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Resilient Advocacy: Build Your Capacity for the Long Haul

ACS has tools and strategies to help your organization stay strong, stay strategic, and keep going—even when the road gets rough.

The past six years have tested our resilience on every level—individual, institutional, and societal. From a global pandemic, to deep social and political upheaval, to the sweeping federal policy shifts of the past year, organizations across the country have found themselves in a near-constant state of crisis response.

Much of the disruption we've experienced is the result of slow, intentional, and incremental policy shifts that culminated in aggressive implementation—often behind closed doors, without warning, and with limited engagement of the communities most affected. Cornerstones of social policy, essential safety net supports, and the fundamental underpinnings of democracy itself have all been challenged. Systems that took decades or generations to build are being disabled or dismantled in the matter of months.

That cycle of reacting, pivoting, and reacting again can be confusing, exhausting, and disheartening. But fortunately, we are not alone.

What has emerged from this tumultuous period is a mass of individuals, organizations, and institutions at every level finding ways to navigate the change and committing to collective recovery. ACS has seen this awakening and resilience building across the country—including among our own clients and partners. Now more than ever, organizations need to be strategic, proactive, and built for the long haul. Many are fighting uphill battles to justify their mere existence. If that sounds familiar, advocacy isn't just one more thing on your to-do list—it is at the heart of your organization's resilience.

But what is resilience, really? Resilience is often treated as some inner grit you either have or you don't. But advocacy resilience is built —through habits, support systems, and shared purpose. And there's a playbook for it. [Longtime grassroots, community organizers have been doing this work in hostile political environments for generations.](#) They've been adapting, remaining strategic, holding ground, and passing along hard-earned lessons along the way.

This issue of *ACS Today* is your guide to resilient advocacy. We've pulled together strategies, tools, and resources to help your organization weather the storm—and come out stronger on the other side.

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5 Building Blocks for Resilient Advocacy

In this environment, resilient advocacy means thinking beyond your next campaign or communication cycle. Whether you're navigating federal rollbacks, defending existing programs, or trying to innovate in hostile conditions, here are five areas every organization should be considering right now.

1. Know Your “Why”—and Revisit It Often

When you're in crisis mode, it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Start by grounding your team in your organization's mission and values. What are your non-negotiables? What does success look like in five years, not just five days? A clear “why” gives your organization an anchor when the political winds shift—and they will. This is especially critical when norms you've relied on for decades are being dismantled faster than you can respond.

2. Build Your Coalition Before You Need It

The time to build relationships is not when you're already in a crisis—it's right now. Map your networks. Identify allies, partners, and even unlikely collaborators. Building local political power through grassroots organizing doesn't require being an elite worthy of wielding power; power is for everybody, but it requires organizing, trust building, and relationship building. It takes a lot of time. You have to believe. You have to go out and tell people what you believe. And yes—it's hard. But it's the foundation of everything.

3. Be Ready to Respond (Or Not) Strategically

When a policy shift drops or a public crisis hits, do you know when to speak and when to hold back? In politically complicated moments, having a decision framework—not just good instincts—is essential. A rapid response rubric helps your organization ask the right questions: Does this align with our mission? Is there strategic value in speaking publicly? Who is the right voice? And what's the right communication channel? When the ground is shifting constantly, you need a system, not a scramble.

NEW ACS TOOL: [Download ACS's Rapid Response Decision Framework](#) for a step-by-step rubric to guide your organization's communication when the pressure is on.



4. Invest in Your Messaging—Before the Moment Demands It

Resilient organizations don't scramble for the right words in a crisis—they've already done the work. Take the time now to develop core messages, audit your existing communication, and build narrative discipline so you're ready to speak to the moment when it arrives. In a political climate where things turn on a dime, the organizations that communicate best are the ones that prepared first.

5. Take Care of Yourself and Your People

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." –Audre Lorde

Advocacy burnout is real—and it's been compounding for years. Your team can't pour from an empty cup. Build in space for rest, reflection, and realistic expectations. Resilience is a team sport, and the most effective advocacy organizations treat their people as their most important asset. The pace of disruption isn't slowing down, so your approach to sustaining your people can't be an afterthought.

Building Community

Advocacy burnout often comes from feeling like you have to carry it all alone. You don't. The strongest advocacy doesn't happen in a vacuum, it happens in community. And when entire systems are being challenged or dismantled, community isn't a nice-to-have. It's survival. ACS has three tools to help you build community:

- ▶ **Coalition Building:** Find partners who share your values and your fight. Coalitions aren't just about strength in numbers—they're about shared strategy, resource pooling, and showing up for each other when the pressure mounts. Use [ACS's Stronger Together: Coalition Governance & Capacity](#)
- ▶ **Network Mapping:** Who are your allies? Who is the movable middle? Who are the decision makers you need to reach? Mapping your network helps you understand the landscape and identify where your voice—and your coalition's voice—can have the most impact. [Check out ACS's Network Mapping Tool for help.](#)
- ▶ **Partnership Rubric:** Not all partnerships are created equal. Develop criteria for the partnerships that will actually move the needle for your organization. Think about alignment, capacity, and reciprocity. [ACS's Partnership Rubric tool can help.](#)

Building Your Strategy

We need to be bold and take advantage of opportunities when they come. Give yourself and your organization grace in this moment. Don't feel like you've failed when you've been playing defense. In tough political climates, victories may look smaller—but they still matter. Resilience is celebrating progress without needing perfection.

Victories can look like:

- ▶ Local policy wins that protect the communities you serve.
- ▶ Securing neutrality from a key decision maker.
- ▶ Reducing harm where you can't prevent it entirely—sometimes damage control IS the win.
- ▶ Protecting existing programs and funding from elimination.
- ▶ Building infrastructure for the fights ahead.

A clear strategy is what turns those wins from a list of good intentions into momentum. ACS's [Creating a Public Policy Plan](#) walks your organization through the questions that matter most: What are your priorities? Who are the decision makers you need to reach? What's your timeline, and what tactics will get you there? It's especially useful when the landscape is shifting and you need a plan that holds up under pressure.

Building Your Message

In polarized climates, advocacy communication must be both courageous and smart. Narrative discipline—staying focused on your core messages even when the news cycle is pulling you in a dozen directions—is one of the most important (and hardest) skills for organizations to master. When the political ground is constantly shifting, your messaging needs to be rooted in something deeper than the latest headline.

Here's what that looks like in practice:

- ▶ Avoid insider jargon. If your audience can't immediately understand what you're saying, your message won't land.
- ▶ Connect to shared values. Lead with what unites people, not what divides them.

- ▶ Speak to broad public concerns. Frame your issues in ways that resonate beyond your base.
- ▶ Be courageous AND strategic. Speaking up matters—but so does choosing when and how you speak.

And when breaking news hits and everyone is looking to your organization for a response? That's when narrative discipline matters most—and when the urge to react on instinct is hardest to resist.

When a policy shift drops, a crisis hits, or the news cycle is demanding a statement, this four-step rubric helps your team quickly and confidently decide whether to respond, how, and through whom. It walks you through mission alignment, impact, strategic value, and voice, so you're making a considered call rather than a reactive one. [Download the Rapid Response Decision Framework here.](#)

ACS has other tools that can help. Use the [Strategic Communication Framework](#) to build your messaging foundation. Then use our [Messaging Boot Camp: How to Give Jargon the Boot](#) to sharpen your outreach.

Resilience as Building What Comes Next

Resilient advocacy requires forward-looking. The organizations that will come out of this period stronger are the ones investing now in the long game, even while they're knee-deep in today's crises. Recovery happens when you prioritize building your capacity while everything else is still demanding your attention.

That means:

- ▶ Strengthening your networks and deepening relationships that will matter in the years ahead.
- ▶ Training leaders at every level of your organization so your advocacy doesn't depend on any single person.
- ▶ Gathering evidence and data to support your positions and tell your story.
- ▶ Shaping narratives now that will define the public conversation later.

Remember: advocacy in just one hour a week can build real momentum over time. You don't have to do everything at once—you just have to start somewhere. Download the ACS tool [How to Make Your Case in Just One Hour a Week](#) for small, consistent actions that add up to big change.

Resources and Further Reading

Want to go deeper? Here are some resources from across the field that can help strengthen your advocacy resilience.

- ▶ **YWCA USA's Until Justice Just Is (UJJI) Campaign**—An annual campaign designed to build community among those working for racial justice and raise awareness about the impact of institutional and structural racism. Learn more at ywca.org/what-we-do/national-campaigns/until-justice-just-is.
- ▶ **Essentials for Democracy Funders**—The Democracy Funders Network offers resources and reports for donors and organizations working to strengthen American democracy, including tools for navigating an increasingly challenging environment. Visit democracyfundersnetwork.org.
- ▶ **Beekeeper Group's Future of Advocacy Report**—Insights on the evolving advocacy landscape, digital strategy, and how organizations can adapt. Visit beekeepergroup.com/thought-leadership.
- ▶ **Alliance for Justice/Bolder Advocacy**—Practical tools and trainings to help nonprofits maximize their advocacy capacity within legal parameters. Visit afj.org/bolder-advocacy.
- ▶ **ACS's Fall 2024 Newsletter: Don't Just Stand There...Do Something!**—Our deep dive into civic engagement and how it intersects with political activism.
- ▶ **ACS's E-Blast: Electoral Advocacy: What Your Nonprofit Can—and Can't Do Right Now**

Just Start Somewhere

Every step you take in building resilience brings us all closer to the change we want to see. You don't have to do everything at once. The goal is to just start somewhere. Resilient advocacy is about taking meaningful steps—big or small—to protect what matters, build what's next, and sustain the people doing the work.

So go ahead! Review your tools. Rally your people. Build your muscle. And remember—the strongest advocates aren't the ones who never get knocked down. They're the ones who get back up, together.

WANT MORE?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development, advocacy, or capacity building can move your organization forward? Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?

Contact one of our team members, call toll free at 1-877-372-0166, or visit our website at advocacyandcommunication.org.

Lori McClung, CEO

Scarlett Boudier, President

Lauren Sogor, Vice President

Allison Marker, Senior Strategist

Amber Hill, Executive Administrator

Malissa Bodmann, Strategic Partner

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

