

February 2024

# STRATEGIC POWER BUILDING ALIGNMENTS IN STATES

REFLECTIONS ON  
INNOVATIONS IN  
POWER-BUILDING  
FOR STRUCTURAL  
TRANSFORMATION

Karen Scharff & Harmony Goldberg  
and the Grassroots Power Project team  
with the support of the Powering a New Economy Fund



GRASSROOTS  
POWER PROJECT



# GRASSROOTS POWER PROJECT

The Grassroots Power Project works with organizations, alliances and labor to develop new organizing practices to achieve transformational social change. Through decades of partnership with grassroots groups, we have developed a series of strategic frameworks that facilitate a shift away from short-term, incremental campaigns and towards building and wielding governing power to achieve economic, racial, gender and environmental justice.

## POWERING A NEW ECONOMY FUND

The Powering a New Economy Fund is a national funder collaborative that fund that supports local and state-based grassroots-led organizations and coalitions in a targeted set of states working to realize a more inclusive and sustainable economy.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS

Faced with profound political and economic transition, organizers have begun experimenting with a new form of movement infrastructure called **strategic power-building alignments (alignments)**. These alignments are sustained, collaborative alliances between strong power-building organizations that share a long-term aim of shifting the state-level policy terrain to advance a transformative agenda. These alignments are an important element of the infrastructure needed to advance alternative economic paradigms.

### **Alignments manifest differently in different states, but they share some key characteristics:**

- Alignments are focused on winning long-term structural change.
- They seek to fundamentally change the terrain for policy-making by building power and by helping to shift the dominant narrative in their states.
- Alignments are created and led by power-building organizations rooted in multiracial working class communities.
- Alignments recognize the need for organizations to collaborate in order to win transformational change.
- Most alignments focus on impacting statewide decisions.

We offer a chart (see page 24) that clarifies the role of strategic alignments in relationship to issue coalitions and civic engagement tables, while acknowledging that all three forms are complementary.

**Alignments have catalyzed significant victories in a number of states.** Looking across states, we draw out a number of advances that have been driven by alignments:

- Alignments have laid the groundwork for significant legislative change and prepared organizations to make the most of moments of policy opening.
- Alignments have enabled impacted constituencies to aggregate power to take on corporate forces whose power often exceeds the influence of individual organizations.
- Alignments focus on state-wide power-building, strengthening both the scale and geographic reach of power-building organizations.
- Alignments invest in shifting deep narratives to enable long-term change.

To illustrate these impacts, we offer a case study of New York state, where a strategic alignment played a key role building the power architecture that won more than \$10 billion in new revenue in 2021.

**Alignments have provided a container within which power-building organizations can manifest a number of much-needed strategic shifts in their work, including:**

- 1. Developing a shared power analysis** of the governmental and economic landscape in their states.
- 2. Crafting a shared long-term agenda** for structural reform.
- 3. Building towards majoritarian power** across race and region.
- 4. Building a values-aligned, mass civic engagement infrastructure.**
- 5. Investing in shared narrative change.**
- 6. Developing a collaborative approach to fundraising.**

To illustrate these strategic shifts, we offer case studies of California’s Million Voters Project, the Michigan Alignment Table, Rise Up Colorado and Florida For All.

**There are a number of components that need to be resourced and cultivated to nurture the healthy development of strategic alignments.** This must be done with sensitivity to the particular conditions of each state. They include:

- A number of strong power-building organizations with capacity for this work;
- Strong anchor organization(s) that can both manage the alignment’s work and bring stability;
- Investment in supporting key emergent organizations, especially in under-resourced communities, such as Black and Indigenous communities and youth organizing;
- A strong group of ambitious and humble leaders;
- The capacity to engage multiple layers of organizational leaders;

- Investment in trust-building across organizations;
- Internal Infrastructure, like regular meetings and communication among leaders across organizations; support from experienced intermediaries; and a clear division of labor so alignment members understand their “lanes” of work;
- Sufficient financial resources for the alignment itself: both the member organizations and the joint work all need to be appropriately resourced; and
- Shared external work, like shared campaigns for structural changes that unite the disparate issues and constituencies or shared power-building work.

In order to encourage effective investments in this work, we offer a series of recommendations to philanthropy to strengthen support for strategic power-building alignments, including, for example, the importance of considering the full movement infrastructure in a state when making funding decisions and the necessity of long-term sustained funding to enable this work to develop and flourish.

Building a coherent strategic alignment is a long-term process of development. These alignments do not just come into being, fully formed; they require work to build, maintain and to rebuild in the wake of leadership transitions. Those invested in the outcomes enabled by strategic alignments must also invest in building the requisite relationships and infrastructure with a sensitivity to the uniqueness of alignment work in any given state.

# INTRODUCTION

## STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS

We live in a moment of profound political and economic transition, with outcomes far from determined. Ongoing crises have shaken the neoliberal political-economic paradigm enough for new frameworks to emerge – but no new paradigm has gained a serious foothold yet. Meanwhile, in states across the country, a battle is underway between right-wing authoritarianism and multiracial pluralistic democracy. Now more than ever, the field of grassroots organizing and power-building has to rise to meet the moment.

The good news is that new approaches to organizing and power-building are emerging across the country. These approaches are led by organizers engaging simultaneously in the short-term organizing necessary to win concrete victories and the longer-term strategic work to shift the balance of power, block the rise of right-wing forces and unlock the possibility of greater victories. The organizations leading this work are based in working class communities of color and driven by a new generation of organizational leaders. They are majority women and people of color, and they are advancing new paradigms that integrate feminist and racial justice frameworks with critiques of economic inequality.

These leaders have recognized that traditional organizing models that rely on singular organizations and transactional issue coalitions are insufficient, whether for addressing the emergent threats of our times or for advancing more structural victories. This has led organizers to extend their strategic time horizons and to create new kinds of cross-organizational and collaborative practices to build power across constituencies and geographies. They seek to build a new depth of collective power in their states, so that the voices of impacted communities, especially communities of color, meaningfully affect decision-making so that they can set their states' policy agendas to achieve equitable outcomes.

In a number of states, this has crystallized into the development of “strategic power-building alignments” (or “alignments,” for

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brevity): sustained, collaborative alliances between strong power-building organizations that share a long-term aim of shifting the state-level policy terrain to advance a transformative agenda. These alignments are an important element of the infrastructure needed to advance alternative economic paradigms.

This paper sets out to explain the unique role of alignments at the state level,\* as well as the investments needed for these alignments to succeed, drawing on Grassroots Power Project's (GPP) years supporting these emergent alignments, as well as practical examples developed in dialogue with alignment organizers. We will begin by unpacking the underlying characteristics of alignments: their rootedness in power-building, their focus on the long view, their choice to engage at the state level, and their commitment to building deep collaboration and trust across organizations.

This will help to distinguish alignments from other organizational forms, illustrating how they complement other efforts. We will then outline how alignments work: what contributes to their success and the stumbling blocks that can trip them up. We will conclude with reflections for philanthropy on how to best support this breakthrough element of movement infrastructure. Throughout, we offer concrete examples of the pivots, breakthroughs and impacts alignments have made in states red, purple, and blue.

*Note: This paper provides information about electoral and 501(c)4 work happening in states. The c3-based alignments we focus on here are not directly involved in that work, but we include this information to help funders understand alignments' role in the broader power infrastructure of their states.*

**A STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENT IS A SUSTAINED, COLLABORATIVE ALLIANCE BETWEEN STRONG POWER-BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS THAT SHARE A LONG-TERM AIM OF SHIFTING THE STATE-LEVEL POLICY TERRAIN TO ADVANCE A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA.**

\* It should be noted that most strategic power-building alignments have been built at the state level, but similar practices have led to successful municipal alignments. Similar reasoning has laid the groundwork for major shifts in how some national networks are building cross-organizational alignment and strategy. This paper will focus on alignments at the state level.

# WHY DO WE NEED STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS?

The work needed to build an alignment is, in many ways, countercultural to established patterns in the field. To understand why alignments are a critical addition to our movement structure and to help define and explore what they are, we examine two dynamics that have shaped the field's culture.

**Dynamic 1: A laser focus on winning immediate issues campaigns.** While short-termism and pragmatism can be real assets for winning short-term policy campaigns, they can also be a limiting factor for the necessarily longer-term work of transforming the broader landscape of power. This often intersects with the tendency to focus on specific constituencies, which – while effective for issue campaigns that impact specific constituencies – is insufficient for winning structural changes or making the narrative shifts necessary to do so. These efforts, which directly challenge the interests of more powerful forces, require alignment among constituencies – a real challenge when organizers hold such a fierce dedication to their specific constituencies that they unintentionally fall into a culture of parochialism.

**Dynamic 2: Competition over scarce philanthropic dollars.** This competition encourages organizations to position themselves as the “most effective” at winning short-term policy campaigns, to position their constituencies as the “most in need”, and to argue that they can do “more, more, more” on their own. The work to position in these ways influences the perspectives of leaders of these organizations, and the experience of competition facilitates a sense of scarcity and antagonism between organizations.

When these two dynamics intersect, they can become super-charged. In this context, it takes a deliberate decision to engage in the work of strategic alignment, as well as a great effort to overcome these patterns. What motivates power-building organizations to make these decisions and investments? Again and again, we have seen that organizations only make these decisions when they are clear that they have hit the limits of what they can accomplish on their own and that they need to work in a different way. Indeed, when power-building organizations become clear about the power they need to win more structural transformations, they become more open to investing in strategic collaboration with other organizations.

# WHAT ARE STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS?

Alignments manifest differently in different states, but they share core characteristics:

- **Focused on winning structural change:** Strategic alignments are made up of organizations that share an aspiration beyond immediate policy victories toward winning structural shifts in the distribution of wealth and power; they aim to win policies that transcend the current neoliberal paradigm and achieve true racial and economic equity. Some alignments have started to articulate this as an aspiration to achieve “governing power.”\*
  - **Seek to fundamentally change the terrain for policy-making.** Here, it is helpful to explain how alignments are different from issue coalitions. Issue coalitions largely exist to aggregate the current power of their members to navigate the existing balance of power. In contrast, alignments – particularly those aspiring to achieve governing power – seek to change the balance of power to be able to advance structural changes that are not currently possible. Different alignments have
- varied approaches to this work, but they all aspire to build coherent “hubs” of power that can counter the strength of corporate and conservative power in states, both by leveraging the existing power of alignment organizations and building new forms of power together.
- **Focused on the long-term.** Again, issue coalitions are often formed around achievable tactical goals within the landscape of the immediate issue, like winning a specific policy change. Thus, however strategic, the time horizon of coalitions is usually relatively short: a few years. In contrast, alignments must take a longer view because they seek to change the broader balance of power. As a result, when alignments do collaborate on short-term campaigns, these campaigns are approached as “stepping stone fights” within a long-term strategy to win transformative change. To approach issue fights in this way, alignments must answer two questions: *How do we win on this issue today?* and *How will this fight build our power to win something bigger next time?*

\* Governing power is the ability to win and sustain power within multiple arenas of contestation so as to shift the power structure of governance and establish a new governing paradigm. With governing power as their northstar, state power-building groups learn to design, build public support for, legislate, enact, and defend public policies. In doing so, these power-building groups could fundamentally reshape the structure of the government itself, creating the conditions for more authentic multiracial democracy, and for a government that furthers equity and justice. For more, read the Grassroots Power Project’s *Governing Power*: [Executive Summary](#) and [Full Paper](#).

- **Created and led by power-building organizations rooted in multiracial working class communities.** Grass-roots community organizations and labor unions are the driving forces in the formation of alignments. These power-building organizations amplify the voices and power of specific communities who need transformational change the most: Black, Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Islander, Latino/a/x, women and gender-oppressed people, disabled people, youth, workers, and more. While organizations that advocate for the particular needs of specific constituencies are the foundational building blocks for changing power relations and advancing a transformative policy agenda, no one organization can advance a comprehensive agenda on its own. Alignments enable organizations to approach their constituency-specific work as an essential aspect of a broader change agenda, not just a marginal “special interest.” This approach facilitates true multiracial, geographic and cross-class collaboration.
- **Recognize the need to collaborate and aggregate power.** Alignment member organizations recognize that while they may be able to win certain victories for their respective bases, they need to collaborate with other organizations to secure and sustain more fundamental shifts. This aggregation of power is a central function of strategic alignments. Alignments can serve as spaces to facilitate direct collaboration between power-building organizations; they can also facilitate their member organizations’ strategic impact in the broader state infrastructure, including

issue coalitions, civic engagement tables and other formations. Alignments can also help to manifest a deeper approach to labor-community partnerships that otherwise can tend to function in more transactional ways.

- **Focus on statewide impact.\*** Alignment organizers are keenly aware that states are the core building blocks of our structure of government, and many of the policy decisions that have the greatest impact on people’s lives are made at the state level. Likewise, states are often where new policies can take hold before spreading to other states and building momentum for potential federal policy shifts. State government is also a place where grassroots groups, especially those in strong alliances, have the most power to move structural reforms – yet many power-building organizations do not have the power to impact state-level policy on their own. State-level victories require the power of multiple organizations, and alignments provide a necessary container for diverse groups to align around strategy and vision, aggregate their different types of power, and then occupy distinct lanes and make unique contributions towards winning transfor-

**STATES ARE OFTEN WHERE NEW POLICIES CAN TAKE HOLD BEFORE SPREADING TO OTHER STATES AND BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR POTENTIAL FEDERAL POLICY SHIFTS.**

mational change. This is a mold-breaking disruption to the competitive dynamics that otherwise risk fracturing progressive coalitions.

- **Alignments help to shift the dominant narrative in their states.** Campaigning organizations tend to revert to short-term messaging to advance their specific issue agendas, which frequently changes from campaign to campaign. This often leaves organizations trapped within the established limits of a current debate, which are sharply curtailed by the intentional narrative work of opposition forces. In contrast, strategic

alignments provide a cross-issue space that helps organizations to refocus on the longer-term work of shifting deeper narratives around race, economy, government and more. Alignments provide a forum in which organizations can both align around shared narratives, and adapt these narratives into more immediate messages that speak to organizations' specific issue agendas, constituencies, and geographies. In this sense, strategic alignments enable organizations to deepen, harmonize and scale their messages in ways that make narrative shifts possible.

\* For more on the role of states and state power building, see USC Equity Research Institute's [Changing States: A Framework for Progressive Governance](#) by Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito and Madeline Wander.

# THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS

To understand the impact of alignments, we can look at the kinds of significant victories they have helped catalyze in a number of states. For illustrative purposes, we'll offer a case study on the impact that strategic alignment has had in New York state, noting that alignments have had similar kinds of success in states around the country, including the now well-known example of alignment in Minnesota.\*

**1. Laying the groundwork for significant legislative change and preparing groups for moments of policy opening.** Strategic alignments have prepared power-building organizations to move cross-cutting state policy agendas in moments when the space for more transformative policies opens up. This becomes especially visible when the make-up of a state legislature shifts substantially. When a Democratic trifecta was elected in Minnesota in 2022, organizers and legislators in the state were able to draw on more than a decade of aligned power-building work to pass a series of policies toward a new governing and economic paradigm.

Michigan's 2022 experience of the state's first Democratic trifecta in 40 years was very different. Alignment was at a nascent stage, so organizations did not have the same capacity to move a shared agenda when conditions improved. A Michigan organizer reflected that, "When our state turned triple blue, we didn't have a plan and got caught flat-footed. Now we can see why we need to work as an alignment to push back against the same corporate forces that have always driven politics in our state." Michigan's emergent alignment provided organizers with a space to learn real lessons from this political inflection point, setting them up to develop a shared plan to advance a more powerful agenda in the future, similar to Minnesota's longer-term trajectory.

**2. Taking on corporate power.** Strategic alignments can also strengthen campaigns targeting corporations. They enable impacted constituencies to aggregate power to contend with these powerful corporate forces, which generally have highly concentrated power that exceeds the influence of individual organizations.

\* To learn more about the history of strategic alignment in Minnesota, read the [Aligning for Power](#) report developed by the Kalmanovitz Initiative at Georgetown University and "A Path Toward Governing Power," in Grassroots Power Project's [Governing Power](#) booklet. To get a sense of the recent impact of this long-standing alignment work, read the [Washington Post's piece](#) about the raft of victories that aligned organizers and legislators brought home after a Democratic trifecta was elected in 2022. These pieces also elaborate the impact of strategic alignments in taking on corporate power, specifically the Target Corporation.

**3. Strengthening state-wide power-building.** One often unrecognized (and still emergent) function of strategic alignments has been to provide a container within which power-building organizations can engage in a sober assessment of the limits of their current reach, and to plan towards building the scale and geographic reach of the popular base needed to win more transformative change. This includes building power outside of traditional power bases in large urban areas to reach small cities, suburban areas, small towns, and rural areas.

**4. Shifting narrative in order to make long-term change possible.** Strategic alignments provide a vehicle for shared narrative work, with the aim of moving away from neoliberal narratives (for example, narratives that undermine taxation and government programs) and towards a new paradigm that enables all our communities and families to thrive. A number of strategic alignments have worked with [We Make the Future](#) and the [Race/Class Narrative tools](#), which have been essential supports, especially on state budget issues.

## TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS A CASE STUDY OF NEW YORK STATE

In 2021, the New York state legislature voted to raise taxes on the rich and on corporations, bringing in more than 10 billion dollars in revenue that provided funds to help workers and communities weather the hardships of the COVID pandemic and reinvest in crucial programs that had been starved of resources for years, like public education, Medicaid and public housing. That vote represented a massive reversal of decades of tax cuts and pro-corporate policies - and a statewide strategic alignment made it possible.

Organizers had built a mature power infrastructure over decades in New York State, including strong power-building organizations representing different constituencies and geographies, cross-cutting issue coalitions, policy and research support, the NY Civic Engagement Table, and long-term C4 collaboration through shared vehicles. Yet the corporate and conservative power dominating the state legislature still blocked these organizations from winning their biggest agenda items.

Recognizing they would need to build and aggregate more power to break through this gridlock, the state's strongest power-building organizations decided to build on their leadership in the state's issues coalitions to form a strategic alignment. The alignment created a space where they could step back from their immediate fights to focus on what it would take to shift the balance of power in New York and enable them to advance more structural reforms. As a result, alignment organizations decided to invest deeply in shared civic engagement, narrative change, and coordinated issue advocacy.

The alignment also enabled the state’s power-building organizations to develop complementary approaches for expanding beyond the state’s major cities to build stronger grassroots power in smaller cities and towns in Long Island, the Hudson Valley, and Western and Central New York. In 2018, when a window opened as the result of major shifts in the state legislature, the organizations and coalitions in the alignment were ready to seize the opportunity. Leveraging their policy agenda, shared narrative and issue strategies, and their organized base and coalition infrastructure, in 2019 the groups in the alignment and their allies in the issue coalitions helped secure driver’s licenses for undocumented people, rent control, bail reform, and the boldest climate policy in the nation.

Despite these wins, alignment organizations recognized that their work hit an upper limit when it came to passing any legislation requiring significant new revenue – i.e. the major goals of their Long-Term Agenda: a fund for excluded workers, rent relief, or equitable school funding. Any of these wins would require tax reform to raise billions of dollars in new revenue. Once again, organizations leaned into the strategic alignment to develop a coordinated strategy to break through these limits.

Alignment leaders identified the long-standing pattern of issue coalitions competing with each other over limited budgetary resources, and they decided to launch the Invest in Our New York coalition (IONY). In 2020, IONY was established to align and coordinate the state’s various issue coalitions around a joint effort to raise taxes on corporations and the super-rich to expand revenue streams across the board. Rather than competing over scraps in the state budget, these issue coalitions agreed to collectively advance a set of shared revenue reforms.

Likewise, to weaken the power of anti-tax narratives in public and policy debates, organizers aligned around shared core narratives. These narratives highlighted the fundamental inequity of the existing tax system, and they centered the programs that would be funded through new revenue policies: “invest in schools,” “invest in tenants,” and “invest in nurses,” for example. In addition to aggressive communications work (including generating press hits, running polls to demonstrate massive public support, and educating reporters), IONY member organizations integrated these messages into their work within their constituencies, their public actions, their issue fights and their civic engagement programs.

Taken together, these efforts worked. In 2021, in the wake of the COVID pandemic, IONY won real advances toward progressive taxation, bringing in more than \$10 billion in new revenue for public education, rental assistance, pandemic relief and more.

\* These shifts were the result of sustained electoral organizing, which is not in the purview of this report. To learn more about that history, read [“The Working Families Party’s Fight for Survival”](#) in *New York* magazine and [“How We Won New Taxes on the Rich in New York,”](#) in *The Forge* written by Sochie Nnaemeka and Nina Luo, two organizers who drove the effort.

# HOW ALIGNMENTS WORK

## SIX IMPORTANT STRATEGIC SHIFTS

As the New York experience illustrates, strategic alignments enable power-building organizations to deliberately invest in developing new practices to overcome established patterns and engage in the hard work of building power at new scales. GPP has seen and supported alignments in six nested practices that enable them to move beyond short-termism and to engage in long-term strategic work. California's strategic alignment provides clear examples of all six shifts, which we will explore in greater detail at the end of this section.

**SHIFT 1: Developing a Shared Power Analysis of the Governmental and Economic Landscape.** Strong power-building organizations are adept at conducting campaign-based power analyses to identify a target on an issue and map the relationships that influence that target. These analyses are important, but they do not address the broader balance of power that shapes those conditions in the first place. Alignments can facilitate deeper power analyses that help organizations to assess and understand the broader power landscape in their states; for example, going beyond examining the existing balance of power between parties to look at the map of corporate and conservative power in a given state, including their corollary

political advocacy institutions and impact on policy decisions. Alignments have dug into analyses of the changing demographic makeup of states, the narrative terrain, and broader progressive and movement infrastructures. Alignments use these shared analyses to guide their strategic choices, both for the work of the alignment and within their separate organizations. See *Colorado and California for examples*.

**SHIFT 2: Crafting a Shared Long-Term Agenda for Structural Reform.** Community and labor organizing is strongest when it comes to winning immediate local issue fights or stronger contracts. These are important contributions, and the toolkit needs to expand if community organizing is to help advance a new economic paradigm; this will necessarily require a longer-term horizon and strategy. Alignments have served as a space where power-building organizations can build a strategic vision that reaches beyond the legislative calendar, helping them to identify their shared, aspirational goals for more structural levels of transformation, then to work backwards to identify smaller victories and power-building “stepping stone” advances on the way to those longer-term aspirations. This “step back” enables alignment members to design short-term campaigns to simultane-

ously advance towards their transformative vision, and to make plans to overcome the structural barriers that stand in the way. In the best case scenario, a long-term agenda process sets alignments up to intentionally collaborate on shorter-term efforts that are central in advancing towards their longer-term aims. This can manifest in shared issue fights, shared narrative work or a shared power-building drive. See *the New York and California case studies for examples of this work*.

### **SHIFT 3: Building Towards Majoritarian Power.**

The contemporary model of community organizing tends to rely on small groups of highly developed leaders who serve as advocates on the issues that impact their lives. This can be effective for a number of local issue campaigns, but it is not sufficient for winning structural

policy changes, especially those that lead to a new economic paradigm. This level of change requires much broader coalitions and majority support among the public. It is not, however, viable for a single power-building organization to attempt to achieve this kind of majoritarian power on its own; this is necessarily a collaborative process in which power-building organizations that represent different geographies and constituencies aggregate their existing power and make shared plans to grow that power. Alignments have provided a container for locally based power-building organizations to reflect together on the current state of their shared power and to develop deliberate plans to grow that power, whether that happens through an investment in base-building or geographic expansion, building alliances with organizations that can reach broader constituen-

## **COLORADO CASE STUDY: THE POWER OF A SHARED ANALYSIS & AGENDA**

The Rise Up Colorado strategic alignment is made up of a number of unions and many of the strongest community organizations in the state. In 2022, as the first step toward developing a shared long-term strategy, Rise Up CO invested in Developing a Shared Power Analysis (Shift 1). This included mapping the corporate and conservative power infrastructures in the state; a nuanced analysis of the state legislature across party lines to determine what forces influence different sections of the legislature; and an assessment of the narrative terrain in Colorado.

This analysis laid bare the sophisticated network of collaboration among their corporate opposition, deepening Rise Up CO members' commitment to strengthening their alignment for the sake of building greater power. It also oriented them toward the need to invest in developing aligned policy campaigns capable of winning more ambitious structural reforms on housing and revenue (Shift 2: Crafting a Shared Long-Term Agenda for Structural Reform). The alignment is also currently Investing in Shared Narrative Change Work (Shift 5) with a process to identify shared narratives on race, government and the economy. Member organizations will then deploy these narratives across their issue campaigns and constituencies with the goal of shifting the dominant worldview in Colorado.

cies or investing in narrative work that can help to build a broader base of support. *See the stories of Florida and Michigan to understand this work.*

**SHIFT 4: Building a Values-Aligned, Mass Civic Engagement Infrastructure.** Most power-building organizations are organizing in communities that have low voter turnout and are therefore often ignored by their elected officials, making it difficult to impact policy change. As a result, most serious power-building organizations have realized that if they want to achieve their most ambitious objectives, they cannot limit their organizing to the legislative arena alone. Many power-building organizations have recognized the need to increase voter registration and voter participation in their communities to make their voices heard. Many of these organizations have built

civic engagement programs and participated in c3 civic engagement tables (usually affiliated with State Voices). Alignments have enabled power-building organizations to go beyond doing this work individually to instead build cohesion and mutual support among organizations doing civic engagement work. In some cases, alignment has enabled organizations to advance ballot measures to mobilize voters on issues that matter most to them, efforts which no single organization could advance alone. *California's Million Voters Project is the consummate example of the work to build a mass civic engagement infrastructure; see the case study below.*

**SHIFT 5: Investing in Shared Narrative Change Work.** Social and economic justice organizations have also become increasingly clear about the need to shift dominant

## MICHIGAN CASE STUDY: EXPANDING MEMBER BASES & SHIFTING THE STATE'S NARRATIVE

The Michigan Alignment Table came together, in part, around the need to build a power bloc across geographies and constituencies capable of undoing state preemption laws that usurp local government control and decision making. The emergent statewide alignment is rigorously assessing the constituent power and geographic reach of its member organizations (Shift 3: Building Toward Majoritarian Power). This will enable Table organizations to develop shared commitments to expanding their member bases strategically, as well as a geographic division of labor for their issues and civic engagement work moving forward. Later this spring, the Table will undertake a power analysis of the state's political landscape. The core of the Michigan Alignment Table also helped to create and lead *We Make Michigan*, a collective narrative project with the long-term goal of shifting the state's narrative about revenue as a precondition for advancing significant revenue reform in the future (Shift 5: Investing In Shared Narrative Work). The Table's shared power assessment work is motivating members to invest in super-charging the work of *We Make Michigan*, one example of an alignment's impact on driving and focusing the state's broader progressive infrastructure.

## **FLORIDA CASE STUDY: ENGAGING PHILANTHROPY & BUILDING ACROSS RACE AND REGION**

Florida For All Education Fund (FFA, formerly the Statewide Alignment Group, SWAG) formed in 2014 to bring together power-building organizations and form a long-term strategy for shifting power relations in their challenging political terrain. Unfortunately, organizers immediately came up against tensions caused by competition over philanthropic dollars. Rather than avoid these tensions, these organizers chose to confront them directly and Develop a Collaborative Approach to Fundraising (Shift 6). They developed a set of shared principles for engaging with philanthropy, which provides guidance for being transparent with each other about budgets and fundraising and for mutual promotion. The principles also provide guidance for shared strategizing to facilitate the growth of all member organizations in accordance with the strategic needs in the state. These agreements have transformed relationships between organizations, opening up space for much deeper strategic collaboration across (former) lines of competition. This model has been an inspiration to alignments across the country, which have adopted similar principles.

The collaborative spirit reflected in this process enabled alignment organizations to build and maintain relationships across turbulent legislative cycles and challenging issue fights. With the support of GPP, they developed a shared ten-year theory of change that helped to align member organization's power-building work and policy campaigns.

When Florida's alignment work started in 2014, member organizations had meaningful infrastructure in two urban areas: Miami and Orlando. They recognized that, if they were going to impact state-wide politics, they needed to build power across issue areas, constituencies and geographic regions. So FFA's member organizations began Building Toward Majoritarian Power (Shift 3) by expanding geographically. Today, member organizations are building bases in 35 of Florida's 67 counties, including Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville and Tampa, as well as many rural counties. They also invested in staffing coalitions in six regions of the state, allowing their alignment to have a locally attuned "micro-geographical" approach to its issue and electoral campaigns. Finally, the table created several constituency tables to ensure that different communities across the state can build cohesion and power, including a Black Alignment Group, Florida Para Todos (a Latino constituency table), and an Asian and Pacific Islander table, along with efforts to bring together youth organizations in the state and Faith in Florida's work to cohere faith leaders.

While the effort to shift statewide politics in Florida has a long way to go, these investments in building multi-constituency and multi-geography power represent the kind of long-term commitment it will take to advance a transformative agenda beyond deep blue metropolitan regions and states.

race to be able to advance more structural policy change. But no one organization can accomplish this on its own. Strategic alignments offer a container in which organizations can come together to map their state's dominant narratives and craft shared alternative narratives that they can move across their issue campaigns, constituencies and geographies. Alignments have been particularly skilled at finding ways to shift narrative through issue organizing in ways that complement their communications programs. *See the case studies from Colorado, Michigan, California and New York for concrete examples of this work.*

**SHIFT 6: Developing a Collaborative Approach to Fundraising.** It takes intentional effort for organizations to overcome the patterned tendency towards competing over philanthropic dollars, and alignment

tables have been an enabling factor in helping organizations to make this shift. A number of alignments have done joint fundraising to enable them to achieve their shared goals, and this has given them a different set of lived experiences to counter the conditioned tendency towards scarcity and competition. A number of alignments have built on these experiences to make shared agreements about how they communicate with each other about prospective funders or how they share credit for joint victories by promoting each other's contributions. Some alignments have also developed a structure in which an anchor organization receives a large grant on behalf of the alignment and regrants money to the other member organizations; this is most effective when it is based on shared agreements and carried out with full transparency in all directions. *See the Florida case study for an examples of this work.*

## CALIFORNIA CASE STUDY: BUILDING POWER & ADVANCING STRATEGY

California's Million Voters Project (MVP) is a multi-racial statewide alliance of nine community-driven state and regional networks reaching more than 125 base-building organizations across 28 counties. Since their founding in 2015, MVP has had a long-term goal of overturning California's anti-tax Proposition 13 to expand revenue and resources for public programs, and more recently, advancing social housing in the state.

MVP serves as a strategically-aligned hub for resourcing and training organizations in the work of civic engagement, predominantly in California's communities of color, and anchored by long-standing civic engagement groups like California Calls. MVP also leads the ongoing campaign to develop and pass a ballot initiative to overturn parts of Prop 13, including a 2020 ballot initiative that lost by a narrow margin. Working together allows the groups that comprise MVP to centralize training, capacity-building, and collective campaigning for statewide structural reforms. This work has raised the standards on organizing and civic engagement across the state. The alignment has also built multilingual voter outreach programs that have reached over 760,000 voters, increasing the voice of historically marginalized communities in the state. In this way, strategic alignment has enabled MVP to play a significant and growing role on various ballot propositions, a particularly important intervention in a state where the ballot is often leveraged to pass paradigm-shifting policy.

MVP has a long-established practice of Developing a Shared Power Analysis (Shift 1), conducting in-depth analyses using the power mapping process originally developed by SCOPE-LA. This ongoing commitment has equipped organizers across the state with an honest assessment of their current power, as well as a clear commitment to the base-building needed to build constituencies with enough power to win transformative, state-level legislation. Used in this way, power analysis goes beyond a traditional role preparing one organization for a successful issue campaign, and instead establishes a shared power-building orientation that aligns organizations across issue, race and region.

Overturing “Prop 13” will take massive shifts in the balance of power in California, and MVP and its member organizations have committed to Building Toward Majoritarian Power (Shift 3); in fact, this is the leading example of the work to Build a Values-Aligned, Mass Civic Engagement Infrastructure (Shift 4). MVP has long been engaged in supporting its member organizations in California’s larger urban areas to strengthen their power base, as well as intentionally supporting organizations outside of the Bay Area and Los Angeles. As the number of organizations working in California’s “fishhook” (from the farms and smaller towns of the Central Valley through the small cities and rural areas of the Inland Empire) has grown, they have been collectively able to strategize on how to build durable power and unlock the possibility of building majoritarian power in the state.

Beginning in 2019, MVP engaged in an intensive process to Craft a Shared Long Term Agenda (LTA) for Structural Reform (Shift 2) in their state. Knowing that, win or lose on a Prop 13 ballot initiative, they needed to be able to identify their “next big fight” together as an alliance. Over the course of eighteen months, MVP built deep alignment on this agenda through a highly deliberative and democratic process that ultimately engaged more than 750 people. Out of this process, MVP reaffirmed its commitment to winning progressive revenue sources, such as overturning Prop 13, and emerged with a new issue focus on social housing. This clarity about a shared LTA prepared MVP both to lead its own powerful member organizations into joint work on these challenging issue fronts, as well as think strategically about how to build the capacity of members to build power on revenue and narrative change locally. MVP and its affiliates are moving towards being strategic forces for alignment across a wider field of organizations in an effort to aggregate power to take on powerful corporate and real estate opposition.

MVP member organizations’ deep alignment on power analysis, power-building and structural reforms has served as the foundation for their approach to Shift 5: Investing in Shared Narrative Change Work. Anchored by member organization Power California, MVP initiated an ambitious Narrative Infrastructure Project that will identify the shared narratives that MVP organizations will use to shift the balance of power on revenue and housing in the state. This project will also provide training and resources for MVP member organizations to bring on new staff who will focus on moving this narrative work in their organizations. This level of alignment and coordination has also enabled MVP to take up Shift 6: Developing a Collaborative Approach to Fundraising, leveraging their relationships to influence philanthropy to invest heavily in power-building in the state and to provide the resources needed to build the requisite statewide narrative infrastructure.

# CULTIVATING

## THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF ALIGNMENT

There are a number of variable elements that can be resourced and cultivated within state-specific conditions to help nurture the development of strategic alignments. In GPP's experience, alignments are healthiest and most effective when they emerge within a strong and mature existing movement ecosystem. These elements, listed below, are not offered as a rigid checklist to be used to evaluate alignments because not every alignment will have all of these pieces of infrastructure in place. Rather, we offer this list to clarify the elements we have witnessed contribute to the success of strategic alignments when developed in accordance with the specific strategic needs of different states at different times. These components should instead be treated as a number of variable elements that can be resourced and cultivated within state-specific conditions to help nurture the healthy development of strategic alignments.

### ORGANIZATIONS

**Strong power-building organizations with capacity for this work:** Alignments must include a number of strong power-building organizations, representing different constituencies and/or geographies in

a state, with the capacity for this work (in addition to their existing work). This includes concrete capacities (like sufficient staff time and financial resources), as well as less tangible considerations (like organizational leaders who have the ability to think beyond narrow organizational needs and strategize years into the future). These organizations do not need to be aligned on every point of analysis or organizing methodology, but they do need a shared dedication to building popular power and winning campaigns, and a commitment to developing shared strategic analyses. It is important to note that this kind of organizational strength is not static or strictly linear, and organizations periodically navigate setbacks in capacity, particularly following leadership transitions. Ongoing investment to strengthen the core power-building organizations in states is a necessary prerequisite for strong alignments.

**Anchor organization(s):** Alignments must be anchored by one – and ideally more – of the stronger organizations in a state that have both the practical capacity to manage the work of the alignment (for example, staffing to convene meetings and track to-do's, the ability to receive and distribute money, and the ability to mediate with funders and other allies) and the trust and

respect of other alignment organizations. Anchor organizations bring stability and support to alignments, and this is particularly important in the early stages. This organizational role almost always correlates with the need for an individual leader who has the clarity and stature to serve as the “organizer” of the alignment table, one who can both invite other organizations into the process of alignment and provide the gravitas to keep them there.

**Investment in supporting key emergent organizations:** While strategic alignments should not aspire to include every organization in a state ecosystem, the strongest alignments bring together the larger, more powerful base-building groups in states with smaller organizations that are building power in specific under-resourced communities and sectors, such as Black and Indigenous communities and youth organizing. This allows alignments to help strengthen smaller organizations and build a stronger ecosystem overall.

## LEADERSHIP

**A strong cohort of ambitious and humble leaders:** Alignments can thrive when there is a strong layer of organizational leaders who have both the ambition to strive for greater impact and the humility to assess their organization honestly enough to recognize when they need to be in strategic collaboration with others. This combination of ambition and humility is not common, but enables leadership to clearly discern what they can give to an alignment, as well as what they will need from it. In other words, these leaders need a clear sense of their organizational self-interest in building the alignment: they need to be clear about

how their organizations will grow stronger from the work of the alignment. And, they need to be motivated by more than a narrow organizational self-interest: they need the ambition to help lead a collaborative process that will enable them to win more structural levels of transformation.

### **Engaging multiple layers of leaders:**

Ideally, it is not only executive directors who participate in the work of the alignment, but multiple layers of leaders from each participating organization (including, for example, organizing directors and political directors). This enables well-rounded strategic thinking and facilitates the operationalization of collaborative work. In best case scenarios, this investment extends to developing cross-organizational relationships between member-leaders through shared actions and training.

## INVESTMENTS IN ALIGNMENT-BUILDING

**Investment in Trust-Building:** Trust is at a premium in functional alignment tables, as power, credit and resources are openly negotiated and shared by members of successful alignments. To get there, past conflicts and competitions often have to be aired out and worked through, a process that often requires skilled facilitation. Different alignments have produced different kinds of agreements to facilitate trust-building, from agreements on mutual support to agreements on fundraising. Many successful alignments have been built out of a shared culture of relationship-building, which often takes the form of one-on-one, bilateral relationships between member organizations and between lead-

ers. These relationships and trust provide the “connective tissue” which allows the component parts of an alignment – organizations that are used to the siloed dynamics of the contemporary social justice ecosystem – to function together.

**Internal Operational Infrastructure:** Functional alignments rely on some core pieces of operational infrastructure, including (1) regular meetings and communication between principals and staff leaders across organizations to do the work of strategic alignment, to resource the alignment and to carry out the programmatic work identified; (2) a designated, in-state alignment table coordinator who ensures meetings happen and that the work stays on track; (3) support from organizations experienced in the work of alignment and trust-building (such as GPP) that can share frameworks and experiences from other states; and (4) a clear division of labor that helps alignment members understand their “lanes” of work, including how they relate to the work of other organizations in the alignment and how to plan growth in complementary ways. In some cases, alignments have built additional pieces of infrastructure, including convening regular cross-organizational training for member-leaders and bringing on shared staff (communications staff, research staff, narrative change consultants) to support work in the member organizations and to support the shared work of the alignment.

**Resources:** For a strategic alignment to function, the alignment itself, the member organizations and the joint work all need to be appropriately resourced. This includes direct resources to support the basic functioning of alignments (for example, to

pay a coordinator or hire strategic facilitation support); member organizations need to be sufficiently financially stable, so their leadership has the time and space to think beyond the short term and to directly engage in the work of alignment; and the alignment’s shared work needs to be resourced adequately, too.

Less tangibly, successful alignments require organizations to have a non-competitive stance toward fundraising. As we’ve illustrated above, a number of alignments have done valuable work to develop shared agreements for a collaborative approach to fundraising. It is important to note that context matters here: resources to the field need to be generous enough that groups are not forced to compete over deeply limited resources.

## SHARED WORK

**Shared external work:** While it is important to give time to the work of trust-building, power analysis and long-term planning, alignments need to eventually have a clear external impact if they are to be maintained over time. As the case studies above illustrate, this can be shared power-building work (like organizing drives or shared leadership development), shared campaigns to build and aggregate power, or shared narrative change efforts.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO PHILANTHROPY TO STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS

The experiences of strategic alignments across the country point to core recommendations for funders. In considering these recommendations, it's also important to recognize that the tables in each state are in different phases of development and face distinct conditions and constraints. Funders will need to consider those specific phases, conditions and constraints in making grant decisions.

### 1. CONSIDER THE FULL MOVEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE STATE.

As funders assess how to best support the work of strategic alignment, as well as state level work more generally, it is helpful to understand the full scope of the existing infrastructure in a state, each group's role within the larger ecosystem, and the gaps that need to be filled. Funding can then be targeted to the elements that best match a funder's mission and guidelines. Some things to consider in this vein include:

- **Fund all three levels of the work:** Fund the strategic alignment overall, fund the member organizations, and fund the specific campaigns and projects they take on together. All three are crucial. If you cannot fund all three, consider coordinated funding opportunities with other allied funders so that the full ecosystem can be supported.
- **Support both large and small groups:** Most alignments have larger groups with more capacity for collaboration and power building, and smaller organizations that contribute to the shared work by organizing their constituency. Success requires the whole range of groups. Without funding for the larger groups to grow, the movement infrastructure will never get to scale. Without funding for the smaller groups, crucial constituencies or geographies will be left out. Encourage clear roles and division of labor when possible.
- **Resource Anchor organizations:** Most strategic alignments have one or two anchor groups. They are usually the larger, more mature organizations in the state. They need to be funded to provide an anchoring function, in addition to funding for their own work (not in place of funding for their own work).
- **Support Internal capacity building:** Help organizations build their internal

capacity over time so they can both implement their pieces of the work and play their role in strategic alignment. Staff, operations, and internal political education are all critical to building internal capacity.

- **Alignments can be strengthened by shared fundraising and regrants:** When strategic alignments raise money together, they strengthen their trust and commitment to collaboration. Shared funds also enable alignments to collectively determine what is most needed in their state, and then to direct funds toward meeting those highest priority needs. When structured well, including shared agreements and transparency in all directions, re-granting processes can help solidify shared goals and mutual accountability. At the same time, it is important to be aware that regranting processes can also result in internal tensions inside of alignments, when larger organizations are seen as “funders” rather than as strategic partners. Careful alignment around strategy prior to regranting is important in order to ensure the grant process doesn’t result in distrust and resentment.

## 2. PROVIDE LONG-TERM SUSTAINED FUNDING.

It takes time and investment to build strategic alignment and to then drive the work based on shared long-term power-building strategies. If you are only able to fund in one-year cycles, make sure that your expectations and the deliverables are structured to take long-term goals into account. Consider grantees’ goals and

needs for the longer term, and shape your funding to match long-term goals as much as possible.

## 3. FUND TRUSTED LEADERSHIP AND THE SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE-BUILDING PROCESS, RATHER THAN SPECIFIC DELIVERABLES, WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

When funders trust the leaders they are funding and can provide long-term general support to enable organizations to build power in their communities over time, organizations can plan longer-term and spend their funds more strategically. Power-building groups that are based in communities directly impacted by the issues, predominantly BIPOC communities, are in the best position to determine what is needed to build power in their communities.

- Why general support? General support enables groups to invest in infrastructure-building and collaboration, and it makes it easier for organizations to move nimbly and quickly when key opportunities arise.
- Why long-term? General support combined with sustained funding enables groups to take risks, which is a necessary part of building power.
- When a funder is limited to providing specific project support, they should be as flexible as possible to make room for grantees to situate those projects within a larger longer-term plan.

- Funders should work to fund in ways that encourage collaboration among groups rather than foster competition.
- Funders will need to find the right balance between deep strategic collaboration with grantees, which is often very valuable, and leaving the groups enough room to develop their own strategy and agreements without funders in the room. It can be helpful when funders raise good questions or push grantees to think big, as long as it's done in real partnership with the grantees and avoids pressing them into work that is a bad strategic fit.

#### **4. BE FLEXIBLE, AND LEAVE ROOM FOR STRATEGY SHIFTS.**

Give the groups time and space to develop their shared strategy and each organization's role within that strategy. Building long-term power takes time, and it can lead to significant shifts in the work as conditions and opportunities change. That requires patience and flexibility among funders. Sometimes that means ongoing general support funding, and sometimes it means a quick infusion of funds for a particular fight that suddenly becomes urgent or in response to a new window of opportunity.

#### **5. ORGANIZE OTHER FUNDERS TO COLLABORATE.**

It is more possible to build strategic alignments if a set of funder allies are also well organized and strategically aligned in partnership with power-building organizations in the states. Just as the grantees need to align on a long-term vision and strategy and break through their learned tendencies toward working in silos, funders need to break through these learned behaviors as well.

#### **6. DO NO HARM.**

Funding dynamics can drive groups apart instead of supporting collaboration and alignment. It is helpful when funders are aware of the negative impact they can have. Things to watch out for include:

- Creating competition between groups or feeding into existing competition;
- Providing funding that requires groups to expand their capacity, then cutting funding after they've grown, forcing them to eliminate what they have built;
- Asking groups to take on work because you see a gap you want someone to fill, even if that work does not reflect their goals or strengths; and
- Ignoring existing infrastructure in favor of creating duplicative entities.

# CONCLUSION

Building a coherent strategic alignment is a long-term process of development. These alignments do not just come into being, fully formed; they require work to maintain and to rebuild in the wake of leadership transitions. Power-builders, intermediaries and funders invested in the outcomes accomplished by strategic alignments need to invest – with sensitivity to the specific conditions in different states – in building the requisite relationships and infrastructure, rather than waiting to invest in alignments once they are consolidated.

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# ADDENDUM:

## HOW DO STRATEGIC POWER-BUILDING ALIGNMENTS RELATE TO AND DIFFER FROM OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS?

The chart below compares three basic types of alliances to clarify the added value of a strategic alignment, and how it differs from other approaches and structures. While this chart necessarily emphasizes the differences between different forms, it should be understood as trying to capture three points on a broader spectrum. Any real-life alliance could be in one of these columns, or could fall somewhere in-between, having characteristics from multiple columns.

	<b>CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TABLES (C3 OR C4)</b>	<b>ISSUE COALITIONS</b>	<b>STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT APPROACH</b>
<b>FORM</b>	Structure for program coordination and joint fundraising, usually around civic engagement work.	Tactical alliance of organizations with the purpose of winning (defeating) a particular issue or campaign	Strategic alliance of organizations with the purpose of building long-term power and changing the external conditions
<b>PRIMARY PURPOSE</b>	Coordinate voter contact work	Navigate the existing power landscape in order to win an immediate advance or to defend against an attack	Change the current conditions so as to shift wealth and power in pursuit of governing power for our communities
<b>POWER</b>	Increase voter participation in order to improve representation	Aggregate the existing power of its members and leverage it toward an immediate end	Proactively build the power of member groups and of the collective set of groups
<b>ANALYSIS</b>	Analysis of voter data in order to target communities and households for contact	Power map of a target to win a campaign	Structural power analysis with the goal of shifting concentrated wealth and power toward equity

	<b>CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TABLES (C3 OR C4)</b>	<b>ISSUE COALITIONS</b>	<b>STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT APPROACH</b>
<b>DURATION &amp; FOCUS OF STRATEGY</b>	Short-term, to increase participation in issues or elections	Short-term, to win the campaign	Long term, to build power
<b>TIME FRAME</b>	Tied to election cycles, which can mean as short as 3 - 6 months	Short: usually organized over a few legislative cycles (usually 1-4 years)	Longer: 5+ years
<b>NARRATIVE</b>	Messaging tied to achieving the immediate goal	Messaging tied to larger existing narratives	Shift public beliefs/make meaning over time and shift the narrative to support our long-term agenda
<b>RELATIONSHIP</b>	Varies from strategic collaboration on one end to transactional funding relationships on the other end	Tactical trust. Organizations need to depend on each other to follow through on their commitments, to take risks and to challenge opponents	Strategic Trust. Organizations need to know what each other is trying to build and understand each other's longer-term ambitions for impact and growth; share decision making, credit and money
<b>MEMBER ORGANIZATION MATURITY</b>	Organizations of any level of development can participate as long as they have capacity to take on piece of field work and deliver the numbers.	Organizations that can campaign effectively and make a meaningful impact on the issue at hand	Requires strong organizations that are able to plan several years out, admit the power they have and need, recognize they can't do it alone



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