



## **Empowering Democracy Initiative Framework: A Guide for Power-Shifting Policies**

This document is intended to help policy leaders think through how policy can durably shift social, political, and economic power.

Pro-democracy leaders lack a common vocabulary for and a consistent practice of talking about power in this way. As part of the Empowering Democracy Initiative, this document aims to foster a common framework for how policy leaders can design and deliberate over different policy proposals on the basis of their power-shifting impacts.

### *Goals and values*

The goal of the Empowering Democracy Initiative is to shift the landscape of power—political, economic, and social—in support of a more inclusive, responsive, sustainable, and egalitarian multiracial democracy. Our vision of democracy is one in which all Americans have the freedoms, protections, voice, and material resources to thrive and participate as equal citizens in our government and society. We recognize that such a vision of democracy requires both a dramatic expansion of civic and political rights, but also social and economic rights, since full citizenship and meaningful democratic participation require economic wellbeing and security. We also recognize that such an expansive vision of democracy has never been fully realized for all Americans, even as social movements and moments of reform, such as during the First Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the Great Society, made important, though incomplete and contradictory, moves towards such a vision.

## *What we mean by power*

By power, we mean the ability to work collectively to achieve our shared vision of democracy by reshaping political, economic, and social conditions. We prioritize organizational and collective power, rather than individual power. And we stress the [relational](#) nature of power: power is always defined in relation to those you are working with, and against.

The resources that groups convert into collective power (and policy wins) include:

- Organized people and their time and effort (including as consumers and workers)
- Material resources, including money and in-kind resources
- Political access (information, standing, and influence)
- The design of policies
- The design of institutions in and out of government
- Social standing, status, and identity
- Narrative frames

These resources often build on one another, with organized groups strategically translating one form of power into another. Groups can, for example, organize people, and as part of that process, raise funds from those people, and then use people power and money to make demands of the government, including access to political agendas.

Our focus on collective power reflects [research](#) showing that durable changes in power generally require changes in organizations and institutions, not just a focus on individuals. It also reflects the fact that efforts to meaningfully engage individuals in politics—especially [marginalized communities](#)—generally require [strong intermediary organizations and institutions](#) that can amplify those communities' voice and clout in politics. It reflects learning from the [successful strategies](#) of the anti-democracy movement to intentionally attack the organizational and institutional pillars of the pro-democracy movement over the past five decades, including organized labor, civil rights groups, and tort lawyers. And it reflects the fact that rebalancing organizational and collective power can unlock more individual freedom and self-determination.

Not all organized interests build collective power, however, and we are focused primarily on groups that represent real bases of members—not just "bodiless heads" as Marshall Ganz has called many grassroots advocacy groups—and possess the capacity to engage those members in politics. Mass membership organizations have members who are meaningfully involved, not just names on an email list, and these organizations [engage](#) in meaningful relationships with their membership, not just transactional and episodic

mobilization during election time. Nevertheless, well-resourced professional advocates can also play a crucial and complementary "insider" role in the pro-democracy coalition, but without direct accountability to affected constituencies and communities, grassroots advocacy cannot organize bottom-up, independent political power.

By understanding power through a collective and organizational lens, we think about power-shifting for democracy as *building and empowering organizations and institutions that underpin and support a more responsive, egalitarian democracy and undermining or eliminating organizations and institutions that challenge such a vision of democracy.*

Our focus on collective and organizational power-shifting means that some policies, while important and necessary, are not in scope for this project. For example, efforts to expand customer feedback from individuals engaging with the government could improve the delivery of government services, but does not shift collective power.

Similarly, efforts to expand individual rights or wellbeing on their own without organizational or institutional changes do not shift collective power. For example, as important as the Biden-Harris Administration's temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit was for reducing child poverty and giving families more financial autonomy, it did not shift collective or organizational power for the recipients of the new benefit. Recipients were not organized into new mass membership organizations that could mobilize collective action. Indeed, the lack of such collective organizing can help to explain why the policy was not ultimately extended or made permanent. A directly delivered benefit or tax break can only build collective political power if [those who benefit are organized](#) in ways that emphasize shared interests, struggles, and interdependence on democratic responsiveness to mutual needs.

A final central premise of the framework is that defending democracy against authoritarian threats and rebuilding a more expansive vision of democracy will require *both* efforts to build the power of communities to demand, secure, and sustain freedoms, rights, voice, and protections, *as well as* efforts to dismantle opposing sources of authoritarian power, including those entrenching economic, racial, and gender inequalities. Failing to reckon with both the need for power building *and* power deconstruction will preserve a status quo dominated by entrenched elites whose influence challenges a vision of inclusive and responsive government and cements existing social hierarchies.

The stark reality is that significant social and economic change cannot be achieved without explicitly disrupting current systems of power and creating new conditions consistent with egalitarian democracy.

### *Examples of collective power-shifting policies*

Below, we list examples of policies that could build collective power for democracy, along with the politically important resource(s) policymakers would be shifting:

| <b>Collective power-shifting policy</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>Resources built up or deconstructed</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Efforts to facilitate new collective organizing into durable organizations, such as policies that would enable new tenant unions, and unions or mass membership groups representing the collective interests of Medicaid or EITC beneficiaries</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increasing base of mobilized people contributing time, effort, and financial resources to organizations</li><li>• New revenue streams through business models that government action enables</li><li>• New revenue streams through government funding or contracts for services that new organizations deliver</li></ul>                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Efforts to weaken the ability of companies to use government resources to undermine workers' rights, such as by barring companies that violate workers' rights from receiving government grants and contracts</li></ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Diminished revenue streams from the federal government</li><li>• Potentially sector-wide effects to the extent that high-profile examples of companies being barred from federal funds changes business practices in a sector</li></ul>                                                                                                               |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Efforts to build worker groups and community-based organizations into the design, delivery, and regular reassessment and revisions to labor protections and social programs</li></ul>                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increasing political access for worker groups &amp; mass membership organizations</li><li>• Increasing opportunities for organizing base of mobilized workers or beneficiaries to contribute time, effort, bargaining power, and financial resources to organizations</li><li>• New revenue streams through government funding or contracts</li></ul> |

### *Power-shifting for democracy is relevant across many policy areas*

Crucially, policymakers and advocates in many different domains might consider a power-shifting lens on their work. Labor policy practitioners and labor leaders have long thought about labor policy not just as a tool for addressing specific economic issues but building durable organized worker power to support democracy. The framers of the New Deal-era National Labor Relations Act explicitly [linked](#) the right to form unions to the health of American democracy.

But power-shifting to support democracy is also relevant in other areas that might, on their faces, seem less relevant to the democratic health of the country. Consider the case of public health policy. Efforts to [curb](#) the economic influence of the tobacco industry through litigation as well as federal, state and local regulation (such as banning smoking in restaurants, bars, and public transportation and barring advertisements to children) undermined the business models on which the tobacco industry depended and helped to build a social stigma around their products. Collectively, those changes not only reduced sales of a harmful product. They also reduced [the political influence](#) of a very powerful economic sector that was investing in a variety of organizations that were in turn seeking to undermine democracy by making it harder for workers to organize or for individuals to vote.

### *Collective power-shifting, policy feedback loops, and deliverism*

Researchers, policymakers, and pundits have all been engaged in a lively debate about "[deliverism](#)", or how policymakers can craft policies that will register with individuals and increase the likelihood that those individuals will credit the policymakers for enacting such policies. This concept is similar to the idea of "[policy feedback loops](#)," or the idea that policy design can reshape politics. These approaches to policymaking can build collective power, but do not necessarily involve building collective power.

For example, some deliverism approaches to policymaking in the Biden-Harris Administration assumed that delivering tangible policy "wins" to individual voters—like the expanded Child Tax Credit, or new infrastructure investments for construction workers—would make those voters more favorable towards the Administration and more likely to turn out to vote in subsequent elections. But these approaches do not shift *collective power*, and their [failure to register](#) in the mass public is arguably due to the lack of organizational or institutional power shifting.

Instead, consider the approach to other policies in the Biden-Harris Administration that sought to build union power or community organization power through infrastructure

investments — for example, through union apprenticeship preferences (preferring contractors that pledge to use union-trained labor) or requirements for community benefit agreements (legally binding agreements between contractors and local communities that specify provisions such as the use of local or union labor, minimum wages and benefits, and community input). These approaches do attempt to shift *collective power* and are more likely to be successful at power shifting over the long run.

This perspective does not mean that substantially expanded cash transfers to American families could not be power-shifting. But it does mean that cash benefits need additional policy infrastructure to shift power. To take one example, an improved Child Tax Credit could be more than just a cash transfer; it could build lasting political power and foster a collective identity among Americans with children. With sufficient federal funding, access to eligible families, opportunities for meaningful political engagement, and training, civil society navigators—trusted local organizations and partners enlisted to educate communities about the credit, assist with enrollment, and connect beneficiaries to political opportunities that amplify their voices—could have organized parents to view the credit as a right worth fighting to keep and connected the benefit to fights over democracy and democratic responsiveness.

Many options exist for such an approach, from subsidizing existing groups to conduct outreach and enrollment alongside their community organizing efforts to establishing a formal “parents’ union” with bargaining rights with the federal government. Alternatively, the existing network of Community Action Agencies, founded as part of the Great Society’s commitment to local community engagement, could be used to coordinate nationwide adoption of families’ new benefits, or a “Civic Health Services Corps” could be modeled after Teach for America, placing college graduates in underserved communities as public servants dedicated solely to the effective delivery of federal benefits, such as the CTC. These options differ in legislative and political challenges, but each could strengthen collective power for American families. Regardless of how effective a more generous and visible CTC may be in boosting economic wellbeing, the tax perk cannot by itself shift collective power.

The bottom line is that policy design matters, and approaches to policies that focus on collective and organizational sources of power are likely to be more successful at durably shifting power relations than those that only focus on individuals.

#### *A power-shifting flow chart*

To help policymakers and policy advocates think about how to design power-shifting measures, we offer the following set of planning questions:

Step 1: Who has power today and who should have power in the future?

- What are the key actors and institutions in this policy area, and what types of resources (e.g. financial, organizational, legal, political, symbolic) are most relevant to political power in this policy area?
- What would a more balanced structure of power in this policy area look like?

Step 2: How will this measure be designed?

- Will this measure shift **resources** towards or away from organizations or institutions? Resources could include:
  - The creation of new organizations or institutions (e.g., a new worker group)
  - Revenue streams (e.g., government contracts or the ability to collect revenue streams from other actors, like membership dues)
  - Ability to organize or retain members (e.g. access to potential member information)
  - Legal entitlements, protections, or claims (e.g., ability to bring suits in court)
- Will this measure change **market structures** in ways that create or foreclose opportunities for market participants? Will this measure alter incentives for market actors? How can we boost incentives for actors to behave in the ways that would rebalance power relations? Such changes could include:
  - Creating new markets
  - Eliminating existing markets
  - Changing the subsidies (implicit or explicit) received by market actors
  - Banning, permitting, incentivizing, or disincentivizing market actions
- Will this measure change the **access that actors have to the government**? How can we boost access for actors who lack it, and limit access for actors who have too much access? Such changes could include
  - Incentives or requirements to consult particular organizations
  - Expanding or retrenching government offices or programs that could be leverage points for organizations to advance political goals

- Will this measure change the **narrative and symbolic landscape** in ways that help or hinder organizations' efforts to win in politics? Such strategies could include:
  - Creating and propagating political identities
  - Creating and propagating political narratives or frames

Step 3: How can your policies minimize and mitigate political opposition?

- What steps will disrupt status quo power dynamics grounded in concentrated vested interests in order to reduce opposition?
  - Does the measure, once implemented, cause previously neutral or opposed groups to become supporters?
  - Does this measure send broader signals to a sector, including private sector actors, and organized political actors? In particular, does this measure encourage anticipatory reactions and adjustments?
  - Does this measure send broader signals to a sector, including private sector actors, and organized political actors, about how the government works?
- How will this measure strengthen a broader pro-democracy coalition?
  - How does the measure minimize or mitigate internal conflicts over funding and agenda space? What tools or features help build solidarity among pro-democracy allies focused on different issues?
  - Does the measure create coordination mechanisms, such as venues and processes for stakeholder bargaining?
  - Does the measure encourage engagement between community organizers and grassroots advocates?

Step 4: How can your policies be made more durable?

- Does this measure incorporate strategies to lock in shifts in power by scaling impact and attempting to make shifts less reversible?
  - Does this measure encourage or require organizations to change their underlying business or organizational models, for example, by changing revenue streams, changing staff, or changing investments?



- What steps would be necessary to reverse this measure (including both political and legal steps)? How can the political and economic costs of reversal be increased?
- Does the measure invest in strengthening already-aligned groups and actors?

Step 5: How will your policies be executed?

- Based on the structure of the power-shifting measure, are there pieces of design or implementation that rely on other actors—for instance, state or local government partners, private sector actors, media, legal actors, or organizers—and what steps are required to ensure those pieces are carried out effectively? How can design of the measure be done collaboratively, where appropriate, to ensure co-implementation?
  - For example, if successful power-shifting depends on new organizing, how can the organizers be partners in co-design of the measure, and how can you ensure the organizers have necessary resources (e.g., [people-centered policy](#))?
  - Similarly, if power-shifting requires creating new government infrastructure or capacities, what steps are necessary to create those capacities?
- What institutions, norms, and processes (“ways of operating”) may need to change to facilitate the implementation of this measure?

*A democracy damaging example: the Trump-Vance attack on higher education*

As an example of how to apply this framework, consider the Trump-Vance Administration attack on universities and colleges as an example of power deconstruction.

Working backwards, the goals of this offensive appear to be (1) reducing the financial, cultural, and social power of institutions of higher education; (2) chilling or stymying political speech by students and faculty, especially international students and faculty, and the ability of higher education to serve as an independent pillar of civil society; (3) embedding pro-MAGA values in course offerings, hiring priorities, and student management; and (4) ending the commitment universities have made to promoting racial equity for historically underrepresented minorities in their student bodies and faculties.

The governmental levers for deconstructing the power of institutions of higher education include the following:

- Leveraging freezes, clawbacks, or terminations to federal grants and contracts to force concessions from universities in terms of internal university operations
- Expansive and arbitrary detention of international students and faculty
- Halting or substantially curtailing the recruitment of future international students and faculty
- Using the federal accreditation process to force compliance (with accompanying threat of the loss of federal aid for students)
- Pressuring universities to change internal governance structures, including eliminating offices promoting racial equity and inclusion and reducing faculty and student voice in governance
- Aggressive use, and abuse, of federal civil rights and other legal authorities to force concessions from universities by wielding threat of litigation, discovery (including production of internal documents), and donor pressure
- Threats to use changes to the tax code and tax enforcement (e.g., to end tax exempt status in general for specific colleges or universities, or to require ending consideration of race to maintain tax exempt status)

Of particular note are the ways that the Trump-Vance Administration is attempting to make these changes scale across the whole sector of higher education and make these changes harder to reverse, even if specific measures are paused or overturned by the courts (as the example of Harvard has made clear):

- Pressuring universities to change internal business models that have grown dependent on federal funding and international student enrollment
- Pressuring universities to change internal staffing, organizational, and governance structures (e.g., firing staff or faculty; shuttering DEI offices; and reducing faculty governance)
- Using high-profile targeting of particular institutions (Harvard and Columbia) to send a signal across the whole sector to encourage anticipatory compliance

The offensive has benefited from foreclosing chances for universities and colleges to respond collectively:

- Creating competitive pressures to poach top domestic and international students and faculty from high-profile targets and likely targets (Ivy League schools, blue states, etc.)
- Rulemaking by bilateral deals—not sector-wide policy—forces individual university responses to lawsuits, investigations, fines, external oversight, and internal reforms, among other demands from the Administration, rather than collective action.

The offensive against universities and colleges has also benefited from coordination with other actors outside of the federal government, including the following:

- Conservative donors and trustees at universities (e.g. Columbia) allied with the Trump-Vance Administration and the MAGA movement
- Right-wing muckraking media that creates hooks for further federal action and advance supportive narratives, and which can get picked up in broader mainstream media ecosystem
- Members of Congress who can use hearings, subpoenas, and other bully pulpit strategies to amplify concerns with universities and colleges that create hooks for further federal action and advance supportive narratives
- Members of Congress who can threaten further legislative changes to amplify or lock-in threats from the Administration (e.g. tax exempt status) and create further pressures on universities and colleges (e.g. endowment tax; curbing financial aid payments to universities and colleges)
- Conservative legal advocacy groups that bring lawsuits against universities and colleges that create hooks for further federal action and advance supportive narratives

To engage in this offensive against universities and colleges, the Trump-Vance Administration has changed a number of norms and processes within the federal government , including the following:

- Leveraging widespread freezes or bans on federal funding to particular institutions for expressly political purposes
- Interjecting political appointees into the grantmaking process in order to advance political goals unrelated to the purpose of the grant
- Reorienting the civil rights enforcement capacity of the federal government away from protecting minority groups towards entrenching existing racial hierarchies
- Politicizing administration of the tax code and weaponizing tax code enforcement and regulation against specific actors
- Aggressively using all legal channels to pressure universities on a range of issues (e.g. civil rights, counter-terrorism, false claims)