

The Ideological Traffic Jam + the River That Can Break It:

Funder Companion Guide

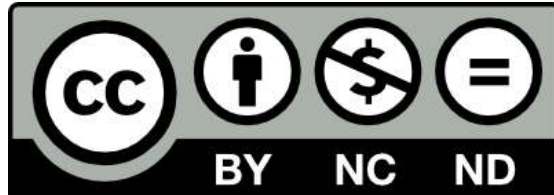
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Introduction

There is a long tradition of pro-democracy organizing in the United States. The most effective movements demonstrated that people from different communities, motivated by different values, could work together to advance justice.

For example, the Civil Rights Movement wasn't just about ending segregation. It was also a democratic struggle for constitutional rights, a Christian moral crusade against the sin of racism, an anti-colonial liberation movement, and a labor struggle for economic justice. The Civil Rights Movement was sustained by organizations that came together at critical moments to advance democracy despite having different analysis, and different agendas for their own work. This is an example of how many springs fed a river of change for civil rights.

The recent rise of authoritarianism is a major threat to democratic institutions and values. People from widely diverse backgrounds are deeply concerned and are looking for ways to resist. But those of us committed to defending democracy face a second, hidden challenge.

You've felt it. The frustration of watching movements that should be winning but end up fighting each other instead. The exhaustion of coalitions that fracture the moment they start to come to scale. The sinking feeling that we have the numbers, the passion, and the arguments, yet we're still losing ground.

There's a Reason for That. And There's a Way Out.

In *The Ideological Traffic Jam and the River That Can Break It*, Scot Nakagawa of the 22nd Century Initiative describes the hidden challenge created by competing ideologies, global anxiety about an uncertain future, and the limitations of traditional coalition politics. He makes the case for creating a healthy ecosystem of organizations (or "springs") that maintain their ideological autonomy yet join together in a "river" of mass mobilization when democracy is threatened.

This Funder Companion Guide is an introduction to the springs-to-river framework for funders at the forefront of supporting pro-democracy work. It also points to resources that can help funders refine their strategy for the current moment.

Together, we can resist authoritarianism. The window is still open, but it's closing. Join the conversation.

The Ideological Traffic Jam

We live in a time of immense complexity. The pace of change in the Information Age is generating deep anxiety. Mass migration has challenged our sense of national identity, culture, and sovereignty. Extreme wealth polarization has made people profoundly insecure, whether employed or not. The way we consume information – from news to popular culture – has become so fragmented we're not even living in the same cultural terrain anymore.

Our efforts to make sense of this rapidly changing reality have resulted in ideological whiplash. In recent years we've seen the promotion of multiple frameworks for understanding our modern world: neoliberal market fundamentalism, identity-based social justice movements, nationalist populism, libertarian tech utopianism, and more. As a result, groups working to defend democracy are drawing on very different frameworks when they propose solutions.

Pro-Democracy Movements Are Fragmenting

We're not losing ground in the fight against authoritarianism because we lack good ideas. We're losing because we have too many. None is strong enough to win alone but each is strong enough to block the others. That's the ideological traffic jam – and it's giving authoritarians exactly what they need.

The conventional wisdom of traditional coalition politics keeps failing because it either demands ideological conversion, as in “adopt our framework,” or flattens differences into lowest-common-denominator issue campaigns that can't sustain mass mobilization.

Authoritarians replace anxiety with the emotional satisfaction of having enemies to blame and a leader who promises to act. While democratic movements fragment, arguing over which framework explains the problem, authoritarians are winning by offering simple enemies and strongman solutions. In an era of overwhelming complexity, authoritarians offer relief: “Stop thinking so hard. Trust me. I'll fix it.”

That assessment is not cause for despair, it is cause for strategic clarity. We need power that doesn't depend on consensus. We need movements that allow us to hold independent ideologies as we come together to defend democracy. Unfortunately, current grantmaking models often prevent the very coordination we need.



Many Springs, One River

The solution isn't to demand everyone agree on the same analysis. We've tried that for decades and it doesn't work. When the goal is defending democracy, ideological unity is not a prerequisite for power.

The Ideological Traffic Jam draws on a simple, generative image of springs and rivers to offer a new approach.

Springs are the groups and activities that help people make sense of the world through shared frameworks, develop strategy with like-minded people, build culture and identity, find safety and belonging, get educated and organized, and experience ideological coherence.

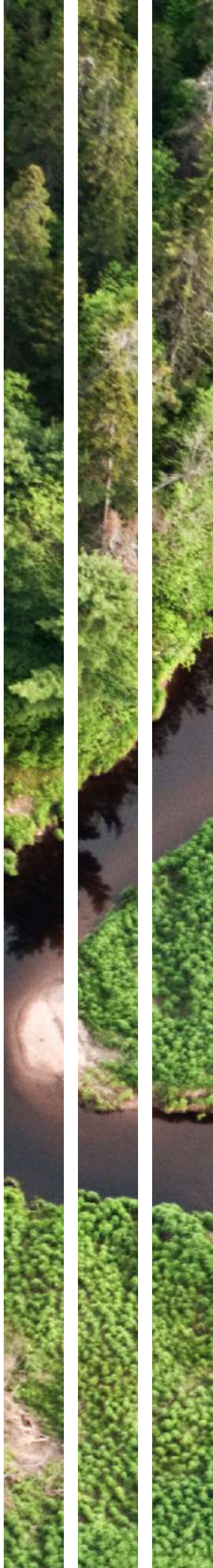
When many springs come together to take action, they feed a river of mobilization that is big and diverse enough to defeat authoritarianism. The river reflects our shared commitment to living in a free society even though we hold diverse viewpoints on many other topics.

Springs create and maintain separate meaning-making systems that motivate and engage people; the river generates power at scale. Without strong springs, there is no river to feed. Without the river, we lack the power to defeat authoritarianism.

The history of pro-democracy movements backs this up. Polish Solidarity. The Tunisian revolution. South Korean and Indonesian democracy movements. Serbian Otpor bringing down Milosevic. In every case, the formula was the same: multiple ideological communities maintaining their distinct identities while feeding a single coordinated mass movement. Many springs. One river. Victory.

In The Ideological Traffic Jam, we describe specific roles and activities for spring leaders and river builders. We also offer advice for strengthening their work: Fortify your spring. Cultivate river awareness. Build river infrastructure.

We believe it's important for funders to understand this analysis and the important role they have to play in supporting a healthy ecosystem.



Resources for Funders

Building an ecosystem capable of sustained nonviolent resistance to defeat authoritarianism requires patient investment in infrastructure, rapid-response capacity, and the cultural work and community care that makes long-term resistance possible and joyful.

In 2024, The 22nd Century Initiative published a Strategic Funding Guide for Pro-Democracy Funders. It offers individual funders and funding coalitions an approach for effectively supporting pro-democracy work. It includes a measurement and evaluation framework as well as crisis response protocols.

The Ideological Traffic Jam, published in 2026, refines that approach by detailing the importance of funding springs, river infrastructure, and activities that build bridges between them. It includes a list of activities in each category to help funders recognize strategic proposals.

Equally important, it describes what not to fund, including:

- Projects that demand ideological conversion as prerequisite
- Organizations that refuse to coordinate with ideologically different groups
- Work that actively undermines other springs
- Anything that treats pluralism as weakness rather than strength
- Coalition work that requires springs to weaken or dissolve

You can download these resources on our website: 22ci.org

We encourage you to use these materials to spark conversations at your institution and with your funding partners. The following reflection questions can help you:

- Assess your portfolio. (Are you already funding spring or river activities? Where do you see barriers?)
- Build a plan for increasing investment over the next three funding cycles. (Of the spring, river, and bridge activities listed in The Ideological Traffic Jam, where would you like to focus? How can you identify springs and river infrastructure to fund?)
- Fine-tune your systems. (What does your organization need to do internally to better fund this work? What currently funded projects would you need to wind down? What boundaries would you need to set about what not to fund?)
- Identify partners. (Are there funders that focus on different priorities but share your commitment to democracy? Where do you have genuine relationships already? These are your spring partners, and together you can become a powerful philanthropic river for democracy.)

Our staff are available to help you refine your funding strategy. To schedule a consultation, email info@22ci.org.

Thank you for your commitment to defending democracy. Building strong springs takes years. Building river coordination takes sustained investment. Quick wins are possible, but lasting infrastructure requires long-term commitment.

The springs are already flowing. The question is whether we'll build the river.



**"And who will join this
standing up
and the ones who stood
without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea:
we are the ones we have
been waiting for"**

**- June Jordan, "Poem for
South African Women" (1978)**