

WHEN FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT IS TURNED AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY

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CONTEXT

As the November midterms approach, the federal government has escalated a coordinated pattern of using law enforcement against the organizations and individuals who make democracy work: immigrant rights groups, voting rights organizations, civil rights institutions, protesters, and the volunteers who support them. Recent weeks have brought a string of incidents. Taken together, they reveal a pattern of intimidation.

The details of each case differ, and some facts are still emerging. But the trend is clear: federal power is being used to investigate, prosecute, surveil, demand records from, and financially squeeze people and institutions that defend rights, protect voters, and hold power accountable. The aim is not only to punish those institutions but to make the public distrust them, recasting the groups that protect rights and voters as the real threat. And the tempo is accelerating as the election nears.

In Minnesota, federal prosecutors [charged](#) 15 people in June with conspiracy to impede or injure federal officers over their response to Operation Metro Surge, the deadly immigration crackdown during which agents shot and killed Renee Good and Alex Pretti; the defendants and their supporters [say](#) they were observers who monitored ICE activity and warned neighbors. In Ohio, the FBI reportedly [raided](#) the Cleveland offices of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, a voting rights group, and questioned staff and affiliates across the state. The Department of Justice [indicted](#) the Southern Poverty Law Center (“SPLC”) over its since-disbanded program of paying informants to infiltrate extremist groups, after which [three major donor-advised fund](#) sponsors blocked donations to it. And in Washington, DC, agents from ICE and the HHS Office of Inspector General reportedly made warrantless [visits](#) to legal-services nonprofits that represent unaccompanied immigrant children—the Amica Center, Ayuda, and Kids in Need of Defense—seeking financial records, and were turned away.

THE UNDERLYING SCAPEGOATING

These tactics do more than intimidate their immediate targets. Each reinforces a narrative about who is supposedly cheating, threatening, or betraying the country, and those narratives help connect the cases into a broader pattern.

- **Voting rights work recast as inherently suspect.** The FBI investigation in Ohio targets a group that registers voters in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, the urban centers where the electorate skews younger, more racially diverse, and least fully registered. Criminally investigating that group sends a message that registering Black voters and other voters of color is inherently suspect, and that their participation taints the count. This is the same narrative that drove the lie of a “stolen” 2020 election, which focused its baseless fraud claims on [heavily Black cities](#) like Detroit, Philadelphia, and Atlanta and culminated in the January 6 attack on the Capitol. The accusation does the political work whether or not any charge is ever proven.
- **Immigrant communities recast as cheaters.** Targeting providers of routine legal services for immigrant children feeds a broader narrative that immigrants are gaming public systems at the expense of hardworking Americans. That story is durable because it draws on anti-immigrant scapegoating that the administration is already stoking at full volume. And it lets enforcement against immigrants double as a warning to anyone who helps them: legal support, advocacy, and accompaniment can themselves be treated as suspect.
- **Political opposition recast as illegitimate or criminal.** The SPLC indictment and the Minnesota conspiracy charges target organizations and individuals associated with civil rights, anti-extremism, and pro-democracy work, recasting that work as deception or fraud. In the Minnesota case, the government goes further, treating observers, volunteers, and community members as part of a criminal conspiracy. Once individuals are cast not as citizens exercising rights but as criminals endangering the country, the machinery of law enforcement can be turned against them and called “justice.”

Naming the scapegoating is part of the work. These narratives are designed to isolate targeted communities so each can be picked off while others look away. Refusing the frame is how we deny these actions their cover story: registering voters, representing children, documenting enforcement, and tracking extremism are legitimate, protected activities, not crimes.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The process is the punishment. In each of these cases, the government does not need to win a conviction to achieve its goal. An indictment, a raid, or an investigation, even a frivolous one, drains resources, frightens donors, exhausts staff, and sends a

message to everyone watching: stay quiet, or you could be next. Creating that fear is the point.

This is intimidation, and it is meant to spread. When the government targets an organization for its viewpoint or legally protected work, the goal is to make ordinary people, and the organizations that serve them, afraid to register voters, document abuses, represent unpopular clients, or simply show up. Leaving these actions unchallenged risks normalizing them and inviting their spread to new targets and states.

It is happening as the midterms approach. Aggressive investigative activity into voter and civil rights groups as the midterms approach is designed to deter lawful civic participation precisely when it matters most.

An attack on one is an attack on all. These cases are connected. Whether or not you agree with any single organization's mission or methods, once the government can punish critics and target groups for their views, no organization, and no person, is safe from those in power. A healthy democracy depends on a robust civil society, a free press, and the right to organize, protest, and vote without fear.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT TO SPEAK OUT

These actions are far more dangerous when they stand unchallenged. Silence reads as acquiescence and accelerates normalization; visible, broad-based pushback raises the cost of the tactic and reassures targeted communities they are not alone. Civil society leaders across sectors, regions, and ideologies have a particular responsibility and a particular credibility here. When groups that do not always agree stand together against the weaponization of law enforcement and this intimidation, it makes clear that this is a shared defense of the rules everyone relies on rather than a partisan grievance.

POSSIBLE MESSAGES

To be adapted for your context, audience, and voice:

1. Across the country, federal law enforcement is being turned against immigrant communities, voters, civil rights groups, and the volunteers who help their neighbors. This should concern every American, regardless of party or geography.
2. You don't need a conviction to punish someone. An investigation, a raid, or an indictment, however baseless, drains an organization's resources, scares off its supporters, and frightens everyone watching. That fear is the goal. We refuse to let it work.

3. In Minnesota, people who legally observed immigration agents and helped their neighbors are being charged as conspirators, even as prosecutors quietly drop case after case for lack of evidence. In Ohio, the FBI [reportedly](#) sent more than a hundred agents to a voting rights group and followed its staff's children to school. In Washington, agents showed up at nonprofits that represent immigrant children, with no warrant, asking for their records. The SPLC, a pillar of civil rights work, has been indicted, and major financial institutions have suspended their customers' ability to donate to it. There is a pattern at work.
4. Criminally investigating organizations that help register Black voters, young voters, and voters of color suggests that doing so is inherently suspect. Treating immigrant legal-aid groups as targets feeds the false story that immigrants are cheating the country. We reject both. Participation in our democracy is not a crime, and helping your neighbor exercise a right is not fraud.
5. This is happening as the midterms approach. Targeting a voter registration organization while recycling debunked fraud claims is designed to intimidate people out of participating in our democracy. Our message to voters is simple: it is safe to register, to vote, and to help your neighbors do the same.
6. While this is happening to these organizations today, it could be any of us tomorrow. Once the government can punish people for their views or their advocacy, none of us is safe. That's why we're speaking out now, together.
7. We may not agree with every organization on every issue. That is exactly the point. The right to organize, advocate, protest, and vote without fear of government retaliation belongs to all of us, or it belongs to none of us. We stand with these organizations because we stand for that principle.
8. We reject any attempt to dress up political retaliation as law enforcement. Genuine investigations follow facts and the law. They don't follow people's children to school, target groups for their viewpoints, or time themselves to an election.
9. Alongside civil rights groups, faith leaders, voting rights advocates, immigrant communities, journalists, and everyday Americans across the country, we say clearly that this is not the country we want for ourselves, our families, or our neighbors, and we will not be intimidated into silence.

WE ALL HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY

Here's what you and your organization can do:

1. **Speak out publicly and together.** Issue statements, join sign-on letters, and amplify partners. Coordinated, cross-sector, cross-ideological voices carry the most weight and make clear this is a shared principle, not a partisan fight.

2. **Demand transparency and accountability.** Call on federal authorities to disclose the legal basis, warrants, and scope of these actions. Encourage your elected officials at every level to do the same.
3. **Practice good data hygiene as a standing discipline.** Collect only the data you need and keep it only as long as you must. Encrypt devices, keep secure offsite backups so a seizure can't erase your operation, and move sensitive coordination onto encrypted messaging. Many resources can be [found](#) at the Democracy Protection Network and the [Activist Checklist](#).
4. **Reassure the communities you serve, and keep doing the work.** Remind people that registering voters, observing public officials, protesting peacefully and lawfully, and representing clients are protected activities, and connect them to know-your-rights resources ([ACLU](#), [ILRC](#)). Then keep going, because intimidation only succeeds if it makes us stop. The strongest reply to a show of force is a registration drive that grows the following week instead of shrinking.
5. **Share only verified information.** Elevate clear, accurate information from trusted sources before rumor and speculation take hold. Be precise about what is known and what is not.

***The legal and security practices above are general best practices. Each organization should adapt them with its own counsel to fit its situation.**

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNICATING

Adapted from Over Zero's Dos and Don'ts for Responding to Violence and Intimidation:

- **Lead with the disproportion.** The scale of the response—including the agent count, and the warrantless demands—is the most damning and durable fact. Keep the distance between the government's allegation and its response at the center of the story.
- **Name the scapegoating.** Be explicit that these actions trade on stories about who supposedly cheats or threatens the country: voters of color, immigrants, political opposition. Naming the narrative helps audiences see the cases as connected and refuse the division they are meant to produce.
- **Don't repeat the accusation in order to debunk it.** Restating a false fraud or "terrorism" allegation, even to refute it, helps it spread. Use the "truth sandwich" method: lead with the true frame, reference the false claim only briefly and without amplifying it, then return to the truth. Describe instead the lawful work that is being treated as if it were a crime, and name the function these actions serve, then let the facts do the work rather than arguing inside the opposition's frame.
- **Don't lead with the worst-case interpretation.** Resist the pull toward "they're stealing the election" or the most catastrophic reading. Such framing forfeits

credibility and reduces each event to a single outrage rather than a repeatable pattern. Name the function you can document, and flag larger risks as risks rather than as the most likely outcome.

- **Be precise, specific, and accurate.** Distinguish confirmed facts from official claims. Where something isn't yet known, say so. Avoid creating a sense that the crackdown is more total or inevitable than it is, since despair is its own kind of chilling effect.
- **Activate shared identities.** Help people see themselves as part of a larger community: geographic ("we in this state"), professional ("as nonprofit leaders," "as people of faith"), and civic ("as people who believe no one should be punished for their beliefs").
- **Place incidents in context.** Connect the individual cases to the broader pattern and to the approaching election, so audiences understand the stakes rather than seeing scattered, unrelated events.
- **Acknowledge emotions, then build agency.** These tactics are designed to make people feel afraid, exhausted, and alone. Name those feelings, then move people toward action and belonging. Show that pushback is broad, that solidarity is real, and that everyone has a role.
- **Reaffirm shared values across difference.** Emphasize that defending the right to organize, advocate, and vote without fear is not about agreeing with any one group. It is about the rules that protect everyone.
- **Reject calls to crack down further.** Don't let these actions be used to justify still broader restrictions on protest, association, or speech. Acknowledge the public's real need for safety while insisting it cannot come at the cost of core freedoms.