire design.

The decisions we make today determine our future. Imagine a $100 million per year philanthropic infusion to grow the supply of Bigger We organizing vehicles over five years. What would be the tangible results? One could imagine powerful, multiracial configurations in fifteen states supported by fifteen hundred nested teams where community leaders experience the belonging, agency, and power to strengthen their resolve to make pluralist democracy work. Talent shifting flexibly across the ecosystem to stand up new efforts, meet new challenges, and build the future we all deserve. One million people in weekly non-violent actions at a scale big enough to force a moral and economic crisis to bring about change.

Our down payment in human capacity would build a foundation for leaders in states to pass new laws to make the government more responsive, caring, and inclusive. Everyday Americans would protect each other from the abuses of corporate and elite power. A

resurgence of grassroots democratic engagement would begin to gain steam. Far from a possibility, our research suggests these are the outcomes we can expect from well designed and well resourced Bigger We organizing vehicles.

At Freedom Together, we are beginning to invest in this future, and we invite others to consider how we might advance this vision through co-investing together.

What's to Come

This report lays out the case for a generational investment by philanthropy in Bigger We organizing organizations. We include mini-case studies of a number of the most effective Bigger We organizations currently working in the field. And we lay out learnings from top researchers, practitioners, and our partners in philanthropy.

We envision this report as a resource for funders, organizations, and all those working across the organizing ecosystem. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment, and we believe everyone has a role to play in stopping our authoritarian crisis and restoring American democracy.

02

U.S. DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

The signs of our current democracy crisis long preceded recent elections. For over a decade, we have observed worsening symptoms of civic decline, including growing divisions along ideological, geographic, and educational lines; declining trust in government and in one another; falling rates of civic participation; and an increasing number of vitriolic attacks on vulnerable communities. As the problems requiring a collective solution have proliferated, from skyrocketing economic inequality to the threat of climate change, our ability to come together, find common ground, and advance meaningful solutions has cratered.

In recent years, civil society institutions have launched efforts to address democratic backsliding. A welcome proliferation of civic groups sprouted to teach tolerance, facilitate dialogue, promote understanding, bridge differences, and cultivate the skills of public life. Foundations have invested deeply in rebuilding democratic norms and promoting a culture that values equity and civility. This activity is important for rebuilding our democracy, yet nonetheless, as we write these words, our country stands on the precipice of an authoritarian future.

It's clear we need a new approach. That's why the Freedom Together Foundation set out to develop a comprehensive understanding of why democratic practice is endangered and what we can do about it. After interviewing 65 senior leaders of grassroots organizations from 28 states and 25 leading democracy funders, we zeroed in on 16 leading field practitioners who are building effective multiracial grassroots organizing power. We paired this field analysis with a thorough review of the growing body of empirical research on effective organizing and power building.

LEARN MORE
Appendix D: Recommended Readings

Our research aimed to understand the practices most essential to promoting pluralist democracy. We explored:

- How can we encourage people from all walks of life to participate in public life?
- How do we build durable bridges and belonging across cultural and ideological differences?
- How can we enable collective action that delivers tangible change in people's lives?
- What are the most effective entities currently doing this work, and what is notable about their design?
- How do we scale up the projects that work?
- How do we help more organizations become effective in this domain?

The answers we found guided our subsequent research and formed the basis of the conclusions put forth in the remainder of this report.

03

AGENCY: THE SECRET INGREDIENT IN A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY

As we explored the challenges facing democracy in the 21st century, we walked down paths that community organizers, activists, academics, and political theorists had explored long before us. We rediscovered German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt's conception of "action," the uniquely human capacity to create or initiate something new through interaction with others in the public sphere. For Arendt, it is through such public action that we both express our freedom and reveal our individuality.

We call this capacity **agency:** the act of exerting one's will or power to challenge and ultimately remake the world around us, while cultivating our truest selves. When someone claims their agency, they cross a bridge from their life as a passive victim of social structures to an active participant in their world, in collaboration with others. No longer a pawn in someone else's game, they come to see themselves as a strategist with the capacity to revise the rules of the game.

Agency cannot be a solitary attribute. The ability to make meaningful change in a complex world requires collective action, so cultivating agency goes hand-in-hand with fostering connections, building community, and building a sense of belonging. Organizations that do this the best also teach the skills of compromise, power-sharing, and navigating multiple differences in pursuit of majoritarian governance. They work toward a **Bigger We**—a democratic society in which a broad cross-section of the population is able to collaborate to forge a common future, regardless of the color of their skin, where they come from, who they love, how they pray, or what's in their wallets.

Our analysis rests on a particular understanding of civic engagement. Although being a public actor is everyone's birthright, no one is born knowing how to take a leadership role in his or her community. As Alexis de Tocqueville and John Dewey have argued, people learn what we might call the skills of democracy in communities or associations that allow them to practice agency on a regular basis. And while there are many vehicles that encourage public participation, from the Girl Scouts to the local gardening club, not all forms of collective action are the same. There is a distinct design that can produce the public action that Arendt celebrated and that can cultivate the skills necessary for a thriving pluralist democracy—a design that is in short supply across present-day America.

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This thinking relies on a decade of research conducted by Hahrie Han, of Johns Hopkins, a preeminent expert on civic engagement and democracy. Han studies the practices of organizational outliers—institutions that achieve a tremendous level of success or scale. She focuses on two kinds of outlier institutions in particular: megachurches, some drawing as many as 35,000 people in weekly attendance, achieving a scale and growth that defy conventional wisdom, and state-based community organizing groups with diverse and growing memberships that explicitly connect people across differences, create entry points to engage in civic life, and build the power to win structural change. These institutions run counter to the trend of civil society decline and offer helpful guidance for fostering agency.

04

AMERICA'S AGENCY CRISIS

Democracy is a system for members of a pluralist society to forge a common life. But it's not easy. In a robust democracy, engaging in the public arena requires hard work: listening to competing perspectives, finding points of agreement, negotiating, compromising, navigating tensions, reaching agreement, exercising collective power, and then waking up the next day and doing it all again. Committing to democracy means agreeing to follow the outcome of democratic processes, even when you don't like the results. Think of how hard it is to maintain a happy marriage, and then multiply that challenge by 340 million.

Democratic practice thus requires both a set of skills and a deep commitment to persist in the face of repeated setbacks. What generates the necessary commitment to keep people engaged as they learn these skills? In a word: agency.

"Agency is a first-order demand of democracy," notes Hahrie Han.[4] The experience of agency—learning that your voice and the actions of your community matter—is a prerequisite for developing what she calls second-order democratic practices like bridging, negotiation, and compromise.

But today, there is a crisis of agency in the United States, and as a result, our democracy is in peril.

For the most blatant indicator of our crisis of agency, consider voting, the simplest form of democratic participation. In 2024, over 90 million eligible people withheld their vote.[5] And it's not just because they forgot or didn't know how. Seventeen million of these non-voters had participated just four years prior, yet chose not to cast their vote again. Today, the most influential voting bloc in American politics is people who decide not to vote.[6]

Behind this non-participation is a growing fear that democracy doesn't work. "You told me to turn out in the election; I did, and it did nothing. Why would I believe the same thing again?" This is the top sentiment captured by communications researcher Anat Shenker-Osorio in two years of weekly focus groups and regular surveys of swing and disaffected voters in battleground states.[7]

The sense of disempowerment goes deep. Steven Teles, professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University and senior fellow at the Niskanen Center, points to a growing number of Americans who feel they have been cast as mere "objects of professional authority"–that is, they exist only on the receiving end of directives, regulation, or discipline from government and other institutions. According to Teles, this sense of being barred from one's own agency–that is, the ability to be subjects of authority–is a major contributor to the current backlash against government, universities, and other elite institutions.[8]

A growing number of Americans feel they have been cast as mere "objects of professional authority"—that is, they exist only on the receiving end of directives, regulation, or discipline from government and other institutions.

The overwhelming majority of Americans feel little to no agency in public life. Morris Fiorina, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, points to a growing divide between the "political class"–which makes up about 15 percent of the population–and the rest of America. The political class is the group that follows the news and, it turns out, is the most polarized. While this small group feels a sense of agency, the remaining 85 percent mostly feel pushed and pulled by this polarized minority.[9]

Young people may be the most alienated. Sarah Jaquette Ray, an environmental studies professor at CalPoly Humboldt who studies the role of emotions, mindsets, and collective wisdom in climate justice activism, observes that over the last decade more and more of her students enter university already feeling overwhelmed and disempowered around issues of climate change. After careful study, she attributes this trend primarily to a massive decline in feelings of collective agency, which she describes as the shared emotional state most needed for people to feel motivated to take action.[10]

The sense of powerlessness is tangible even among voting blocs traditionally considered reliable participants. The 2024 Black Values Survey, conducted by the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund (DPI), HIT Strategies, and Sojourn Strategies in 2024, found that nearly

40 percent of Black voters feel that the Black community lacks the power to impact change and that their vote doesn't matter.[11] A whopping 75 percent of multiracial working-class voters divided almost equally across party affiliation believe the government prioritizes the needs of wealthier people, according to a recent report of the Progressive Policy Institute.[12] Meanwhile, fewer than a third of those surveyed believe the government prioritizes the needs of rural and poor people.

Strategists across the ideological spectrum have attacked the problem of non-voting through mass mobilization, buying voter contact by phone, doors, and online as well as filling the airways with TV and radio ads, in the weeks before an election. In just one week in the fall of 2024, both presidential campaigns spent more than $4.5 billion on TV ads.[13] This extraordinarily high level of spending ignores a central truth: people who don't vote don't feel their vote matters.[14] In short, they don't believe they have agency to make change.

05

A CRISIS OF BELONGING

It turns out that agency creation is a supply-side problem: our country no longer provides enough opportunities for people to learn and practice collective action, like the civic associations de Tocqueville celebrated in the 19th century. Over two decades ago, Robert Putnam's groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone* cautioned that America was transforming from a nation of joiners into a nation of loners. His research showed that participation in civic organizations like churches and social clubs was essential to creating the social capital required for effective government.[15] Civic organizations are where people learn the skills of democratic citizenship, and today, most of us aren't showing up.

Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie Han take Putnam's analysis one step further. They argue that the major reason we have a crisis in agency is not the lack of demand (people do, in fact, want to participate in public life), but the lack of supply of "agency-creating vehicles." We have a shortage of institutional vehicles that go out and invite people into a particular kind of collective action experience that builds collective agency. Without them, our democracy suffers.[16]

The major reason we have a crisis of agency is not the lack of demand (people do, in fact, want to participate in public life), but the lack of supply of "agency-creating vehicles."

Philanthropy and community-based organizations, McKenna points out, tend to focus on individual actions as a proxy for wider engagement. Organizations invest massive effort in trying to encourage solitary actions—signing online petitions, sending emails to public officials, or voting. It's easier to quantify clicks than to measure belief, belonging,

and commitment. But as Joy Cushman of the Democracy and Power Innovation Fund (DPI) puts it:

> A bunch of individual actions, disconnected from a collective strategy, is not a movement. Movements that win and defend meaningful outcomes require sustained, organized leadership over months and years. The dominant metrics [of the civic engagement industry] overlook the commitments that people must make to each other and ignore the collective democratic capacities that precede the construction of powerful collective agency.[17]

In short, if we want to advance a pluralist democracy in America, we must create organizations that invite people into a wider community and allow them to experience the power of collective action. Or to put it another way, we must grow the supply of organizations that explicitly cultivate collective agency.

06

INTRODUCING BIGGER WE ORGANIZING

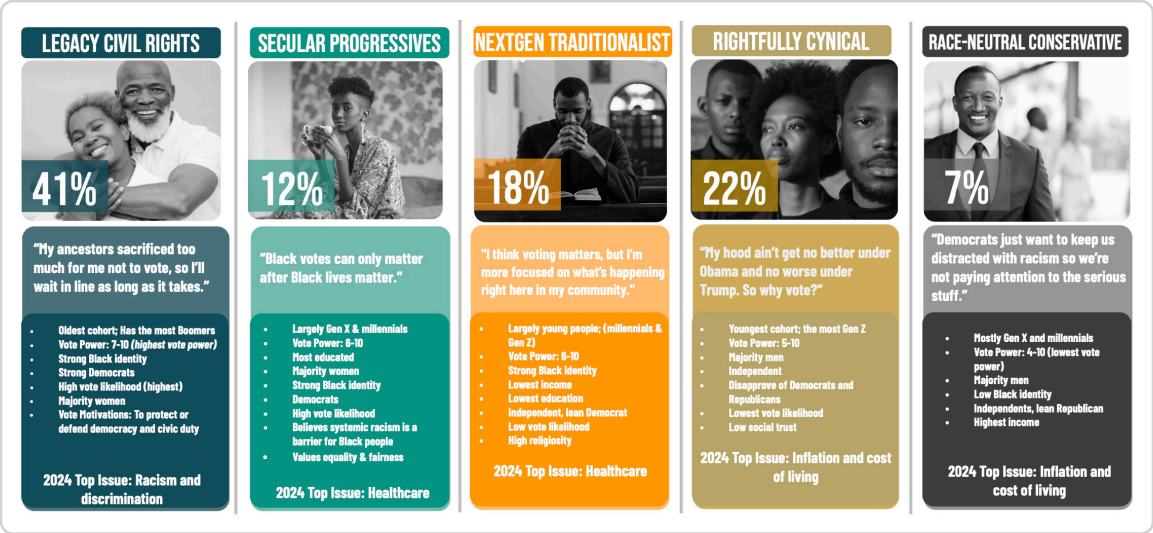
Voting strategists sometimes imagine that specific communities can drive social change. After every election, a new constituency is celebrated as the decisive social force and a particular attribute (race, class, gender, geography, or educational attainment) identified as the key predictor of civic behavior. There were the soccer moms of the 1990s, then the Rising American Electorate of the 2000s. "If only more BIPOC women or suburban white people or Latino voters had turned out on election day, our side would have won," the thinking goes. Campaign strategists, using last election's results as a guide, prescribe a "treatment" approach–TV ads, messages, door scripts–to "cure" the targeted community's underperformance. Two years later, experts name a different group as the crucial voting bloc and deliver a new prescription. Rinse and repeat.

But communities are not monolithic, and civic behavior is complex. Political scientists estimate that 85 percent of Americans have no coherent political ideology.[18] Instead, values, identity, faith, social relationships, life experience, and their complex intersections come together to yield civic action.[19] And most people, across all demographic groups, hold multiple, often contradictory beliefs simultaneously.[20] Mobilizing a target constituency rarely guarantees a reliable outcome, as organizers tend to learn the hard way. No one comes hardwired with an orientation toward public policy or social issues: as public actors, we are formed, not born.

If we want to build a functioning pluralist democracy, we need both a more nuanced understanding of the factors that motivate people and a more targeted strategy for forming people as public actors and cultivating their collective agency.

For example, when the DPI Fund conducted a national survey of the Black electorate to understand the values, issues, and motivations driving civic engagement and design

programs to generate agency, researchers identified five subcategories of the Black electorate, each with distinct issue priorities, motivating values, shared experiences, and perceptions of collective agency (see graphic below).



Not only did the results disaggregate a group that is often perceived as monolithic, but they cast doubt on the treatment approach favored by campaign consultants. Forty percent of Black voters (belonging to two subgroups–NextGen Traditionalists and the Rightfully Cynical) look on first glance like low-participation voters who might play a decisive role in an election if campaigns could turn them out. But granular research reveals that these younger voters are highly skeptical that civic participation can make a difference. No amount of door-knocking and GOTV calls will give them a sense that their franchise can change the status quo, rendering the traditional treatment approach useless.

Similarly, organizing approaches that apply an ideological litmus test to determine who has the right beliefs to join a cause or campaign are both ineffective and destructive. Such entrance exams miss a large proportion of the people who might otherwise be dedicated leaders, while creating an environment of gatekeeping, rather than welcome.

The evidence suggests the need for a new approach to politics and a different kind of organizing, one that aims first and foremost to cultivate the agency of people who might otherwise doubt their role and efficacy in the public sphere. We need to treat people as individuals (inviting their participation despite what we think we know about their politics) while creating a space that nurtures solidarity–two imperatives that can be in tension.

Bigger We organizing projects aren't just training programs that teach a leadership curriculum or the rules of democratic engagement in the abstract: they also provide people with concrete opportunities to participate in real-world projects and campaigns as thinkers, strategists, and designers. Bigger We organizers invite people into shared institutions that aspire to make a difference in the world. They intentionally focus their resources on the formation of human beings into powerful, disciplined actors with the capacity to advance the organization's vision and values. Acting on this shared vision becomes the curriculum for learning the skills of democracy: collaboration, bridging differences, sharing power, negotiation, compromise, and building community.

Ideally, then, Bigger We organizing combines individual agency-creation with a wider aspiration: establishing cross-cutting movements that can put more power into the hands of people typically excluded from public life. These movements elevate the leadership of excluded communities as they unite participants across race, faith, class, gender, and geography.

BIGGER WE: IN PRACTICE

BUILDING FREEDOM OHIO:
An On-Ramp for the Rightfully Cynical

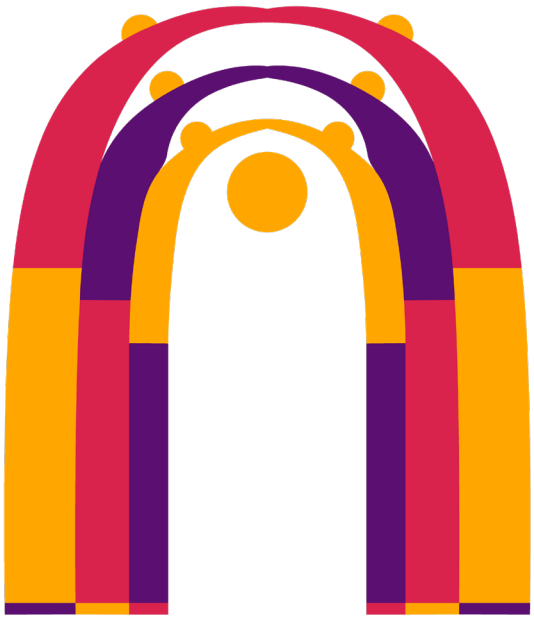
Consider the approach of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC), an organization with deep roots in working-class communities across Ohio. The OOC has long recognized that many of the state's Black citizens don't respond to the traditional voter treatment approach, but the group came upon a vehicle for addressing this challenge through a serendipitous route. In 2011, during the depths of the great recession, OOC launched a listening campaign to understand the economic challenges facing working people across the state. In Black communities in Akron, Cincinnati, and Columbus, people reported that felony records were holding them back from jobs, education, and housing.

So the OOC created an institution for Black and brown returning citizens—people coming out of incarceration—and their families who were rightfully cynical about government and its treatment of their communities. Building Freedom Ohio, led by organizer Fred Ward, is now a member institution of the OOC that develops the agency of Ohio's returning citizens. The group's leadership and staff all have first-hand experience with incarceration, and their life stories fuel their activism and engagement. The organization's members are working together to end collateral sanctions that block felony-impacted Ohioans from good jobs, education, and economic opportunities. But just as importantly, in the last decade Building Freedom Ohio has provided a leadership path for 1,567 returning citizens, many of whom are reaching back into their communities to develop a sense of agency and belonging.

07

THE SIX INTERLOCKING ELEMENTS OF BIGGER WE ORGANIZING

Not every group that engages in community organizing is doing Bigger We organizing, and not every group should. Organizations that focus on other elements of our current democratic decline are vital. But as a critical factor in the project of revitalizing our democracy, Bigger We organizing deserves deeper investment and requires greater recognition and understanding. What are the elements that define this practice? What conditions enable people to walk the path from pawn to strategist? What practices and structures foster the elusive sense of agency? How can we create opportunities for more people to participate? And how can we encourage collective action at the scale necessary to meet the challenges we face?



To answer these interrelated questions, we turn to Hahrie Han's research, which empirically identifies the attributes that the most effective collective action vehicles have in common. We tested these elements with some of the nation's top practitioners of community organizing. What follows is a summary of the common threads.

1. Culture of agency

The bottom line of Bigger We organizing is the relentless creation of people's agency. This practice is focused on *developing people to become collective actors in public life,* an approach in stark contrast to our culture of consumerism, in which you express your selfhood by buying things. And it also differs from much of contemporary activism, which, as Han points out, tends to focus on *getting people to do a thing* (come to an event, sign a petition, vote) rather than getting people to *become something together.*

Bigger We organizing offers structure, orientation, and practices designed to encourage people to make the leap from being a victim of circumstances to exercising agency over their lives in a shared power project. It asks everyday people to become heroes in their own lives. To facilitate this transformation, Bigger We organizations foster a culture of agency.

A culture of agency deliberately encourages risk-taking, because in public life, outcomes are uncertain. If you exert your agency in the public sphere, you may fail. You might ask someone to join you and they say no. You might speak out publicly and be targeted as a result. You might fight like hell and still lose an important vote. Or you might succeed, only to trigger backlash. There is no way to avoid this uncertainty, which is inherent in the complexity of public life, so an organization that nurtures the capacity of agency must invite people into collective endeavors whose outcomes are unknown.

Bigger We organizing creates opportunities like this by designing human-scaled experiences, where fledgling leaders are invited to strategize, make decisions, and take responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions. Bigger We organizing projects typically cultivate small groups and local teams to maximize the opportunities to experience agency.

An organization can't just acquire a culture of agency. Most organizers in the field learn the nuances of the work as apprentices, watching more experienced organizers craft an environment that nurtures agency. Like a garden, creating organizational culture requires constant tending. We see a powerful role for philanthropy in resourcing those gardeners. We want to be in conversation with other funders about what it would take to make that support real.

2. Culturally relevant on-ramps

Because Bigger We organizing is focused on building power that crosses lines of race, identity, class, and geography, it strategically recruits diverse constituencies. An organization may analyze demographics, economic and cultural trends, and arenas of decision-making to understand what sort of coalition is required to achieve the organization's vision.[21] Then, its leaders design culturally relevant on-ramps that invite people into the organization and give them space to exercise their newfound agency.

Increasingly, Bigger We organizing vehicles take responsibility for expanding the local organizing ecosystem beyond their existing membership by creating projects or nested organizations that serve as entry points for key constituencies. The job of the parent organization is to align the various groups so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

BIGGER WE: IN PRACTICE

Cultural On-Ramps from Arizona to Maine

Sometimes these on-ramps are wide—inviting in an entire community. Minnesota's ISAIAH created a Muslim Coalition to welcome Somali immigrants and create a separate room within the organizational house, where this important constituency could lead and exercise its agency. Sometimes these on-ramps are narrower.

When the Arizona Center for Empowerment saw how frustrated Arizonans were with the onslaught of political advertising, phone calls, and door-knocking before the 2024 election, they tried a different approach: inviting people to community events like tamale-making and frybread-making classes.

Maine People's Resource Center narrows its focus even further, seeing every front porch as a potential on-ramp. By knocking on every door, disregarding assumptions about who might align with the group's positions, the organization has recruited an impressive 32,000 dues-paying members—roughly one out of every 17 households in the state—half of whom are registered Democrats while the other half are Republicans or independents. These on-ramps are designed to meet people where they are; leverage shared experiences, identities, and social relationships; and communicate, "you belong here." Putnam refers to this as bonding capital.[22]

3. Belonging before belief

Bigger We organizing doesn't begin with ideology. It puts belonging before belief—inviting people to join who are "curious but not yet committed" and fostering social connections around shared interests or culture. In this sense, the approach is "seeker-sensitive"—it is oriented around the interests and needs of people who are interested but not yet dedicated to the organization or movement. Bigger We organizing vehicles lead with clear vision and values, while at the same time welcoming people of every kind into their community, even those who don't (yet) agree or believe.

Many organizations assume that people will only join a group if they already believe in or care about the group's specific cause or ideology. But research demonstrates the opposite: people join groups for all types of reasons (most often because someone they know invited them), and only after experiencing belonging do they adopt the group's cause. Lehigh University sociologist Ziad Munson found that nearly half the people entering the anti-abortion movement in recent decades were not anti-choice when they attended their first anti-abortion event. Instead, they joined because they felt welcomed and seen. Their views on abortion evolved *after* they joined. In other words, people have to feel connected and secure *before* they are willing to change their beliefs. Belonging is therefore embedded into all aspects of a Bigger We organization.[23]

Bigger We organizing vehicles build thick social ties. They meet the needs of community, safety, agency, and understanding by encouraging new social bonds among small groups of people from similar backgrounds. These are "short bridges" in the words of scholar and advocate john powell, connecting people across small differences. Over time, as people feel more secure in their connection to the group and learn to practice the skills of democracy in a safe setting, Bigger We organizations deliberately foster longer bridges to help people build trust and friendship across deeper chasms of race, identity, culture, and religion. This relational solidarity helps social movements resist divide-and-conquer tactics and win high stakes campaigns.

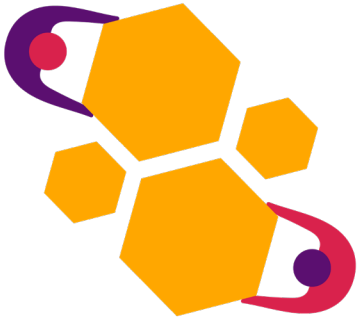
4. Honeycomb structure

Scale in Bigger We organizing emerges from a honeycomb structure, in which dozens or hundreds of small groups—built through culturally relevant on-ramps and the glue of belonging—come together to form a powerful whole. Holding the organization together are hundreds or thousands of deep relationships formed in small group conversations, projects, and activities.

The small groups are not the bottom level of a hierarchy of power, following orders from a central hub. Rather, they are self-governing entities, a terrain for participants to practice the habits, skills, and culture of agency in a safe setting.

Bigger We organizing operates according to an interdependent leadership model.[24] Every participant in the structure is both a member and a leader, taking on growing responsibility for developing strategy, recruiting new members, and acting as a co-owner of his or her small group. Member-leaders support one another to steward collective projects by identifying clear goals, defining roles, and ensuring accountability. As member-leaders recruit friends, colleagues, and neighbors, they develop their skills as leaders, and as they build the size, depth, and sophistication of their relational networks, they grow in decision-making authority.

One of the most important roles in the honeycomb is the member-organizer or "super leader," a team lead who is responsible not just for the development of his or her small group but for the honeycomb itself. Super leaders design experiences that cultivate deep, intimate connections, generate commitment to the organization even amid disagreement or challenge, and connect people directly to the whole. They lead the creation of long bridges.



Some parts of the honeycomb may be denser than others. If a super leader moves from growing their own following to coaching others in growing their followings, they might trigger a surge in new membership. A project that is just starting out might be less dense as new relational ties form.

Interdependent leadership isn't the same as distributed leadership, in which ideas are cultivated at the top, sometimes in the form of a toolkit, and then circulated to individuals at a lower level to recruit more people to carry out the project. By contrast, Bigger We projects share power across the honeycomb and only succeed insofar as they support the growing voice and agency of new participants. This is the secret sauce that allows Bigger We organizing to expand.

Most social organizations face a tension between size and community. Consider religious institutions. The bigger a church grows, the weaker the sense of community may be and the lower the level of participation. A honeycomb structure of small groups can reconcile this tension, as Malcolm Gladwell describes: "there is another approach: to create a church out of a network of lots of little church cells—exclusive, tightly knit groups of six or seven who meet in one another's homes during the week to worship and pray."[25] From the Anti-Slavery Society of 1833[26] to Alcoholics Anonymous, social movements have long used this network structure to scale up while retaining the intimacy, engagement, and accountability of small groups.

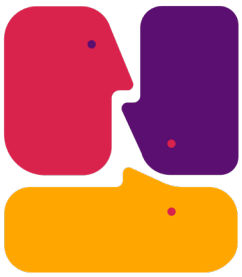
In their resource guide *1000 Churches,* Daniel Im and Ed Stetzer propose the following axiom:

> Movements do not occur through large things (big budgets, big plans, big teams). They occur through small units that are readily reproducible. If you want to see a movement, things need to be accessible and reproducible at every level. Accessible means that the average person can understand and participate in the vision without any advanced knowledge or special training. Reproducible means that the concepts are reduced from complexity to simplicity to virally spread. This is a challenge to resist the grandiose in favor of the reproducible.[27]

Bigger We organizing constantly asks the question, "What is the smallest reproducible unit in our organization, and how are we investing in that?" Scale emerges by connecting microstructures together, through constructing bridges and a common space where shared power projects develop.

5. Bridging across the commons

In order to bridge differences across a honeycomb of small groups, Bigger We organizing vehicles construct spaces for negotiation and solidarity, which we call a commons. The commons is a forum for different parts of the honeycomb to come together regularly, like a central leadership team meeting, organization-wide gathering, or annual weeklong training program. In the commons, people from across the organization build relationships with each other, unearth shared interests, deepen the analysis of the problems they face, and align around a shared power project. If the organization is a house with many rooms (to use ISAIAH's metaphor), then the commons is the kitchen or living room where everyone can gather. In Robert Putnam's formulation, the parts of the honeycomb promote bonding capital, while the commons fosters bridging capital.[28]



In the commons, people learn and practice the second-order skills of democracy: bridging, collaboration, community, negotiation, compromise, pluralism, leadership, and power.

This makes the commons sound like a dry educational experience. In fact, participating in a carefully constructed and facilitated commons can be exhilarating. Nineteenth-century sociologist Émile Durkheim referred to the "collective effervescence" that suffuses communal experiences at their most intense and creative. Hannah Arendt wrote about "the lost treasure of revolutions"–the experience of genuine public freedom people feel when they have the opportunity to claim their public voice in a community of colleagues. Hahrie Han, reflecting on her experience as a student activist, called the experience of collective action "magically intoxicating."

In the commons, people experience collective agency—learning to act with the whole. Participants have the opportunity to try on the values they aspire to live by, replacing cultural norms of scarcity, isolation, and fear with abundance, belonging, and hope. Stepping out of their daily lives as employees, consumers, or passive subjects, they have a chance to show up as creators, thinkers, and planners. Working alongside others with radically different life experiences deepens the power of the experience.

Crafting the commons requires deep care and attention to the quality of interactions between people. Bigger We organizing nurtures both the inner capacity and the outer skillset to work across diverse groups, navigate one-up/one-down dynamics, avoid pitfalls, and forge solidarity. These particular facilitation skills—critical to Bigger We organizing—are often not taught in traditional forms of organizing.

In a skillfully constructed commons, people report life-altering experiences that shift prior beliefs, forge new friendships across lines of race, identity, culture, and religion, share the personal stakes that brought them there, and inspire others to make long-term commitments.

Wider and more diverse than any small group, campaign, or community, the commons is the space that unites people across lines of difference and creates the durable commitments necessary for successful movements and a thriving democracy.

BIGGER WE: IN PRACTICE

Life-Altering Experiences in the Commons

Take, for example, the experience of Aaron, a Black man in a small town in Western Pennsylvania. Through Pittsburgh United, a grassroots organization that empowers working-class families, Aaron began his journey into public life by organizing a protest against police brutality. As he met and built relationships with others in the organization's commons, he realized that, to address his concerns, he needed to build partnerships with people different from him. This is how he ended up collaborating with Shannon, an older white woman and a former police officer of 20 years. This unlikely duo decided to run for public office as a team: Aaron won a seat on his city council and Shannon was elected mayor. The two of them are now committed to co-governing their town.

6. Shared power project

A shared power project is what animates Bigger We organizing. You can't learn collective problem-solving in the abstract; people learn collective problem-solving by actually confronting shared problems head-on. Perhaps this way of describing it is backwards: it's not that a collaborative power project is necessary for Bigger We organizing; it's that Bigger We organizing is an essential strategy for addressing public challenges. This conception grows out of the Deweyan tradition of democracy as a pragmatic and experimental method for identifying and solving common problems.

If democracy is the way a diverse community figures out how to live together, a shared power project propels agency around a common purpose. It is grounded in a problem that people across the honeycomb can see and feel, that they can solve by exercising power together. It aligns the different parts of the honeycomb toward a common future. It frames membership in the group or movement as a choice that illuminates the costs of inaction and the risks of action.

In contrast to short-term objectives like winning a policy campaign or election, a shared power project builds strategic capacity for the long term. The shared project of a Bigger We organization is typically:

- **Structural:** It aims to change underlying power arrangements. If goals are achieved, more change is possible.
- **Ambitious:** It requires the alignment of multiple constituencies (different parts of the honeycomb). No one entity could achieve the broader goal alone.
- **Rooted in a strategic horizon:** A shared power project lays out a two-year-plus strategic power trajectory for the organization.
- **Capable of delivering meaningful results:** If achieved, it would alter the material, spiritual, and social conditions of people's lives.
- **Fueled by the base:** The vehicle's source of power is a base (or bases) of people across the honeycomb who are decentralized yet operate consistently and collectively to advance a shared agenda.

The shared project aligns people around a mission so that growing their collective power, not just engaging in activity, is the central focus of the organization (becoming something, not doing something).

The organization is successful when it *becomes* a community of powerful, disciplined, public leaders who claim their agency for public action. The shared power project is the terrain where the critical elements of Bigger We organizing are experienced, learned, and honed over time. It's how these elements become manifest in the real world.

Harnessing agency and a sense of belonging to a shared power project—one that transforms the world in which participants live and makes a tangible difference in their everyday lives—is a distinguishing feature of Bigger We organizing.

BIGGER WE: IN PRACTICE

A Shared Power Project Connects Diverse Michiganders

After three years of building out its honeycomb, the organization We The People Michigan faced legislative opposition that regularly thwarted its local campaigns. To overcome it, the organization needed to win over representatives in five state legislative districts, a project that required uniting the previously autonomous parts of the honeycomb. Leaders constructed a commons, bringing together Black members in Southeast Michigan, citizens of the Lac Vieux Desert tribe, white working-class residents of the Upper Peninsula, and migrant farmworkers in Traverse City and Grand Rapids. They invited this diverse group to consider how their solo efforts had failed.

Together, the leaders hatched a plan to break the logjam, beginning with coordinated, disciplined action by every part, of the honeycomb for an entire year. A house meeting campaign created on-ramps for people affected by local issues, shaped a broad multi-issue agenda, built a sense of belonging, and clarified why people's votes mattered.

When elections rolled around, the leaders used voter turnout as a barometer of support for their issue agenda, sending an unprecedented number of new voters to the polls. Finally, We The People led weekly actions at the Capitol. At each step along the path, the ties that bound communities together grew stronger, and the power of the movement swelled. In the end, those communities changed what was possible. Among other victories, We The People won renters' rights bills that kept families in their homes.

08

HOW PHILANTHROPY CAN BUILD A BIGGER WE

Philanthropy can play a critical role in creating the conditions for a Bigger We to thrive. We've been struck by how this style of organizing moves people into action as public leaders, bridges polarizing differences, and drives meaningful social change. As a funder, we are exploring what it would mean to invest more deeply in this work—and we want to be in dialogue with others who are wrestling with the same questions. In that spirit, we share the following recommendations as a starting point for conversation about how to advance the field together.

1. Fund Bigger We organizing groups directly

Although a robust body of research supports the effectiveness of the six interlocking elements of Bigger We organizing, funding streams still prioritize the treatment or individual behavior approach. Our interviews with practitioners reveal a central tension: the demands of funders can undermine an organization's agency-cultivating mission.

In a learning cohort of Bigger We organizing leaders, Alexa Horwart, co-director of ISAIAH, called her colleagues "guardians of the realm" when describing the herculean efforts required to meet funder demands without sacrificing ISAIAH's agency-cultivating mission. Widespread applause erupted.

Today, our country's strongest and most promising Bigger We organizing efforts operate on budgets that don't match the scale of their impact, let alone reflect what is needed to transform a state's public life. Boom-and-bust funding around elections makes it nearly impossible to retain staff, make long-range plans, or grow capacity. The heavy use of funder intermediaries puts a high administrative burden on groups in exchange for fewer dollars.

To move toward a nation where collective agency is a common experience, commitment to democracy flourishes, and people trust in their government, we need more Bigger We organizations. The philanthropic sector is ideally positioned to fertilize the soil.

2. Fund capacities that support Bigger We organizing

In our scan, we noticed that strong development and capacity-building networks already exist to nurture Bigger We organizing. This suggests that one of the most meaningful roles philanthropy can play is not to create new networks or programs but to strengthen what's already in place and ensure these capacities are deeply accountable to grassroots organizations.

We are reflecting on how funders—including Freedom Together—might best support these existing networks and help Bigger We organizations develop their in-house capacities. Here are a few that stand out to us.

a. Organizer training and development

Without experienced organizers, Bigger We efforts will fail. Seasoned staff are essential to build new projects and expand old ones. But only half of new organizers stay in the field long enough to make it to this level. Staff turnover and lack of proper resources for training and development are among the most common challenges we heard from organizational leaders. We need to fund organizations at a level that keeps them growing, despite inevitable attrition.

Bigger We projects require spaces for organizers to study and experience the culture, practices, and structures that foster agency development. The Organizing Lab is among the projects that have emerged to play this role. Formed by organizers in 2020 to support state-rooted capacity building, the Organizing Lab houses four central programs:

- A lead organizer cohort to develop organizers who can design Bigger We programs, create a culture that fosters agency, and train younger organizers;
- An organizational development effort (with senior organizers as long-term consultants) that walks with staff to establish a culture of agency and build out the other critical elements of Bigger We organizing;
- Training programs for new organizers and veteran grassroots leaders; and
- An organizing track that trains childcare workers to lead efforts in their states and communities.

b. Research and data

To further the field of Bigger We organizing, funders can support research, data collection, and analysis of this approach. For example, this year Freedom Together supported a research pilot alongside four Bigger We groups to assess interventions designed to grow one of the six elements. Programs like this could become standard. In fact, much can be done to invest in in-house data capacity, including data collection, analysis, and visualization.

Improving research does not require massive investment in new tools; it means supporting human leadership and funding simple systems that have been tried and tested. For example, in partnership with the Organizing Lab, the DPI Fund has worked with state partners to develop an analytic framework to measure community agency and power.

c. Independent revenue generation

From the Civil Rights Movement to today's megachurches, U.S. mass movements have always required independent sources of money. Grassroots fundraising in the form of membership dues is a measure of agency: communities own the power they've built when they fund it. Funds raised outside of philanthropy can generate more dollars that can be applied across movement entities, liberate top talent to focus on strategy, and provide resources to scale.

Starting up a significant fundraising effort takes capital and ongoing infrastructure—two things most organizing groups have little of. We're curious about how philanthropy might walk alongside organizations as they test new approaches to building independent revenue streams. For example, Amalgamated Foundation, Solidago Foundation, and others partnered with movement leaders to launch the State Power Accelerator to pilot experiments in social enterprises, a trade association for field vendors, and a real estate development fund. And the Democratizing Philanthropy Project is helping frontline organizations build small-donor revenue they can rely on. These are promising examples of how we can support efforts to sustain Bigger We organizing projects.

d. New operational spines

In the prevailing model of non-profit leadership, the most experienced organizer on staff often gets promoted to become the new executive director or leaves to launch their own organization. In either scenario, a person with deep organizing know-how then spends at least half their time on fundraising, human resources, legal compliance, technology, finance, and accounting. This practice usually puts organizational administration into the hands of someone without a management background or strong administrative skills—a particular danger in the current moment, as powerful

actors in Washington, DC, threaten to use regulatory agencies to intimidate, harass, or persecute non-profits with opposing views.[29] More fundamentally, placing lead organizers in administrative roles robs groups of their most valuable resource: top organizing talent that has taken years to cultivate.

While this practice is a challenge across the field of social change, it is a particular obstacle for Bigger We organizing, which demands the creation of a unique culture and organizational model not taught in business schools or most non-profit spaces.

What's needed is more like an operational spine: a company or organization that can take on the back-office needs and reduce administrative burdens on organizers. In some cases, a Bigger We project itself steps up to be the operational spine—maintaining personnel and bookkeeping functions while adding new chapters, constituencies, or projects to the organizational honeycomb. Yet even in these cases, a new entity may be needed to ensure legal compliance. Community Building Strategies has played this role in Ohio. Resilient Strategies based in Oakland offers another model. As stand-alone entities, they provide administrative capacities to interconnected ecosystems of separate organizations. Both alternatives provide the administrative support to enable top talent to focus on building community connection and powerful organizations.

3. Measure what matters

We find ourselves asking: what are we counting in philanthropy, and what might change if we counted differently? After all, what we measure and fund can shape the course of our nation.

In their 2023 report "Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy," Elizabeth McKenna and Joy Cushman identify a crucial challenge for organizations, funders, and researchers:

> For years, the political industry—and the researchers and philanthropists in its orbit—focused almost exclusively on single-point-in-time participation metrics like aggregate head counts, digital impressions, contact attempts, and decontextualized voter turnout figures.
>
> Founded on implicit neoliberalism, this approach focuses only on downstream individual behavior and not on the ways that collective efforts can shape political narratives and terrains upstream. It incentivizes practitioners to build programs that yield marginal tactical changes in individual behavior, rather than building long-term collective power that can shape outcomes year after year.
>
> This type of narrow focus on market-based metrics inherited from the electoral industry distracts us from the core purpose of democracy: collective self-governance. In short, the real work of building democratic power is not being measured, only individual participation. This means strategic investments are tied to and cover only

> the tip of the iceberg in terms of what has to be done to attain more robust democratic participation. All the work behind the result is invisible, but it shouldn't be. When we make the work visible, we can talk about it across space and time, share strategies and techniques, fund it, and—crucially—improve it.[30]

In the spirit of "what gets measured gets done," we've been considering how philanthropy might shift what it measures. One of the most powerful opportunities we see is to foster systems of assessment that track what we are actually trying to achieve: collective agency and power. Appendix B breaks out the six elements of Bigger We organizing with sample metrics, designed as a helpful tool for program officers. There are other, more comprehensive resources: the DPI Fund has spent the last five years developing relevant metrics with some of the nation's leading practitioners. DPI's work supports organizations to develop in-house data and learning capacities and build a culture of real-time analysis to reorient organizations around agency cultivation. If we hope to right the democracy ship, it will take funders and practitioners learning together how to better understand, measure, and incentivize these outcomes.

LEARN MORE
Appendix B: Learning and Assessment Guide

4. Go deep, stay the course

Bigger We organizing is an essential ingredient in the recipe of democracy. The empirical evidence demonstrates that the six elements that generate the agency, commitment, and power to make democracy work are interlocking. Bigger We vehicles are committed to implementing the entire design, and philanthropy should be, too.

It takes ten years or more for Bigger We organizing to transform a state's public arena.[31] The good news is there are many strong efforts well on their way. These vehicles will develop the leadership necessary to create new agency-generating organizations. Philanthropy should consider making long-term investments and providing multi-year general operating support to Bigger We projects.

09

CONCLUSION:
WHY BIGGER WE ORGANIZING? WHY NOW?

By now, you might be thinking: this is a great idea for making change in a small community, but how can we scale it up enough to make a difference at the national level?

The structure of Bigger We organizations is designed to solve the problem of scale. The traditional model of distinct 501(c)(3) organizations for each project or constituency base essentially puts a cap on their impact. But the honeycomb and operational spine approaches make it easier for Bigger We organizations to expand and grow. A successful Bigger We project can add more small groups, extend into a nearby suburb, or offer an institutional on-ramp for a new constituency.

Imagine a philanthropic collaboration that commits $100 million a year for five years to advance the four Bigger We funding strategies. By 2035, this investment could produce powerful multiracial configurations in 15 states. These organizing projects could engage one million people in weekly actions to advance the vision and values of their Bigger We vehicles, but more importantly, they could support 1,500 super leaders coaching 1,500 teams (each one part of a honeycomb) and producing 15,000 champions of democracy, acting together in public life.

The organizations would raise millions of dollars annually in grassroots funds, because many of their most active participants would be financial co-owners making monthly contributions. Each state would have an administrative spine that could provide operational support to entities advancing the shared mission. Talent could shift flexibly across the ecosystem to stand up new efforts, meet new challenges, and expand where needed.

Each state-based group would track its progress using a shared, real-time data system that would allow practitioners to quantify and understand their impact, make hard decisions, and adjust to changes. Strategic capacities like communications, research, and voter engagement would be embedded in these organizations, amplifying the power of the base and contributing to a surround-sound effect that reaches every corner of each state.

By 2035, 325 skilled organizers would be working across 15 states, plus another 50 senior organizers nationwide who would collaborate with each other to support the training and development of more junior organizers, anchoring a culture of agency in each state-level operation.

Thanks to this human capacity, leaders in these states would pass new laws to make the government more responsive to the needs of communities, particularly those who feel most disaffected. The public arena would be more vibrant and representative at the municipal, county, and state levels. Organized communities would increasingly ensure their statehouse and federal representatives are accountable for the people and defend the interests of everyday Americans against corporate and elite power. We could usher in a resurgence of grassroots democracy and civic engagement.

This vision need not be a dream. The roadmap we lay out represents a realistic projection based on two decades of experience in Bigger We organizing and a rigorous assessment of the state of the field. In a moment when the nation's democracy is in real and imminent danger, this organizing model holds out hope of a revitalized social world in which everyone can participate and an alternative future that is constrained only by the limits of our imagination. Philanthropy, as always, has a critical role to play. By investing in Bigger We organizing, we believe we can help put our country back on a better course—together.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Methodology and Participants

The Bigger We project consisted of four main activities. First, we conducted 65 in-depth interviews with senior leaders in grassroots organizations spanning 28 states. Our outreach focused on efforts in under-resourced geographies, often overlooked by progressive philanthropy: projects located in non-battleground states, small towns or rural regions, Native American reservations, and/or more ideologically diverse parts of the country. Second, we convened a learning cohort of 16 leading organizing practitioners in the field who are actively working to build multiracial grassroots organizing power. Third, we conducted a literature review of the growing body of research on effective organizing (see Appendix D). And finally, we conducted conversations with 25 leading democracy funders.

We made every attempt to talk with a broad cross section of people and organizations, but naturally there were many we were unable to reach. Thus this report is a starting point, not an ending point.

Many thanks to the people we interviewed for this work, who, despite being extremely busy, generously shared their insights. The wisdom here is theirs; any errors are ours.

Appendix B. Learning and Assessment Guide

The purpose of this guide is to demystify the elements of Bigger We organizing and offer non-practitioners tools to better understand, measure, and incentivize this distinct form of organizing. This is by no means a comprehensive list. Rather we offer these examples as a starting point.

Culture of Agency

Agency creation requires a break from the dominant practice of paid staff orchestrating individuals around a set of discrete tasks and instead focuses on creating the conditions required to enable people to take responsibility, assume greater leadership, and act together.

SAMPLE MEASURES

- Number of leaders with clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- Laddered leadership roles
- Percent of meetings (both collective and individual) devoted to development by training leaders in propositions, coaching, reflection, accountability, training, strategy, etc.
- Multi-year plans offering leadership pathways
- Structures and habits that facilitate top-level organizers and leaders to strategize, make decisions, and act in the face of uncertainty

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell me about the role of volunteer leaders?
- How about the role of staff?
- What does the leadership pipeline look like? What are the expectations?
- How are decisions made? Who participates in strategy development?
- How does your organization measure growth up the leadership ladder?
- What are the organization's top-level volunteers responsible for?
- Do leaders make public commitments to the group?

Culturally Relevant On-Ramps

The central unit of measurement here is the recruitment of human beings and their demonstrated capacity and commitment to act with others in agency in the civic arena.

SAMPLE MEASURES

- Number of chapters
- Number of teams
- Number of new members each year
- Number of house meetings
- Number of people reached in listening sessions every two years

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- What are the different entry points for leaders in your organization?
- How do organizations' programs recruit new active members?
- How are those members growing their participation over time?
- Are members inviting new people into democratic practice?
- How are on-ramps culturally relevant and why?
- What is the coalition your organization is working to build? Why?
- How does your organization cultivate belonging (bonding capital)?
- How are these efforts tracked and evaluated?

Belonging Before Belief

This requires an organizational culture that truly prioritizes relationships and can exist in the never-ending tension between holding clear values while making room for people of diverse viewpoints.

SAMPLE MEASURES

- Number of people engaged in broad-based listening campaigns at individual meetings or house meetings each year
- Number of people engaged in team meetings each year
- Rate of retention of members over time
- Qualitative metrics to track growth in belief
- Growth in skill of working across difference

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- What is the smallest replicable unit of the organization? How is this supported?
- How does your organization welcome people who might not yet be committed to the organization's values and vision?
- Tell me about what you've learned about how leaders shift worldviews or grow beliefs over time? How might this be measured?

Honeycomb

The depth of the honeycomb is measured by the strength of the smallest reproducible unit and the strength of the leadership scaffolding where scale emerges.

SAMPLE MEASURES

- The core metric is the density of the honeycomb. Density is measured by the depth and scale of member commitment and leadership. Common measures (which require both careful data-keeping and analysis by a qualified researcher) include:
  - Density of the relational network nodes (leadership and followership)
  - Thickness of bonds among and across the scaffolded containers
  - Clearly defined bases, with teams of volunteers responsible for base development
- Presence of cross-base structures (like central leadership teams or weeklong trainings) in which decision making and power flow both ways, demonstrating alignment and ownership of collective action
- Number of leaders at various levels of leadership (the following levels are typical for Bigger We efforts):
  1. Number of member organizers or super leaders
  2. Number of volunteer leaders with followings
  3. Number of active members
  4. Number of supporters or prospective leaders
- Event participation (the single most important information to track for leader development)

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell me about how your organization is structured. Why?
- What kinds of events build commitment and encourage people to return?
- Tell me about the role and responsibilities of member volunteers? Staff?
- Tell me about the development pathway for grassroots leaders in your organization?

Bridging Across the Commons

Organized bases regularly align their interests with each other to act collectively in their power arena. Relational solidarity is built through experiences.

SAMPLE MEASURES

- Frequency of meetings of cross-honeycomb teams
- Visibility of organizational values, vision, and cultural norms across the honeycomb and among volunteer leaders
- Transparency of internal communication system to share responsibility and resolve conflicts
- Qualitative and quantitative data measuring shifts in beliefs and behavior in relation to exposure to the organization
- Visibility and thickness of networks of solidarity

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Who is involved in collective decision making and how is it carried out?
- How does your organization balance the tension between autonomy and collective action?
- Tell me about your civic education program. How are people formed for collective action and solidarity?
- Tell me about how your organization bridges across differences.
- Tell me about how your organization manages tension, disagreement, and conflict.

Shared Power Project

A long-term power play that if achieved will shift the power dynamics where the organization operates and make it possible to leverage power to drive even more change.

SAMPLE MEASURES

Much has been written about how to assess community power and impact. Here are a few common measures:

Policy change

- Passing or blocking a bill or law
- Implementation of a policy win
- Changes that result from policy implementation (e.g. drop in violence, incarceration)
- Securing administrative action

Setting the agenda

- Aligning other bases of power around a shared objective
- Recruitment or placement of a leader in a position of public authority
- Shaping budget priorities

Worldview

- Public shift in narrative
- Adoption of narrative, values, or frame by media and civic leaders

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Many groups are clear on their next defensive or offensive battle and are able to confidently name an issue, mobilization moment, or upcoming policy fight. These are tactics, not shared power projects. Here are a few questions to surface if a shared power project is part of an organization's strategic orientation:

- What would it take for your bases to set the agenda and deliver that agenda in the next five to ten years?
- Who are the most influential actors in the arena where decisions are made (bonus if non-governmental actors are named)?
- What entities are you building alignment with?
- If you were playing chess on the power board, what would your next three power moves be and why?

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Appendix C. Incentivize Bigger We Outcomes

There are many ways philanthropy can rethink incentives to support the growth of Bigger We organizing. The following list is a starting point to prompt a wider and deeper exploration. We encourage continued exploration and intentionality to align incentives to match desired outcomes.

▶ **To incentivize a culture of agency,** reward organizations that build a culture of agency and fund organizations committed to developing one. It isn't easy for an outsider to tell if an institution is actually cultivating agency among its members, but there are some signs. These organizations tend to:

- Assign clear roles and responsibilities to grassroots leaders,
- Hold trainings that prepare leaders to develop new skills and take on new commitments,
- Have a system of discipline that holds leaders accountable for carrying out their responsibilities,
- Lay out a well-defined ladder of growth for leaders, from attending their first meeting to becoming a super leader who guides strategy,
- Track retention and development of leaders,
- Grow their base from one year to the next, and
- Let their leaders decide collective goals and strategy together.

▶ **To incentivize culturally relevant on-ramps,** support the expansion of successful agency-generating vehicles into new constituencies or geographies. Our sector has a tendency to over-value novelty, leaving the movement with a proliferation of under-resourced, competitive, small-scale nonprofits. Instead, creating multiple projects under one roof encourages alignment, removes administrative burdens, and fosters collaboration. It also deepens investment in organizations that have proven their ability to develop leadership and cultivate agency.

▶ **To incentivize belonging before belief,** reward large-scale listening campaigns that create entry points for people outside the existing constituency, generate bonding capital, and provide opportunities for scaled leadership growth over time.

▶ **To incentivize strong and dense honeycombs,** offer matching funds for growth in paid members. Support organizations to develop in-house data capacities to track event participation and levels of leadership, create immersive fellowships for advanced leaders and organizers to learn the craft, and/or explore a small group network model.

▶ **To incentivize bridging in the commons,** support organizations to develop collective decision-making capacities across constituencies or hold intensive multi-day trainings that anchor agency culture and build cross-racial solidarity.

▶ **To incentivize shared power projects,** encourage seasoned Bigger We practitioners to remain in state and in new roles after big wins. Seek opportunities to leverage their talent, networks, and experience in the next phase *in their geography,* rather than moving to a national position.

Appendix D. Recommended Readings

Black Values Survey 2024
Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, HIT Strategies & Sojourn Strategies

Building Structure Shapes: What Structure Reveals about Strategy from Six Movement Organizations in Transition
Melanie Brazzell, Realizing Democracy Project, The P3 Lab, 2021

Comparison of Lone Wolf, Mobilizing, and Organizing
Hahrie Han

Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What It Means for America
Paula Ramos, Penguin Random House, 2024

Good Reasonable People: The Psychology of America's Dangerous Divide
Keith Payne, Viking Press, 2024

It Takes Ten Years: The Organizational Sources of State-Level Power
Elizabeth McKenna & Bethany Wood, MPP, June 2024

Latinos Rising: Redefining Power, Inside Arizona's Most Comprehensive Voter Study
Arizona Center for Empowerment, Data for Social Good, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, Sojourn Strategies, 2024

No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age
Jane McAlevey, 2018

Organizing was the Heartbeat: The Ten Year Path to Progressive Governance in Minnesota
Laura Flynn, Win the Midwest, 2024

Power Metrics: Measuring What Matters to Build a Multiracial Democracy
Joy Cushman & Elizabeth McKenna, Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 2023

Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First Century America
Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna & Michelle Oyakawa, University of Chicago Press, 2021

Rules to Win By
Jane McAlevey, 2023

Stories of Democracy Realized; Becoming, Building Belonging
Hahrie Han, Tanner Lecture Series, Harvard Kennedy School, April 2024

The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again
Robert Putnam, Simon & Schuster, 2020

Understanding Strategic Capacity In Constituency-Based Organizations
Jane Booth-Tobin, Kal Munis, Lynsy Smithson-Stanley & Hahrie Han, The P3 Lab, 2021

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