



# A GUIDE TO CO-GOVERNANCE

*Can movements and politicians work together?*

BY MARK ENGLER AND PAUL ENGLER



## ■ A Note from the Authors

This report began as a series of articles published in early 2022 on the theory and practice of “co-governance”—an idea that was being invoked with increasing regularity in social movements in the United States but that is often not well defined or examined in depth.

In preparing these articles, we undertook a review of existing literature on co-governance and conducted a variety of interviews—both formal and informal—with organizers, scholars, and other social movement participants. Given the feedback we received on these pieces, as well as the desire expressed by several organizers to use this material for training and group discussion, we decided to compile our published articles into a single report, which could be more easily accessed and distributed. The Ayni Institute, *Waging Nonviolence*, and *In These Times* have joined in partnership to release and distribute this document.

Part I of this report, “The Rise of Co-Governance,” provides a history of the term and examines why co-governance has emerged as a topic of social movement discussion in the current political moment.

Part II, “Five Practices and Five Pitfalls of Co-Governance,” looks at what happens after movement-backed politicians win election. It considers ways in which movements and politicians can effectively work together, while also highlighting common tensions that arise between grassroots activists and the elected officials they put into office.

Part III consists of a discussion with professor Rebecca Tarlau about “contentious co-governance”

in Brazil. In particular, it examines how Brazil’s landless workers movement, or MST, seeks to win practical reforms within state institutions while avoiding cooptation. With Tarlau, we believe that the MST’s example is valuable in illustrating how co-governance can be explored outside of a purely electoral context.

The three parts of the report can be read together or separated for use as individual handouts. Each part is designed to be able to stand on its own. At the same time, the articles complement one another and collectively offer a more comprehensive treatment of the origins and use of co-governance. While Part I contains the most historical background, Part II has the most nuts-and-bolts content for those attempting to put this idea into practice. The third part expands the discussion by providing an international case study and proposing broader ways of thinking about social movements co-governing within the state.

Together, we hope that these materials will provide a means of better understanding the promise and the potential limitations of co-governance—both as a theoretical concept and an emerging set of practices—and that it will assist movements in forming better strategy.

*Mark Engler and Paul Engler*  
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# Contents

<b>Part I: The Rise of Co-Governance</b>	4
<i>Movements are vying for political power—is ‘co-governance’ the answer?</i>	
Beyond boom and bust elections	5
Taking co-governance out of the academy	6
A movement moment in electoral politics	7
How “co-governance” creates a new conversation about old problems	10
<b>Part II: Five Practices and Five Pitfalls of Co-Governance</b>	12
<i>What happens after movement-backed politicians take office.</i>	
Monolithic politicians and collective action	14
Five key practices of co-governance	16
1. Setting the table	
2. Common agenda, common expectations	
3. Support and staffing	
4. Regular meetings and spaces to strategize	
5. Task forces and assemblies	
Five problems of political partnership	19
1. Getting to scale	
2. Watered-down commitment from politicians	
3. Movements losing leadership	
4. Splintering coalitions	
5. Not defending movement politicians	
Can it work?	23
<b>Part III: Contentious Co-Governance in Brazil</b>	24
<i>Forty years of struggle by Brazil’s landless workers movement offers lessons on engaging the system without being co-opted.</i>	
<b>About the Authors</b>	33



## Part I: The Rise of Co-Governance

“I believe in co-governance,” Congressional Representative Ilhan Omar said this past summer upon announcing funding for a spate of new community projects in Minneapolis. Yolanda Roth, a union organizer in her district who ran for county commissioner the year before, declared “co-governance is my passion.” Last fall, Sandy Nurse, a

former Occupy Wall Street organizer who has now been elected to the New York City Council, made co-governance a core tenet of her campaign, calling for “a process where movements and community members aren’t only asked for their input, but are at the decision-making table, side by side, with decision-makers shaping legislation and policy.”

These politicians are not alone. Across the country, movements are increasingly demanding that elected officials adopt the concept of co-governance, and dozens — if not hundreds — of candidates backed by grassroots coalitions have embraced it.

In taking this stand, elected leaders and the organizations that back them are investing in an idea that a large swath of the public has likely never heard of, but one that is nevertheless gaining traction in progressive politics. So what does “co-governance” really mean? Where does it come from? What kind of problems does it seek to solve? And does it really represent something new in how organizers are approaching electoral politics?

Those promoting co-governance describe it as a new relationship between social movements and the

staff are laid off, volunteers go home. Even when they prevail, movements go bust and are demobilized.

During this latter period, newly elected politicians are sent off with hopes that they will become progressive champions. Their interactions with movements may be limited to a few specific asks, however. Otherwise, it is only once an elected official is deemed to have betrayed their grassroots base and need to be “held accountable” that activist energies are reignited. Outside of being occasional targets for protest, politicians are largely left to their own devices — until a fresh election cycle gears up.

Way to Win, a group created to organize donors to support progressive efforts, [points to](#) the ups and downs of this cycle as “one of the biggest frustrations we’ve heard from groups in states.” Local groups “are

## “Movements are vying for political power — is ‘co-governance’ the answer?”

candidates they help win office — a partnership in which activists and elected officials work to maintain a long-term relationship, closely coordinate strategy and advance grassroots priorities. But while this may be a compelling ideal, it is a devilishly hard one to realize in practice. The question of whether social movements can make co-governance a reality could well determine how far they can go in shaping the future of U.S. politics.

### Beyond boom-and-bust elections

Behind growing interest in co-governance lies a key question: “What happens when we win?”

In the United States, social movement involvement in electoral campaigns often moves through a boom-and-bust cycle. The boom comes before election day, when organizations invest large amounts of time, money, energy and volunteer power in revving up large field campaigns in order to get an endorsed candidate into office. But after an election, the cycle of mobilization ends: field offices are dismantled,

flooded right before elections and then experience droughts right after.” Meanwhile, grassroots candidates can feel abandoned: “For elected officials that have been supported by movements, the transition to office can be stark, and they often need support to effectively govern.”

Maurice Mitchell, national director of the Working Families Party, further discussed this problem in a 2021 [roundtable](#) in *The Forge*: “One of the things that we tend to do — even with our cherished movement candidates — we do all this work that’s really intensive, really expensive from the standpoint of our time, our labor, our money, our psychic energy in order to get somebody elected, and then we drop them off in city hall like we’re dropping them off at daycare,” he argued. “And then when they do something or say something that we feel is misaligned with us, we respond [with] dismay or disappointment.”

Co-governance, as a theory and an emerging set of practices, represents an attempt to break out of these patterns and to foster a more constructive relationship between politicians and social movements.

Instead of a cycle that peaks with major elections every two or four years, co-governance prescribes a more continual engagement, where grassroots groups form enduring partnerships with movement candidates. Ideally these elected officials are leaders who have been recruited from their ranks and are bolstered by ongoing coordination with movement organizations once in office.

“We must insist on representatives who will share governing power,” [writes](#) Lizeth Chacon, executive director at Colorado People’s Alliance and Colorado People’s Action. “Co-governance means

**“Instead of a cycle that peaks with major elections every two or four years, co-governance prescribes a more continual engagement.”**

that elected officials are actively working with our communities — not corporate lobbyists — to draft policies and to move them forward together. It’s about finding innovative ways to ensure that the people who are most harmed by structural racism and our profit-first economic system are part of co-creating the solutions.”

All this is easier said than done, of course, and the dilemmas involved are hardly new. Yet the fact that so many organizers are reaching for a new approach to governing reflects a number of noteworthy developments on the U.S. left. In turning to the language of “co-governance,” they have worked to give name to an ideal that had previously been desired, but rarely defined.

## **Taking co-governance out of the academy**

Before community organizers began to adopt the idea and give it their own politically charged meaning, co-governance was scarcely ever referenced in U.S. politics. Instead, over the past two decades, the term has appeared in a variety of other contexts.

In countries such as [Canada](#) and [New Zealand](#), the concept is used to describe various arrangements between tribal authorities and the state concerning the stewardship and [control](#) of natural resources. Penn State professor Rebecca Tarlau has [used](#) the term “contentious co-governance” to describe how the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, or MST, has alternately clashed with and worked within the state to promote its model of rural education, a model that could have valuable [lessons](#) for U.S. activists. Other scholars, however, have used the term in ways that veer much further afield — and sometimes do not involve social movements at all.

Among [academics](#) in fields related to government and public administration, the language of “co-governance” started popping up with some regularity in the [early 2000s](#) and [appears](#) alongside concepts including “[co-creation](#),” “co-management” and “collaborative leadership.” Scholars use the term to describe initiatives in which local “stakeholders” outside of the formal structures of the state are invited to play a role in government projects, often at the municipal level. In this vein, organizers of a major international conference on co-governance in October 2021 convened hundreds of academics and municipal planners to [discuss](#) how to create more “inclusive cities” — or, when they succumbed to more jargony impulses, to explore “intersubjective and multi-sector collaboration in the construction of public policies.”

The cornerstone example of such [citizen engagement](#) comes from a medium-sized city in southern Brazil. Shortly after the leftist PT, or Workers Party, took power in the regional capital of Porto Alegre in 1989, they began a “participatory budgeting” initiative in which ordinary residents met in local assemblies to collectively decide how a significant portion of the municipal budget would be spent. In recent years, the model has been widely replicated. Ironically, in Porto Alegre itself, the initiative has been suspended since 2017, as rivals who bested PT officials in local elections have worked to roll back the party’s legacy.

The Porto Alegre example is a relatively politicized one. But many other participatory governance projects are promoted on non-ideological grounds, [supported by](#) institutional partners as staid as the

European Union or the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Among the “public-private partnerships” and “stakeholder initiatives” held up as models are a [community banking](#) program in Australia; efforts by a water company in the U.K. to [listen](#) to input from community members and thereby improve customer service; and a [web portal](#) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, established for citizens to suggest municipal improvements.

Most of this is far removed from what grassroots radicals in the United States mean when they talk about co-governance. At most, there is evidence of a small amount of overlap between academic and activist worlds: For example, in developing their vision of co-governance, organizers in Minnesota report having looked at some case studies in participatory democracy from Brazil. But, by and large, U.S. organizers have given the term their own unique meaning. In exploring co-governance, they are asking questions about how organized movement groups can gain a type of political influence typically reserved for the wealthy and well-connected, and how — through partnership with elected grassroots candidates — they can take control of key functions of the state.

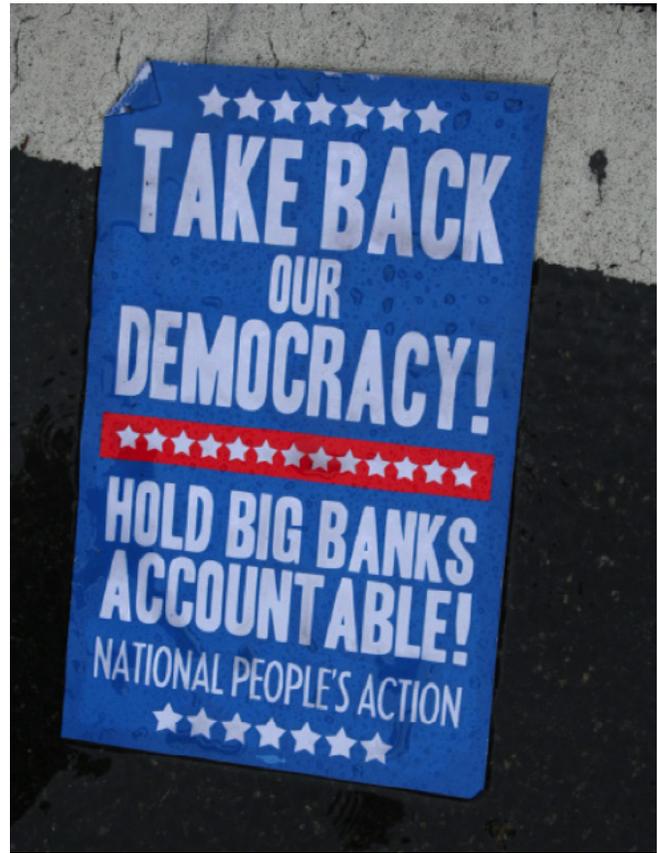
In other words, movements are vying for power, and better city web portals are not what they have in mind.

## A movement moment in electoral politics

Why has this new rhetoric of co-governance taken hold in the last few years? Two main reasons stand out. One is specific to the world of community organizing, and the other reflects the wider state of the U.S. left.

At the forefront of the current push for co-governance is People’s Action, one of the nation’s most prominent networks of community organizations. The group claims a base of more than 90,000 members, spread through more than three dozen groups in 28 states. Under the leadership of George Goehl, who recently [finished](#) a 14-year tenure as the network’s executive director, People’s Action has reevaluated some of the core tenets that once undergirded its members’ work.

One of them is a distaste for elections and party politics. Many community organizers since the 1960s, working in the [lineage of Saul Alinsky](#), have been bred on the idea that their job was to be a thorn in



the side of the political establishment, regardless of who held office. “For most of our organizing history,” Goehl says, “it’s been about being on the outside of the building throwing rocks and kicking up dust. The approach was designed to win the best thing possible in the existing political landscape, and not really to change that landscape altogether.”

While there have always been exceptions to this bias in the community organizing world — and while some networks, including ACORN, had longer-term electoral engagements — deciding to venture into this realm involved a notable reorientation for People’s Action. “It was a big shift,” Goehl says. “We decided that for too long we’ve been letting elections happen to us, and we’re going to make them happen for us.” As part of this process, member organizations formed 501(c)4 affiliates, which can formally endorse candidates. By the 2018 cycle, People’s Action and its state affiliates were involved in hundreds of races, and they helped [win](#) seats in several dozen congressional

contests, 10 gubernatorial races, 115 down-ballot races and 10 ballot initiatives. By 2021, the group's Movement Politics program — which had only been created a few years prior — had trained more than 1,000 grassroots leaders to run for office or manage campaigns, and it was taking at least partial credit for electing more than 400 officials nationwide.

Winning elections gave rise to a new set of problems. “It’s been great,” Goehl says. “But I think pretty quickly we ran into the experience of having elected serious progressives, without it really resulting in much. We figured out that we needed to have a very clear strategy of what we’re actually building with the people we elect.” This motivated a deeper dive into ideas about “governing power” and ultimately co-governance.



“The term itself was hardly even in existence in 2017... when People’s Action began a structured internal conversation around the idea,” writes longtime community organizer David Hatch, former director of Reclaim Chicago and founder of The People’s Lobby. Since then, People’s Actions affiliates — in particular, advocates in Minnesota, Colorado and Chicago — have been major drivers in promoting the adoption of co-governance concepts.

Consideration of the idea, however, has not been confined to community organizing spaces. Indeed, its rise in popularity has much to do with a wider shift on the U.S. left, fueled in large part by the galvanizing 2016 presidential run by Sen. Bernie Sanders. The example of a candidate who openly identified as a democratic socialist, ran an unabashed campaign against the country’s wealthiest

1 percent and won 23 primary states — from Maine to Nebraska to West Virginia — suggested potential for other progressive populist drives, especially at the local level. Sanders, who has been a speaker at People’s Actions gatherings, propelled that network’s push on elections. “Bernie came on the scene, and it started to just superpower our recruitment of candidates,” Goehl says. “At our next convention, we had almost 100 people from a low-income and working-class base get up and say they would run for office. Without question, he was the storm that came in and blew through.”

Bernie’s impact was not limited to one network. The Sanders campaign resulted in the massive expansion of Democratic Socialists of America, or DSA, and a redoubled commitment within the group to doing electoral work. This, combined with the continued growth of existing groups such as the Working Families Party and the rise of new ones including Our Revolution, Justice Democrats and Way to Win, meant that progressives were entering the fray with an intensity not seen in recent memory.

Leo Panitch, the late political scientist and co-editor of the *Socialist Register*, contended that it represented a change in disposition for the left away from the distinctly anarchist sensibility that had prevailed in the decades following the end of the Cold War. “From the continent-spanning anti-globalization protests at the turn of the millennium to the rapid spread of Occupy Wall Street... the predominant mood reflected a widespread suspicion, if not disdain, for any political strategy that involved going into the state,” Panitch wrote. “And then, rather suddenly, there seemed to be a widespread realization that you can protest until hell freezes over, but you won’t change the world that way.”

With electoral insurgencies in Spain and Greece, as well as drives by Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Sanders in the United States, the dominant mood shifted. Increasing polarization in U.S. party politics further advanced the trend: In polarized times, elected officials are more oriented to their most vocal supporters, rather than the hypothetical “median voter” that drives “triangulation” strategies. And so progressive-leaning politicians are ready to reciprocate interest from a social movement base and entertain the idea of “co-governance” more readily

than before.

For its part, DSA's efforts have led to the largest number of elected socialists in more than a century. Today more than 120 DSA members hold positions nationwide, ranging from high-profile members of the Squad (such as U.S. Reps. Rashida Tlaib and Jamaal Bowman) to county treasurers and members of local planning commissions. DSA-endorsed city council members currently hold office in upwards of four dozen U.S. municipalities. Not surprisingly, since most electoral campaigns involve coalitions of supporters, there is significant overlap between these wins and the ones claimed by the Working Families Party, Our Revolution, People's Action, Sunrise Movement and other progressive groups. So, while the extent to which each group uses co-governance language varies, there is significant spillover in the discussions taking place across organizations.

All of these groups must wrestle with common, and newly urgent, issues of how to interact with insurgent candidates when they transition from being outside long shots to seated officials. As reporter Rebecca Burns recently wrote in *In These Times*, "before Sen. Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run, the question of what dozens of socialists would do if elected wasn't even much of a question." Now, it is a pressing one.

So far, coordination between movements and candidates has been closest in city politics, but

awareness of co-governance practices has filtered up to the federal level, gaining a foothold among members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, their staffs and affiliated institutions. "When we did an event with members of Congress, a bunch of Hill staff, and movement leaders, they were all using that language and talking about bridging the inside and outside," says Leah Hunt-Hendrix, a Way to Win co-founder, remarking on the organization's work this fall. "That conversation and those relationships have progressed a lot, especially this past year."

Capitalizing on the movement moment in electoral politics, grassroots groups are working to counteract conservative efforts to influence politics. As many have observed, it can be said that co-governance is already a common practice — but only among the wealthy and powerful. "One of the clearest ways that we've seen co-governance has been between elected officials and corporations or developers, folks who have money," says Bahieh Hartshorn, an organizer who has worked with People's Action and TakeAction Minnesota, its state-level affiliate. Hartshorn notes that such business lobbyists are typically the ones coordinating with staffers and writing the text of bills.

Maurice Mitchell of the Working Families Party has echoed this sentiment: "Politicians have a lot of experience with co-governance, but it's generally co-governance with capital," he told *The Forge*.



“So, really, what we’re talking about is shifting the co-governance relationship to the people.”

## How “co-governance” creates a new conversation about old problems

Does “co-governance” represent a real change in how social movements are approaching the state?

For some, co-governance is a description of an ideal, rather than an already-existing set of practices or relationships. At times, the term can feel a bit like a Rorschach test, a vague set of progressive principles that remain open to diverse interpretation. Especially for progressive political operatives who have wrestled with these issues for decades, the practical difference between co-governance and long-established models of “lobbying” or “accountability” can seem unclear.

The need for movements to figure out how to deal with elected officials is not new, of course, and there have been [previous efforts](#) to articulate how movements needed to think about actually wielding [power](#). “A phrase we used in the 90s was ‘from grievance to governance,’” says Dan Cantor, one of the founders of the Working Families Party.

Furthermore, certain movements have had long-standing histories of being involved in electoral politics — organized labor being a prime example. Unions’ practice of deploying endorsements, money and volunteer support in order to gain political clout in politics has perennially made them a foundational part of the Democratic Party’s donor base. In recent decades, there have been multiple [examples](#) of central labor councils becoming powerhouse political brokers at the municipal level, at times running union officials or rank-and-file leaders for public posts and winning.

Yet even with awareness of such antecedents, there is a good argument that the push for co-governance has made several valuable contributions to the current political debate. Four are particularly noteworthy.

First, community organizing groups have created a public discussion of dynamics that are normally left up to political wonks and high-level leaders. Instead of just having an organization’s political director managing relationships with politicians, as might typically be the case, the co-governance approach

has been to engage the entire membership around these issues. “We send people through week-long movement politics and co-governance trainings,” Goehl says. “We have curriculum on it. So, for sure, we deeply believe in training the troops.”

The unusual breadth of this discussion has contributed to a more robust pipeline of rank-and-file movement participants choosing to run for office. And this connects with a second important contribution current advocates of co-governance have made: They have forced politicians themselves to engage in a conversation about the need for substantive partnership with grassroots organizations. “In all of our questionnaires around screening, and in our candidate forums, we’ve started asking them

**“[T]he concept of co-governance helps challenge the view of power that sees politicians acting by themselves, on the basis of their good judgment and personal convictions.”**

how they see themselves co-governing with our movements,” Bahieh Hartshorn says. “That’s when I started seeing elected officials in Minnesota use that word a lot more in their campaign literature and stump speeches. And with that shared term, we could then start building out a framework for what the relationship would look like.”

Not surprisingly, a commitment to co-governance is strongest among candidates that come directly from the movement’s ranks and go through trainings by community organizations. These leaders are far preferable to ambitious outsiders coming to grassroots groups to seek endorsement after they have already decided to run, driven by more conventional views of what makes a worthy elected official — and, typically, by a swollen sense of self-regard. But even among more standard political hopefuls

seeking endorsement, the concept of co-governance helps challenge the view of power that sees politicians acting by themselves, on the basis of their good judgment and personal convictions. Instead, it focuses attention on the organized forces that shape how governing happens and reminds politicians of their commitments to the people who elected them. Speaking of his experience with The People’s Lobby in Chicago, Hatch adds, “We asked politicians this question: ‘Will you keep a log of how much time you spend with lobbyists and commit to spending at least equal amount of time with people from the community and labor?’ We never enforced that. But I thought it was a great idea.”

A third contribution of co-governance is that it encourages movements to pursue a less transactional attitude toward electoral power. While unions and other progressive groups exercising political muscle typically have focused on a narrow set of legislative asks, co-governance is oriented toward broader vision. “What’s different is that we’re agreeing on long-term strategy, versus ‘how we’re going to get this bill passed,’” Goehl says. “And we are creating agreement on what needs to be built to execute that strategy.”

Finally, the push for co-governance has encouraged efforts to enrich the dialogue around how movements think about their electoral work. Advocates have put forth new concepts and made useful delineations: A tool called “[The Power Onion](#),” for example, distinguishes between instances in which movements have access — which means being able to get meetings with a public official and perhaps share information — and influence, where movements “get a call BEFORE [a] decision is made” and have some ability to affect the outcome. Access gives a dangerous illusion of power, but in truth falls far short of it. Influence is far preferable, but still significantly thinner than a true co-governance relationship, which seeks a much deeper level of alignment.

By identifying problems that arise in co-governance and attempting to address them with codified best practices, organizers are creating theory about the relationships between movements and the politicians they help elect — even if they do this theorizing

in an unusual fashion. “We believe in what we call ‘Go, Set, Ready,’” Goehl says. “We try something, see what happens, and then we’ll learn quickly from it.” In organic-intellectual fashion, People’s Action and their allies are working to develop and refine movement ideas that emerge in response to real-world dilemmas. New curricula and trainings formalize and disseminate what is learned, converting insider expertise into widely shared knowledge.

“In Minnesota, we’ve seen how co-governance has created shared language that both the movement and electeds can use,” Hartshorn says. Movements have long wrestled with how to place their champions in positions of power, and then how to manage the relationship with those representatives once they are seated in government. Many of the dynamics and difficulties of that task remain unchanged today. Yet in their current push for co-governance, organizers are taking a step toward fashioning a common vocabulary that can add something fresh to social movement practices. As that language spreads nationwide, it is fueling a conversation that fits a political moment in which social movements are entering into electoral contests and exploring the possibilities of insider power in a more dedicated fashion than they have in decades.

“We don’t know how to co-govern yet,” Goehl says. “But we feel certain that we have to figure it out.” ■

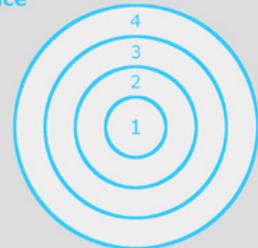
#### Power Onion of Co-Governance

**4: Demands** – We are on the outside looking in, making credible demands of people in power. With our allies, we stand in solidarity.

**3: Access** – We can get a meeting with someone in power and possible notification after a decision is made. Allies show solidarity and maybe share information.

**2: Influence** – We have some ability to affect outcomes before a decision is made. We strategize with electeds and coalition allies.

**1: Compass** – No matter the crisis or opportunity, our values and ideology point us – electeds and allies – to the same stance or action. We are the government and it is us and we can create structural change. This is difficult to imagine but what we aim for.



(Power Onion courtesy of Dan McGrath / TakeAction MN)



## Part II: Five Practices and Five Pitfalls of Co-Governance

The past decade has marked an era of mass protest. From Occupy Wall Street to the Movement for Black Lives, from #MeToo to the anti-Trump resistance, from pro-immigrant marches to mobilizations around climate change—some of the largest protests in American history have helped transform public consciousness and placed issues of injustice on the public agenda. Yet they have not always translated into meaningful change at the level of legislation and public policy. Lawmakers in Washington, D.C., city halls and state legislatures around the country are slow to act on movement demands, and the support of even ostensibly sympathetic politicians has often amounted to little more than rhetoric.

Recognizing that they need champions in government, social movements have responded by taking

as “movement governance,” “collaborative governance,” or “inside-outside politics,” co-governance refers to a set of practices through which social movements and elected officials can coordinate and strategize together on the exercise of state power.

Lizeth Chacon, Founding Executive Director at Colorado People’s Alliance and board president of People’s Action—a leading network of community groups promoting the concept of co-governance—argues that under this model, “Elected officials need to treat us not as votes to be won but as partners in governance, beginning on—or long before—the campaign trail.” Or as Way to Win, a group created to organize donors to support progressive efforts, put it: “Co-governance is deep representation, it is what democracy should look like.”

## “What happens after movement-backed politicians take office?”

an increasing interest in electoral politics. Today, the dividends of this investment are starting to show: community activists have taken seats on city councils, progressive district attorneys have unseated “law-and-order” incumbents, and left-wing members of the Squad have joined the U.S. Congress. But even as movement champions take office, grassroots groups are facing a sobering realization: Sometimes winning an election is only a start. Figuring out what to do next is something movements have not adequately planned for.

To address this challenge, an increasing number of organizers and movement groups have promoted the idea of “co-governance.” Once an obscure concept rarely mentioned outside of academic circles, the term is taking on a fresh life and meaning in U.S. politics as grassroots organizations employ it to describe a radically reimagined model of partnership between movements and politicians.

Sometimes used alongside other terms such

Answering the call by movements, elected officials from Minneapolis to Philadelphia to New York City and beyond have embraced the concept. Jillian Johnson, Mayor Pro Tem for Durham, North Carolina and a longtime community organizer, recently told *The Forge*, “I have tried to put my philosophical commitment to co-governance into practice as much as possible with groups that share my values and share my goals.” And progressive Denver City Councilmember Candi CdeBaca declared on the campaign trail, “I am running because I believe we can rise together through responsible growth, people-centered transportation, and co-governance of our city.”

With the concept gaining traction, organizers are beginning to take stock of what it means in practice: What are the mechanisms of co-governance, and what are its pitfalls? A review of how movement groups across the country are applying the framework shows that, while co-governance is still being tested, its

advocates have made significant advances by asking critical questions about electoral strategy—and working to formulate a better approach for how to partner with their champions in office.

## Monolithic politicians and collective action

Co-governance starts by rejecting the idea that we can merely elect good people to office and trust them to do the right thing. The standard view of politics presented in the American media (and widely accepted by the public) looks at elected officials through a fundamentally individualistic lens. It views politicians as wielders of *monolithic* power, decisive players whose personal judgements, skills, and values shape public affairs. It focuses very little on how our economic system and the influence of monied interests profoundly limit those who seek to create change from inside the system. This monolithic outlook, with its emphasis on sole actors, stands at

odds with the core tenets of movement organizing, which emphasize the collective marshaling of *social* power to transform society.

From Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s to the Bernie Sanders slogan of “Not Me, Us” in 2020, American politics has occasionally witnessed attempts to reinvent campaigns on social movement terms. Yet, by and large, even candidates with strong organizing backgrounds default to mainstream narratives of the public servant as heroic individual.

Grassroots groups can inadvertently reinforce this tendency towards individualism. After elections, movements tend to leave politicians to their own devices for extended periods, approaching them only for occasional asks on specific issues. This dynamic generally lasts until an officeholder makes a statement or casts a vote that disappoints, at which time activists rebuke the offending official with protests or call-outs. As People’s Action [explained in the group’s 2020 platform](#), “Too often... we throw in to help get good candidates elected, but then leave it up to them to govern. We are supposed to ‘wait and see’ how they do, while they try to navigate pressure from other elected officials and big money on their own. This usually doesn’t end well.”

When organizations do engage with politicians, their interactions tend to be transactional: movements make a narrow demand, which politicians may or may not try to grant. Win or lose, the long-term result is the same: politicians come to look at movements as one interest group among many to appease.

Finally, the nature of U.S. political parties further reinforces the problem. In many other countries, parties typically have stronger ideological identities, representatives are beholden to the platforms of those they join, and party leadership has greater power to discipline representatives who break ranks. In contrast, in the United States, party platforms are generally regarded as irrelevant formalities. To run a campaign, candidates rely less on party structures than on their own public standing, individual relationships, and personal capacity to raise money. As a result, elected officials commonly vote in defiance of party leadership, and mechanisms to hold wayward members accountable are slim. This state of affairs can be seen most recently in the refusal of Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema



to back President Biden’s Build Back Better legislation, which has the overwhelming support of the party’s caucus.

How, then, can social movements combat these tendencies? Grassroots groups, which are a step removed from formal political parties, have even fewer means to make sure that the politicians they elect stay true to their principles once in office. In fact, these groups have long watched erstwhile political allies bow to personal ambition and opportunism, abandoning their movement commitments in pursuit of higher office.

Socialist organizations in the Trotskyist tradition have one solution to this problem: holding any member they elect accountable to “democratic centralism.” Under this Leninist organizational principle, members within a group debate political issues internally, but they are compelled to defend a party line publicly once an internal decision has been made. An elected official who is a loyal member of such a party would submit to decisions made by the organization’s leadership.

Having narrowly fought off a bitter recall effort in late 2021, Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant, a member of Socialist Alternative, is likely the only elected official in the United States operating under such a structure. Indeed, despite the fact that Sawant has always been outspoken about her beliefs and affiliations, political opponents decry the idea that an outside political organization might be deliberating over her votes and making decisions in line with an ideological agenda. Likewise, these critics are aghast that Socialist Alternative members refer to Sawant’s seat as “our Council office.” Such notions fly in the face of cherished ideals of hyper-individualism.

Whether or not democratic centralism represents a desirable model, it is not a practical one for the vast majority of the existing U.S. left, given that most social movements are made up of messy and ideologically diverse coalitions rather than a single entity under tightly centralized control. Therefore, these movements must find other means of forging durable relationships and fostering coordination with the representatives they elect.

This is where co-governance comes in. The idea

is to amass a set of practices that turn the exercise of governance into a movement task, where inside and outside organizing are linked, and where the politician is but one part of a collective project to deploy social power. As Maurice Mitchell, National Director of the Working Families Party, recently argued, “Individuals, even the best individuals, don’t individually have the power to undo a system. We should anticipate that the best amongst us will encounter these really tough contradictions, and it’s our duty to make sure that they’re engaged in these contradictions with us as comrades, not alone, be-

**“The idea is to amass a set of practices that turn the exercise of governance into a movement task, where inside and outside organizing are linked . . . ”**

cause no one person can transform a system.”

Mitchell adds, “To me, it’s about flipping what has been a very personal, careerist focus to something that is very much rooted and accountable to people.”

Co-governance often serves as an ideal of what the relationship between movements and their elected champions should look like. But using the concept as a model for action, rather than an abstract principle, requires looking at the mechanisms organizers have already been putting into place—and examining what is working and what’s not. As David Hatch, former director of Reclaim Chicago and founder of The People’s Lobby, argues, “What must be figured out for co-governing to flourish is for the community, [movement] leaders, and our electeds to fashion clear parameters, bottom lines, and processes that guide us in making these difficult judgments together.” In our appraisal of the framework, we have identified five practices of particular interest that give substance to co-governance as it is currently developing, as well as five common problems for movements attempting to execute this strategy.

## Five key practices of co-governance

Let's start with the five core elements of co-governance that movements have put into practice. These are: defining the participants involved in co-governing; establishing expectations for new officials; providing support and staffing; holding regular meetings for strategic coordination; and exploring shared governance through task forces and assemblies.

### 1. *Setting the table*

A first mechanism of co-governance may seem straightforward in principle, but it can be complicated in practice: Movements determine whom elected officials will co-govern with, and what groups the politician will be primarily accountable to.

“The core of leftist co-governance is a coalition of social movement organizations,” argues political analyst Vanessa Quintana in a [paper](#) for the Goldman School of Public Policy at U.C. Berkeley. In traditional electoral politics, progressive groups act alone. They form individual relationships with public officials and lobby them on their core issues. Elected officials, in turn, work to appease individual groups by meeting specific transactional requests. Divided in this way, movement groups can easily be played off of one another. In contrast, co-governance encourages a more ideological and multi-issue approach, bringing a range of voices into shared strategic discussion. This is both a strength and a challenge.

Advocates of co-governance typically form a coalition, or “table,” of participants. Hatch explains, “By ‘table’ I mean a place where people come together with the elected or electeds who are really down with figuring out some common sort of analysis and agenda.” He adds that differently sized groups are appropriate for various conversations: “Usually there are concentric circles of folks figuring out how they’re going to organize all the other people on the inside and outside into this.” At the center is a relatively small group, usually “heads of organizations and key leaders, along with electeds and their staff.”

At times, an existing structure can give shape to a coalition. In 2019, the Working Families Party used its own ballot line to successfully run move-

ment candidate Kendra Brooks for Philadelphia City Council. Since the party counts many prominent unions and community groups as members, its already-established leadership committees created a framework for cooperation when she won. Arielle Klagsbrun, a community organizer who managed Brooks’ campaign, explains: “Because she is a Working Families Party candidate, Kendra has something clear she is a part of and can be accountable to. She can see herself as a party-builder in a way that other movement electeds can’t, since they’re not building the Democratic Party and their role in building other movement organizations can be a little more nebulous. It puts her in relationship with movement groups in a very structured way.”



Beyond the foundation provided by the Working Families Party, Brooks had been a key organizer in the formation of the Alliance for a Just Philadelphia, a wider coalition set up the year before the election. In terms of co-governance, Klagsbrun says, “I think members of the Alliance specifically chose Kendra to be in ongoing relationship with, because it was like, we don’t actually know how to do this. This is very new. And so we should do it with somebody that came out of this space. And since Kendra was one of the founders of the Alliance, she is someone we can experiment with together.”

Movement interactions with Brooks, who had been an organizer herself, contrasted with the experience of groups trying to coordinate with another official governing from the left: Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner. Arguably the most progressive DA in the country, Krasner was elected in

2017 on an anti-incarceration platform with strong support from community groups such as Reclaim Philadelphia. But while he was connected to the progressive community, Krasner's role in relation to social movements was different. "He was our lawyer," explains Klagsbrun. "He was the guy who got us out of jail. But he wasn't organizing the actions." Moreover, because he ran as a Democrat, and because he was pursuing a citywide office that required a larger number of votes to win, Krasner had to interact with a more diverse base after he took office.

Although grassroots groups set up a coalition they referred to as a co-governance table to meet and coordinate with the DA and his staff, the relationship was often tense, and the table ultimately dissolved after Krasner's first years in office. Dialogue between movement advocates and Krasner continues, but now in a more fragmented manner, with groups that are working on distinct issues meeting separately with the relevant branches of the DA's office.

### 2. *Common agenda, common expectations*

A second vital practice of co-governance is setting clear expectations for elected officials up front, having them commit to the idea of collective strategizing before being elected.

Getting substantive buy-in is easiest with candidates who come from the ranks of movement organizations. As Chacon of Colorado People's Alliance [argues](#), "The most trustworthy candidates are those with a history of working for justice before they even thought about running for office, so training our community's strongest leaders to become candidates is a must." But even when candidates come from outside of movements, groups can nevertheless be proactive in setting expectations. "We ask candidates to endorse our agenda before we endorse them," says outgoing People's Action director George Goehl. "They also commit to co-governance in the endorsement process. That is key."

Trainings are another important tool that not only help in setting expectations, but in creating greater alignment around political analysis as well. As Goehl [told](#) *The Nation* in 2018, "Reclaim Chicago has run multiple elected officials through a

political-education training program that's really a dissection of the last 40 years of neoliberal policy and strategy. We do that because progressives who get elected and go into the halls of power quickly realize that neoliberalism is the baseline, the dominant politic. Quickly, their radical imagination starts to fade." Trainings help to combat that tendency, and to strengthen politicians' ties to movement groups. "We've done it for our members," Goehl explained, "so why not for elected officials?"

### 3. *Support and staffing*

Once movement candidates are elected, a third key function of co-governance is providing support and staffing. Activists are trained to think that they must antagonistically push elected officials to get anything they want. But sometimes, a different dynamic comes into play when grassroots candidates take office. "Our movement politicians, we're often not giving them enough to do," says longtime community organizer and former ACORN leader Jeff Ordower. In his experience, sympathetic elected officials have complained that while corporate lobbyists flood them with requests about development projects and business priorities—demanding attention and claiming time—these politicians can go long

**“Our movement politicians, we’re often not giving them enough to do . . .”**

stretches without grassroots groups reaching out to them about anything, contributing to the sense that they have been abandoned.

In a report-back from a 2020 retreat with several dozen organizers, elected officials, and government staffers from throughout its network, People's Action highlighted a key takeaway: "Movement Elected officials need a lot of support, especially when they come from directly impacted communities." The report continued, "We ask them to run and then throw them into very complicated systems without preparation and support. Most organizations are not funded to provide this kind of support and planning."

Ordower points out that, while corporate lobbyists are adept at providing politicians with a path of least resistance—providing pre-drafted legislation and helping usher bills to completion—activists often come only with demands, which invariably create more work for overburdened representatives. “I think folks don’t understand what the other side is like,” Ordower says. “They have a strategy at each point in the process to make the politicians’ lives easier.”

Whether through research, monitoring items on the legislative agenda, or providing advice on issues that may be outside the officials’ expertise, movement groups can work to address this gap—although this takes an investment of resources and training. “Almost none of the electeds have the capacity to really research and develop policy on their own,” says David Hatch. “They need us for that.” Groups such as the [State Innovation Exchange](#) (SiX) and [Local Progress](#) work to provide policy briefs, model legislation, and other support to progressive elected officials. Co-governing coalitions can help these officials to take advantage of such resources and adapt proposals to local circumstances.

One key question for movements is whether they should send organizers from their own groups to staff the offices of new officials. “I think movement governance needs to move beyond just the relationship with the elected, but also look at all the people who work for them,” says Bahieh Hartshorn, an organizer who has held positions with People’s Action and TakeAction Minnesota, a progressive grassroots group. “It’s about, who are the people that are scheduling their calendar? Who’s determining who they spend the most time with?”

To this end, some organizations have invested in creating a pipeline for political staff, just as they have tried to develop a bench of prospective candidates. Short of directly providing staffers, grassroots groups can make sure they serve on a candidate’s transition team, helping to determine who will receive appointments or fill administrative posts.

At times, organizers hired by new elected officials can reimagine the function of a politician’s office, turning it into a vehicle for base-building. As Sumathy Kumar, a co-chair of the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), [told](#) *Convergence*, “all the elected officials

have home offices in their districts, and these are usually used to provide services for constituents. One thing we are talking about is how to move that from direct service to organizing, so that the district office is playing a role in organizing the base.”

#### *4. Regular meetings and spaces to strategize*

After helping win six seats for members in the New York State Legislature in 2020, DSA formed a “Socialists in Office Committee” to provide a space for the elected officials and the organization’s leadership to plan together. In 2021, the committee held monthly in-person meetings, in addition to twice-per-year retreats. “We’ve now created a decision-making



process and in the last year we’ve gotten to a place where everyone’s committed to making decisions collectively, which is really cool,” Kumar [stated](#).

Meetings like these make up a fourth key practice of co-governance. Whether they take place weekly, monthly, or quarterly, coordination meetings create what New York Working Families Party leaders Sochie Nnaemeka and Nina Luo [call](#) “spaces of shared strategy,” where “legislators and movement allies [can] actually strategize and organize—discuss tactics, take assignments, and share concerns and information transparently.” Beyond allowing co-governing groups and politicians to interact, regular strategy sessions can give elected officials a sense of having a political “home” that provides an anchor apart from their individual ambitions. With regard to DSA’s experience in New York, Kumar explains, “because there are six of them, they can

sort of hold each other accountable. ‘We’re a crew.’ That helps people stay grounded.”

Strategy meetings with multiple officials can contribute to creating caucuses with teeth at the city and state levels—and potentially even in Washington, D.C. “I’m sure there’s more co-governance happening at local levels, but at the federal level it’s progressed a lot, and really fast this year,” says Leah Hunt-Hendrix, co-founder of Way to Win. The Congressional Progressive Caucus—which has grown to encompass more than 40% of the Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives—has taken steps to refashion itself as a more disciplined and formidable voting bloc. In the fall of 2020, the body adopted new rules that streamline its leadership structure, mandate greater participation in group meetings, and bind representatives—with limited exceptions—to vote as a bloc if a position is supported by at least two-thirds of its members. Hunt-Hendrix notes, “The Congressional Progressive Caucus Center now holds a movement table that started meeting regularly on inside-outside strategy.” Such developments open channels for joint action, and the hope is that they will create possibilities for more robust co-governance in the future.

### 5. Task forces and assemblies

As a final significant step toward giving concrete meaning to co-governance, advocates have pushed to open up democratic decision-making through the use of task forces, review boards, and popular assemblies. In places such as Oakland, California and Durham, North Carolina, for example, such task forces have allowed movement leaders and members of directly affected communities to have a say in shaping local plans around public safety and policing. As People’s Action contends, “We want working people involved not only in making the laws, but in implementing and enforcing them as well through oversight boards, co-enforcement of workplace standards, and other measures.”

Others, taking a cue from the example of Porto Alegre, Brazil, are calling for mechanisms that allow ordinary citizens to join directly in decision-making processes. As political analyst Quintana argues with regard to co-governance, “This framework is best coupled with elements of a participatory

democracy, such as participatory budgeting and community-driven city planning.” Recent examples include the use of public participatory budgeting in St. Louis, Missouri to distribute some \$80 million in funds from the American Rescue Plan Act during the pandemic, as well as people’s assemblies which helped determine the 20-year city plan for Jackson, Mississippi—both examples made possible by the election of movement-aligned officials, namely St.

**“It remains an open question as to whether the model can become something more than partnerships with a few diehard ‘movement candidates’ in favorable localities.”**

Louis Mayor Tishuara Jones and Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba. People’s Advocacy Institute executive director Rukia Lumumba recently argued in *The Forge* that such initiatives represent “structures that allow whole communities to be a part of the process,” and help “to envision what it means to not just have representation in government but actually have government that’s coming from the people.”

If invested with real power, task forces and assemblies can each be mechanisms of expanded democratic rule. Of course, that’s a big “if.” Lacking sufficient authority, such bodies can just as easily become excuses for delay and inaction. As the old joke goes: if you don’t want anything to get done, form a committee.

### Five problems of political partnership

Along with common practices, the process of co-governance in the United States also comes with challenges. Identifying these pitfalls can be a step toward finding ways to collectively address them. Five of these common problems are: difficulties

getting to scale; lack of buy-in from elected officials; the loss of movement leadership to electoral politics; splintering coalitions; and the tendency to revert to an adversarial relationship, rather than one characterized by reciprocity.

### 1. *Getting to scale*

A first problem confronting co-governance is that of scale: It remains an open question as to whether the model can become something more than partnerships with a few diehard “movement candidates” in favorable localities. Co-governance tends to work best with tightly aligned politicians who rise from a movement’s structures. These individuals are rare, however, and they are most easily seated in posts where activist field campaigns can mobilize enough votes to provide the required margin of victory. These factors threaten to confine co-governance to the level of city council members, school board officials, and state representatives—with the addition of an occasional mayor or district attorney.

When it comes to most city-wide or state-wide offices, movements do not have the power to sway a large enough bloc of the electorate to decide the race themselves. Therefore, politicians must seek support from a diverse range of actors that goes well beyond a single group or activist coalition. This diminishes the influence that movements have over governance. With regard to Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, Color of Change criminal justice campaign director Clarise McCants *told In These Times* in 2018, “Even with somebody as radical as he is, there are realities around the fact that he has a wide array of people to answer to.”

A renegade mayor or DA might alone be able to implement some changes. But lacking a larger faction, a small handful of elected champions often have more limited impact—especially if they hold legislative seats rather than executive ones. “When they’re one of sixteen on the city council, it’s much less about what they can do overnight,” Klagsbrun says. “It’s more about growing our movements and using the platform and soapbox so that we can elect more people and then someday have more of a majority to pass things.”

A political dialogue based around co-governance

tends to focus on getting the most out of a movement’s strongest champions. This conversation is not necessarily geared toward creating wider alliances and building up factions large enough to realign entire political parties. In politically hostile areas, the latter task means making compromises and accepting that movements may have limited control over how an official governs. In other words, a push for co-governance may not make sense outside “deep blue” areas with strong Democratic majorities.

**“[B]eing open to a phone call or a meeting isn’t co-governance. It might be access or influence, and that is a level of power. But it’s not the same thing.”**

### 2. *Watered-down commitment from politicians*

The higher the political office in question, the more fickle an office holder’s conception of co-governance is likely to be. In some places, movements have elevated co-governance as a buzzword, making it desirable for liberal politicians to express support for the strategy. But because the term is not well-defined, their commitment may be little more than lip service.

“I do think that it’s started to be watered down because of how overused it’s been,” says Hartshorn of People’s Action. “Especially in Minnesota, where it’s a continuous thing that we bring up to electeds. And I think some folks who don’t come out of the movement see co-governance as something like, ‘My door is always open’ or ‘I’m always open to input from you and from my constituents.’ But being open to a phone call or a meeting isn’t co-governance. It might be access or influence, and that is a level of power. But it’s not the same thing.”

While supportive of grassroots organizing, even some of the more progressive officials in the country

may have a limited view of what co-governance entails. In recent years, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) has repeatedly declared her belief in the idea. Yet at times she has talked about co-governance in reference to holding town hall meetings with constituents and distributing federal funding to community projects—activities that do not represent a particularly radical conception of partnership with social movements. For his part, Larry Krasner was happy to hold a monthly meeting with activist constituents. However, his office referred to it as just that: a meeting, rather than a joint exercise of power.

“I think it’s very cooptable language,” says Leah Hunt-Hendrix. “You could see businesses starting to say, ‘oh, we’re doing co-governance,’ when what they mean is lobbying for private interests instead of movements governing for the public good. So either it needs to get really defined, or it may not be a very useful term.”

### 3. *Movements losing leadership*

If co-governance does expand to a greater scale, movements will have to confront the question of whether emphasis on electoral work creates a leadership vacuum in grassroots groups. Such organizations lose much-needed talent when top volunteers become candidates or organizers move on to staff political offices. As this happens, grassroots infrastructure can erode—something that has been a major dilemma in places where social movements take over the national government, such as in Bolivia, Uruguay, and other Latin American countries.

Arielle Klagsbrun, who decided to manage a city council campaign after years of base-building work, speaks to this challenge: “I was definitely a ‘fuck elections’ person,” she says. “But I think I underestimated the soapbox that elected officials have. It can be really valuable for movement building.” At the same time, she questions whether this electoral focus comes at a cost. “I’ll say that, honestly, I have a lot of tensions with the strategy that we should just run our best organizers for office,” Klagsbrun says. “I think it decimates our movement groups. We don’t have the leadership pipelines at scale right now that when you take some of the strongest leaders out of our groups, you can find somebody else to take over

that position quickly. And then these leaders are moved to a fundamentally different turf—like fighting batshit crazy Republicans in the state capital instead of building the base. I think that can be really hard.”

**“I have a lot of tensions with the strategy that we should just run our best organizers for office.”**

Speaking about the experience of People’s Action, Goehl acknowledges the impact that having top people leave an organization can have, but he believes it is worth the cost. “Yeah, it sucks, but it doesn’t suck more than losing. And I think that’s the alternative: losing more,” he says.

“It took us a while to get to the place where we said, ‘this actually makes sense,’ and we were going to be happy that some of our organizers are going to leave to go to the staff of someone we elected,” Goehl argues. “The way we look at it is that we are building the forces that it takes to win. Some of that is inside the local organization, some of it’s in the national organization, some of it’s outside. But they’re not different things. We’re building something much bigger than just our organization. So we should be high-fiving and moon-walking when one of our people gets into the right position.”

“There’s a broader question of what kind of training and recruitment apparatus you need,” Goehl adds. “I mean, some organizations are just talent mills. They find and develop talent way better than



everybody else. You’ve just got to figure out how to be one of those groups.”

#### 4. *Splintering coalitions*

A fourth common problem in co-governance is the fracturing of coalitions. Because different constituencies have different needs, an elected official may find it easier to focus on some demands at the expense of others. At that point, activists often disagree with one another about whether to take a more antagonistic stance—at the risk of shattering the partnership.

The tension was evident in the co-governance table that met with Larry Krasner in Philadelphia, and it is amplified in the criminal justice arena elsewhere, as some abolitionists reject the concept of a “progressive DA” altogether and do not believe in collaborating with an office they ultimately believe should be eliminated. *In These Times* reporter Rebecca Burns has [documented](#) that some DSA chapters, “in Chicago, Silicon Valley and Lansing, Mich., for example — have even ended up censuring or breaking with the city council members they helped elect.” On a national level, the organization has had sometimes bitter [debates](#) about whether to censure or [expel](#) Rep. [Jamaal Bowman \(D-N.Y.\)](#), specifically for votes relating to Israel and Palestine.

In her analysis of co-governance in Denver, Vanessa Quintana expressed dissatisfaction with organized labor’s reluctance to break with transactional politics. “In any election, Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF) is a key endorsement to secure,” she [writes](#). “Unfortunately, DALF often is short-sighted in siding with political expediency in endorsing a safe candidate, often the incumbent.” At the same time, she points to problems in more radical circles that make political negotiation and compromise difficult. “Cancel culture has compounded the fear of mistakes,” Quintana observes. As she explains, “When one inevitably has a misstep, rarely is there space held for a learning opportunity. Yet, there are ample tongues to release criticism and countless hearts growing resentment. Consequently, this translates into bitter politicking with minimal space for accountability.”

Reporting back from workshops at the 2019

People’s Action national convention, David Hatch wrote about participants who feared that elected officials brokering political deals were “selling out” the movements they came from. “Clearly, the weight of experience has led many community activists to feel ‘sold out’ when our demands get tossed out once the folks who get inside the room cut the final deal,” he [wrote](#). “But increasingly, as we gain power and get closer to that room ourselves, we also struggle with the opposite problem: if we insist on an all-or-nothing approach that puts purity over progress, we can snatch defeat from the jaws of our hard-won victory.”

Hatch believes this conflict—pitting pragmatism versus principle—will always remain part of co-governance, for a simple reason: “the line between necessary and unacceptable compromise is never

**“[C]o-governance involves a fragile reciprocity, one that can feel foreign to activists accustomed to battling exclusively from the outside.”**

as clear as we’d like.” And as long as activists are prone to disagree about where the line should be, the threat of splintering will persist.

#### 5. *Not defending movement politicians*

For politicians to stay loyal, they must know that movements have their backs. And so co-governance involves a fragile reciprocity, one that can feel foreign to activists accustomed to battling exclusively from the outside. As Klagsbrun notes of the Philadelphia experience, “After Kendra [Brooks] was elected, we had to have a conversation about how do we ensure that we continue to see her as part of our movements, as opposed to treating her like any other elected—even a progressive one—that just needs to be pushed or called out. Even getting to that point was a process.”

To address this problem, in People’s Action’s

2020 report-back, the group speaks of the need to promote “collective ownership” and open new conversations about “How We Walk Together.” This involves finding processes for “healing the relationships between community, elected officials and movements—exploring where and why have we caused each other harm, and what we must do to repair that harm.”

“I think most co-governing now is just trying to do transactional a little better,” says Hatch. If true partnerships are to develop, he believes, activists must be willing to defend elected champions who take heat for pushing a movement’s agenda. As he puts it, “Politicians are like, ‘I come to this table to do all the shit you want to do. But when my ass is hanging out there, where are you?’ So it does have to be reciprocal.”

### Can it work?

As co-governance moves from being a mere buzzword to a model informed by a deep body of practice, its advocates will seek ways to avoid these pitfalls. But even then, the model is unlikely to fully replace more traditional practices of lobbying and accountability. Movements may elevate some cham-

pions who agree to serve as strategic partners, but they will still have to deal with the ambitious and the opportunistic—using protest and deal-making to extract concessions from more centrist politicians, even as they take steps toward setting better expectations with potential allies. All the while, organized money will continue working as a countervailing force seeking to consolidate political power into the hands of a few.

Still, rising interest in co-governance holds out the possibility of a breakthrough in movement engagement with electoral politics. “In a different world, and in a better functioning democracy, I don’t know that co-governance would be necessary to name,” says Hunt-Hendrix. “But because our democracy is so badly functioning, it feels important to recognize movements as political actors.”

The promise of the model is that, through collective action, social movements can counter norms of monolithic individualism and deepen avenues for participation in the use of state power. While there remain reasons for skepticism about whether they will succeed, believers in co-governance are intent on bringing a more genuinely democratic form of politics into American life. ■





## Part III: Contentious Co-Governance in Brazil

While social movements in the United States have primarily discussed co-governance in the context of electoral politics, a look at Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (known in Portuguese as the *Movement dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST) provides a different perspective on the concept.

Movements continually face the challenge of figuring out how to maintain their radical vision while also pushing for practical changes in the here and now. How do we make gains today without being fatally co-opted or compromised, especially when we're dealing with flawed institutions and very imperfect political conditions?

There are no easy answers, but the MST provides some valuable insights into how movements must remain in contention with the state, even as they try

schooling for Brazilian youth and adults, especially those living in rural areas. As of 2018, the movement was operating in 2,000 schools — with thousands of MST-aligned teachers instructing upwards of 250,000 students. Remarkably, although state and local governments fund and administer many of these schools, the MST has been able to place its own teachers and implement a radical pedagogy. This includes study of agrarian reform and social justice movements, as well as the ideas behind agroecology — a model of sustainable agriculture that rejects corporate agribusiness.

For movements in the U.S. and beyond wondering how they can engage with the system without being co-opted, the MST offers a powerful example. Many social movement scholars believe that move-

## “Brazil’s landless workers movement offers lessons on engaging the system without being co-opted.”

to burrow inside it.

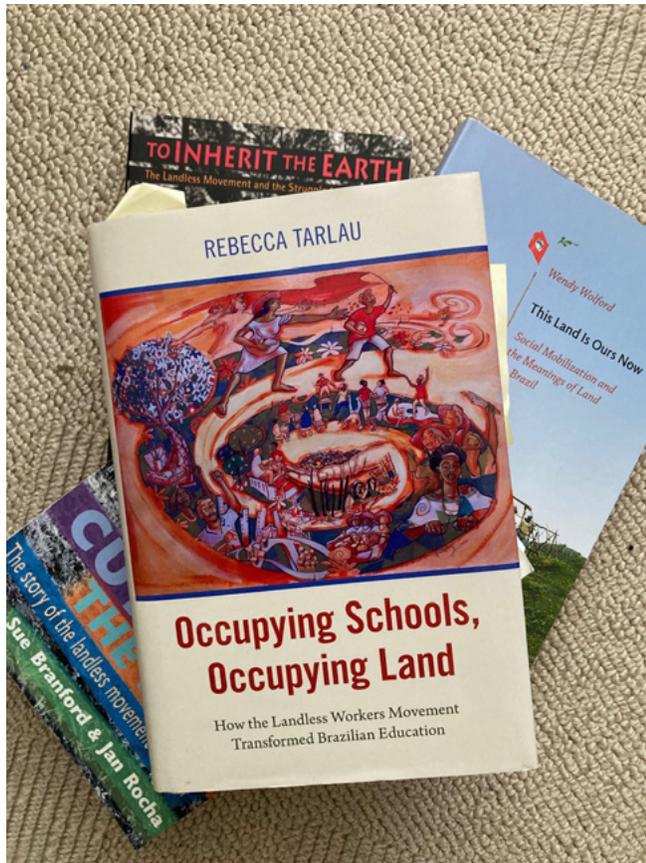
Ever since it launched its first audacious land occupations in the mid-1980s, in which groups of impoverished farmers took over unused estates in Southern Brazil and turned them in to cooperative farms, the MST has stood as one of the most innovative and inspiring social movements in the world. By 2016 its estimated 1.5 million members had established 2,000 permanent settlements throughout Brazil, with some 350,000 families winning land by organizing for their rights. By the start of the pandemic, the movement also maintained more than 170 community health clinics and 66 food processing facilities, which quickly became vital centers of mutual aid, as the group began giving out huge quantities of food to people in need.

In addition to using direct action to win land reform, the MST has pioneered a program of radical

movements can institutionalize their wins over the long term by having the state and mainstream political parties adopt their demands and programs. However, these scholars also contend that such institutionalization comes at a price: too often, as movement programs are incorporated into mainstream structures, grassroots forces become demobilized, dull their radical edge, and lose their ability to exercise disruptive power.

Rebecca Tarlau, a professor of education at Penn State University, believes that it does not have to be this way. In her 2019 book *Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers' Movement Transformed Brazilian Education*, Tarlau argues that the MST provides a model for how activists can use a strategy of “contentious co-governance” to win practical reforms from the state while also resisting cooptation.

We spoke with Tarlau to discuss this strategy — as well as the wider lessons we can learn from the 40-year struggle of Brazil’s landless workers. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



**Mark Engler:** In your book, you talk about “the long march through the institutions.” Can you explain this idea and how it applies to the MST?

Rebecca Tarlau: A lot of people associate this idea with Antonio Gramsci, although it actually wasn’t a phrase that he used. The “long march through the institutions” comes from German activist Rudi Dutschke, who was referring to how students could potentially transform universities as institutions — and also the way that students could go on to transform other institutions after graduating.

The idea, which draws on Gramsci, is that when social movements engage with state structures, they’re not necessarily destined to be co-opted. Of course, that can happen. But if you have a collective movement, thinking through structures like schools

and healthcare systems — as well non-state structures, such as unions and civil society organizations — is extremely important, because those are the institutions that people spend their daily lives in. We spend hundreds of hours in schools, in healthcare systems, in institutions that provide housing. So you can have a utopian vision, but if you’re going to affect everyday people, you also have to try to engage and transform these mainstream institutions.

**ME:** So, implicit in the idea that activists should undertake a “long march through the institutions” is the notion that they might regularly try to avoid such engagement?

RT: Yes. And that’s because the danger of co-optation is real. And also because engagement with the state is so often reduced to electoral politics. Especially in the United States, people get disillusioned with the idea that if you get someone elected, they’re going to make the change. And, first of all, that never happens, right? But also, this notion misunderstands power.

With the long march through the institutions, electoral politics is only one piece of the puzzle. I quote one of the leaders of the MST, João Pedro Stedile, who addressed a conference of MST teachers in 2015, just as Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff was being kicked out of office by conservative legislators and right-wingers were mobilizing the streets. He said, “Some people think we can just take the presidential palace and then have power. But there is nowhere in Brazil with less power than the presidential palace!” Everyone laughed because Dilma was about to be impeached. And then he said that we need to understand power differently — we need to understand it like Gramsci, who says we need to contest power in all spaces of social life, whether that’s in the media or the schools or with the land. And the MST has been doing that for a very long time.

**Paul Engler:** You describe the MST’s interactions with the state as a process of “contentious co-governance.” What does this term mean, and why does it matter?

RT: I think this is key in not getting co-opted. We're used to seeing institutional reforms at moments when social movements are really strong. And then the reform continues, and social movements die down.

One example of this in the United States in the educational sphere would be Black Studies and Ethnic Studies departments. These were born out of the Third World Liberation Front, out of the Chicano movement, and the Black liberation movement. So there was a really strong link between social movements and institutional reform. But as movements died down and the reform continued, you started to get a disconnect. I don't want to be misunderstood: there are still amazing, radical faculty in those programs throughout the country. But the departments are no longer organically linked to a cohesive social movement that is thinking about these programs as part of a larger strategy of social and political change.

For me, the idea behind contentious co-governance is that you are not just implementing a reform, you are having a social movement enter an institution as part of a broader plan for social change. That involves a lot of contention. If that plan is to radically transform racial capitalist and hetero-patriarchal systems yet you're using institutions that are within those systems, that's going to cause conflict. Because you're constantly pushing forward ideals that go against the ideals of that institution. I refer to this as "contentious co-governance."

In this model, not only does contention continue because the social movement has to keep going into the streets and mobilizing in order to keep the reforms moving forward, but it's also contentious because — if you're doing things right — you're even coming into conflict with your allies inside the institutions.

**ME: A common view in social movement theory is that movements become less disruptive, less radical and arguably less effective as they institutionalize and their programs of change become incorporated into mainstream structures — and that this deradicalization is part of the price of being successful. But you take a different position. You argue that institutionalization is, in fact, a key part of the MST's longevity —**

**and furthermore, that the MST has been able to maintain a radical vision despite undertaking a march through state institutions. Can you say more about this dynamic?**

**“For me, the idea behind contentious co-governance is that you are not just implementing a reform, you are having a social movement enter an institution as part of a broader plan for social change.”**

RT: I think the kind of process that scholars such as Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward document does happen. Social movements often get a win and then are demobilized. But I don't think that is the only path possible when a movement is doing institutional reforms. In fact, for almost 40 years the MST has been able to maintain its long-term activism partially because it provides institutional services that everyday people need.

You see this in the schools. The MST programs were the only schools in some communities. If you were from a rural area and wanted to go to high school — which is not a radical goal, but a mainstream goal for anyone who wants social mobility — the MST could provide that for you. And then in this high school, you're introduced to these really radical pedagogies that discuss how to read the world critically and understand the history of capitalism and agrarian reform. These programs force you to practice what it means to be part of a social movement, since the school systems are organized to be driven by small collectives of students. So you get transformed, and that plays back into the movement. You earn a degree that's recognized by the state, but you've also spent four years in a transformational program.

Yes, a movement could do education through

non-formalized courses. But not everyone has four years to give to a non-formal program, as compared to enrolling in a school that is recognized by the state. By using state institutions, you get a bigger chunk of society to have these radical experiences. And a lot of people stay in the movement.

**PE: It is not uncommon to see movements providing social services. But what jumps out to me about the MST is that they're getting these services to be funded by the state and yet keeping them radical. You open your book with a quote from a Brazilian activist, Antonio Munarim, who asks "How do we maintain this movement?" And his answer is, "Negotiating with the state without being absorbed." What do you think are the central practices that have allowed the MST not to be absorbed, when other movements are?**

RT: I quote another MST leader in the book named Erivan Hilário, who says, "It's only cooptation if you stop being connected to the movement." I think one reason the MST has been able to do this is they keep people involved in the movement, even when those people are a part of the institutions.

**"It's only cooptation if you stop being connected to the movement."**

For example, if you go and become a teacher, or a doctor, or an agronomist, you're still within MST, and you're still accountable to a collective body. A lot of people are broadly associated with the MST because they have gotten land through the process of land occupation or live in an MST settlement — the number of 1.5 million members comes from that. But there are a smaller number of people, maybe 30,000 to 40,000 people around the country, who are involved at a much deeper level. These are people we would say are "organic" to the movement. They're participating in the movement's decision-making spaces.

In every settlement or camp, there is one or

more "nucleus," which might be 10 or 20 people who are involved in making collective decisions. Then there are regional and statewide and national decision-making bodies that sort of replicate this structure. There are also thematic bodies — if you're part of the education sector, or the women's sector, or now there's an LGBT collective sector, you might be part of what's called an *instancia* — literally, an "instance" of decision-making within the movement. People who are part of the movement are spending a lot of time in these collective bodies, so they're held accountable.



There are other things, too. A lot of teachers or even agronomists who are MST leaders will be asked to give a part of their salary to sustain the movement. This is a huge debate in some of the circles: How much should teachers give? Should they give up half their salary? Teachers don't make that much, so it's a big deal that this gets decided in collective decision-making spaces. But if a person decides, you know, "I don't want to give up a fourth of my salary," they might leave and no longer be organic to the movement. But I would argue that they've still been influenced by the movement because they got their job through an MST degree program and they've gone through this collective process.

**ME: Apart from the money, just the investment of time involved here seems tremendous. To be working full-time as a teacher or a state agronomist, and then also going to all these meetings in the evenings — that's a big commitment.**

RT: That's why people leave. The MST has childcare at every meeting, so if you have a kid you can bring them. But it's still really intense. I know a lot of folks that have husbands or wives who are not OK with having their partner spending so much time there. That usually breaks their relationship or breaks the person's relationship with MST. It's similar to the U.S.: It's hard to be a full-time activist, right?

**PE: How is the MST able to have its programs funded by the state? Is it dependent on having a sympathetic political party in power?**

RT: A lot of people think that the MST and the Workers Party, or PT, are the same thing — or that they're always supporting each other. But that's not true. The MST has always had autonomy from political parties. Now, sometimes their efforts do get tied to the PT: Certainly when Lula took power in 2003, that was a moment of huge expansion for a lot of MST programs. So left-wing political power is important.

But then there are locations, like in the northeast of Brazil, where there's not really a progressive political party, and the movement has a different approach. In places where you have a weak state, where the state that doesn't have much capacity to actually offer services to people, the MST has been

able to step in. In a sense, they are helping the state. I spoke with some conservative mayors in these places, who would talk to me because I'm a U.S. academic. And I'd say, "These MST people are teaching your teachers about Marxism, and you're part of the most conservative party in Brazil. Why are you OK with this?" And they'd say, "You know, our teachers need trainings. The MST is bringing in people from all over the country who have doctorates. They're offering a type of training that we can't otherwise offer. And our teachers like the trainings. So it's good for us."

Even though the state was funding something that might overthrow it eventually, in the short term it was very convenient to have the social movement doing these things.

The state isn't one thing. It is multifaceted, with various types of institutions at national, sub-national, and local levels. The MST is like water, trying to soak in wherever it can.

**ME: There's a dynamic that's inherent in Bayard Rustin's famous phrase "from protest to politics" which suggests that social movements start on the outside but gradually move towards insider roles over time. You challenge this idea and argue that "both forms of political intervention can happen simultaneously over many decades."**



**“If there’s ever a moment where you’re not protesting, you’re either no longer fighting for something radical, or you are going to lose.”**

RT: I think outside pressure, negotiation, and co-governance inside institutions all have to go together. The MST is fighting for policies — around agriculture, education, health, transportation — that not only are expensive, but that involve investing in communities that aren’t usually invested in. And then this movement is very radical and explicitly Marxist. So there’s a lot of resistance. They constantly have to organize protests, both to get these policies implemented and to continue the policies afterwards.

I think there’s a lesson there: If there’s ever a moment where you’re not protesting, you’re either no longer fighting for something radical, or you are going to lose. Because if you’re fighting for something radical, there’s going to be resistance that has to be overcome.

Even when you win, you need protest to defend your institutional gains. In 2010, the MST was challenged by the judiciary in Brazil, which said that the movement could no longer partner with universities in their higher education programs. To get the programs back, the MST had to protest and mobilize — but they could draw on all the institutional power they had gained. When the MST first started its university program, no one would work with them. But they got one university to partner on the project, and then they just grew it and grew it. By 2010, the program had become so successful in serving a population of folks who never had university access, that even university presidents were supportive. When the courts tried to interfere, not only did you have progressive politicians and people in the streets protesting, you had 52 university presidents who said, “Stop trying to cut this program that we love and support.” When you put that alongside the protests, it sealed the deal. The MST got the programs back.

**PE: In your book you mention examples in which the MST acknowledges that there is tension between organizing disruptive mass protests, on the one hand, and trying to maintain their services and do inside-game politics on the other. And yet, their movement is able to manage these tensions.**

RT: Absolutely. One example was with the MST’s first university program. The students boycotted a national exam that they were supposed to take. This basically messed up the entire program for the professors that supported them. For these professors, who had gone out on a limb for the program, the exam was really important for getting legitimacy. When the MST students boycotted, the professors were like, “never again.” The MST never did another program there. Luckily, other universities opened up. But this showed the tensions in play.

I interviewed some people about that situation. Upon reflection they said, “Yeah, that was our first program; we were so radical, we didn’t even let the professors be part of the program.” But in future iterations of these courses, faculty members became part of the collective that made the decisions. So the movement is always learning. It’s learning about when to pick a fight, when it’s worth it, and how to treat allies that may have their own interests.

**“The movement is always learning . . . when to pick a fight, when it’s worth it, and how to treat its allies.”**

The MST is constantly trying to balance the inside game and the outside game. And tensions do come to a head. If you’re too close to the government, then maybe you’ll decide to get that extra money for your rice farm, and you won’t occupy that land that’s going to cause a big conflict. My point is, the MST realizes this is a tension. They’re constantly discussing it. At times, they’ve maybe made some wrong choices, but they’re doing the best they can to navigate these issues. At this point, the MST has been a movement for 40 years, and they’ve learned a

lot. They learned that the kind of radical collectivism where everyone has to live in the same dormitory doesn't work — that you've got to give people a little freedom from the collectivity. In terms of the state, they are constantly discussing the tensions involved. They're always working to figure it out.

**PE: To what extent do you think the MST's example of contentious co-governance is relevant for people in other countries, particularly the United States?**

RT: We've talked a lot about movements providing services. I think the MST shows us that you can't just provide a service, like the state or private actors would. It has to be a service where you're prefiguring an alternative way of being. I embrace the term prefiguration: I love the idea of enacting the world we want to see in the current moment. I want to take the term back from a kind of anti-state ethos — that prefiguration is creating the world you want to see in Zuccotti Park [with Occupy Wall Street], or somewhere else outside of the confines of the state. I think you can be prefiguring an alternative world within state institutions. It's hard. The institutions are never going to be perfect. But the challenge is for us to practice what that world should look like in those spaces.

**PE: This is what you call “co-governance prefiguration,” right?**

RT: Exactly. And there are examples in the United States. Crystal Sanders has a [book](#) about how civil rights activists in particular locations, like Mississippi, were able to take control of Head Start programs in the 1960s and turn them into radical movement schools. This is different from the Freedom Schools that are often cited and that were outside the state. This is actually occupying a space within formal educational offerings.

I think Black studies and Chicano studies departments are other great examples of social co-governance in the educational sphere. But again, the problem is that the social movements that won them died down. I think that some of the radical teacher unions right now are trying to do things: The Black

Lives Matter school curriculum was created by an activist in Seattle, and then expanded by Philadelphia union activists. So there are examples.

**PE: What do you think are the biggest lessons the MST provides for avoiding cooptation?**

RT: I think in the United States we're obsessed with the divide between people who engage in electoral politics and people who are against that strategy — a position that becomes anti-state. I think the problem is we don't think about occupying other spheres of the state outside of electoral politics. State power exists in a lot of different spaces. And so we need to think about how we can solidify a movement and then find the spheres of state power in which we might be able to wield some control. I think the MST gets that from Gramsci, who they hold up as one of the movement's *pensadores*, or intellectual heroes.



**ME: Have things changed for the MST since far-right President Jair Bolsonaro came to power in 2019? Has the movement stayed intact?**

RT: Bolsonaro has been awful for working-class people, and the extent to which he damaged the gains working people have made over decades and decades is just devastating. There's also been more violence and evictions that I don't want to minimize. But in the epilogue of my book, I also make the argument that even Bolsonaro is not the Brazilian state. He is the president. But he doesn't control the multifaceted apparatus that is the state. Even as he has shut down a lot of programs, the MST is still embedded in the state and moving forward in different ways.

The most important thing I would highlight with respect to the last couple years is the MST's role during COVID. The MST has basically engaged its entire movement infrastructure to help people survive the pandemic. They've donated a ridiculous amount of food — like thousands of tons. Every

single month, farmers from across the country just bring food together from the MST and give it to poor urban areas. We call it mutual aid; they call it solidarity. They also transformed a bunch of their schools into hospitals right after the pandemic started. And they have something like 15 urban cafes that they've opened up across the country over the past five years, which are now providing hundreds of free lunches every day. I've been studying the MST since 2009, and it is the most amazing thing I've ever observed.

We won't know the long-term results of this for some time. They've gained a lot of allies, because the state was just not there. Even the private organizations were not there. But the MST was there, allowing people to survive. And you have poor folks in the urban cafes who will come and get a free lunch, and then the next day they'll ask to volunteer. Then the MST will plug them into the system. Lots of people are being connected to the movement through this solidarity work. It's just incredible. ■



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**Co-governance refers to a set of practices through which social movements and elected officials can coordinate and strategize together on the exercise of state power.**

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