

Funder Discussion Guide



Advocacy, Politics, & Philanthropy

A Reflection on a Decade of Immigration Reform Advocacy, 2004-2014

January 2016

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Purpose

We created this funder discussion guide as a companion to our report that The Atlantic Philanthropies commissioned about its immigration reform work, “Advocacy, Politics, and Philanthropy: A Reflection on a Decade of Immigration Reform Advocacy, 2004-2014” which can be [downloaded at the Atlantic website](#). We hope that by better understanding what guided Atlantic’s funding choices, other funders can use this information in their own work.

We have organized the guide around the underlying strategies of Atlantic’s immigration reform grantmaking. For more than ten years Atlantic invested heavily in US immigration reform. Atlantic is a limited life foundation, and for the past few years has been simultaneously continuing to work with and support US immigration reform advocates—and prepare its partners for its exit from the field. This guide is a part of that preparation. In each section of the guide, in addition to providing an overview of Atlantic’s decisionmaking, we highlight both what worked and what did not turn out as hoped, and in each case highlight reasons.

It is also important to point out what this guide does and doesn’t do. What it does is presents and discusses the decisions that Atlantic made over the course of its immigration work and the underlying rationale for each choice. What it doesn’t do is share the internal discussions and thinking that led to those choices—including other options considered or how its choices might be viewed by external groups. Therefore, at times, choices that appear very black and white were actually more a shade of grey. And in no case is it presumed that these were always the best or only choices. In fact, the discussion questions that follow each section offer individual funders the chance to ask whether Atlantic’s approach would work for them or what other considerations—as well as information—would be necessary before deciding what actions to take. Among the topics discussed throughout the guide:

- Atlantic’s overall strategy;
- Funding types and styles; and
- Collaborating with advocate leaders and other funders in a field.

We believe this Funder Discussion Guide is relevant to all funders, regardless of size, structure, program area, or tax status. The discussion contained herein is meant to describe and stimulate discussion around strategic decisions that any funder may make.

We hope these insights will be useful to other funders who are weighing similar strategic grantmaking decisions.

Background

In the early 2000s, The Atlantic Philanthropies decided to focus on funding immigration reform policy change at the federal level in the US. Comprehensive immigration reform fit nicely with their desire to focus on human rights as well as with their focus on immigrants that already existed in their Reconciliation and Human Rights portfolio. As their research into immigration reform evolved, so did their conviction that “the only lasting change would be changing the legal status of 8 to 10 million people, and the only way [for immigrants] to access justice was to become legal [and] come out of the shadows.”¹

Between 2004 and 2014:

- Atlantic awarded \$70.3 million to US federal immigration policy reform.
- Atlantic helped structure and fund three successive campaigns for comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level: Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR, 2004 to 2007); Reform Immigration FOR America (RI4A, 2007 to 2012); and Alliance for Citizenship (A4C, 2013 to present).
- Much of Atlantic’s funding in support of comprehensive immigration reform was given directly to organizations, rather than through the campaigns, though the campaigns were a major component of the Foundation’s immigration reform strategy.
- Most of Atlantic’s funding for federal policy reform was in the form of 501(c)(4) dollars.
- America’s Voice, an organization focusing on messaging and communications for immigration reform, was founded and became the communications powerhouse for immigration reform supporters.
- In June 2012, President Obama announced Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive action granting work permits and temporary relief from the threat of deportation for undocumented youth who came to the US as children. In November 2014, President Obama expanded DACA and simultaneously announced Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), an executive action providing temporary relief from deportation to undocumented parents of US citizens and lawful permanent residents.
- A series of windows of opportunity in the form of federal legislative bills have opened in the past ten years, though none have borne fruit. Particularly important comprehensive immigration reform bills introduced in Congress include: May 12, 2005: the McCain-Kennedy Bill (S.1033) is proposed and dies in committee; December 16, 2005: the Sensenbrenner Bill (H.R.4437) passes the House but not the Senate; May 25, 2006: the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA) of 2006 (S.2611) passes the Senate but fails the House; June 7, 2007: the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA) of 2007 (S.1348) fails; June 27, 2013: the bipartisan “Gang of 8” propose a landmark bill (S.744) which Democratic Senators vote for unanimously, but which fails the House.

¹ Interview with funder. (March 2014).

Selecting a Strategic Focus

Grantmakers are guided by their missions and informed by their assessments. The first step is to select a strategic focus in a given issue area.

Atlantic's Strategy

Atlantic shifted a significant portion of the field of immigration reform to target federal legislative policy change to provide a path to citizenship to as many undocumented immigrants as possible. In 2001, when Atlantic staff were designing their new grantmaking strategy, they came to the decision that to create lasting change for the then 8 to 10 million undocumented immigrants living within the US, federal immigration policy would need to change. This decision reflected the views of many key players in the field and much research and reflection by Atlantic staff. In this vein, they decided to pursue a federal legislative strategy focusing on comprehensive immigration reform, instead of other strategies at the federal, state, and/or local levels.

Implications

Atlantic's decision to pursue a federal legislative strategy influenced the field of immigration reform and created several ripple effects. The sheer magnitude of Atlantic's investment deeply affected the shaping of the field by impacting how people understood what immigration reform policy looks like (i.e., a robust federal policy change) and by acting as a magnet for additional foundations to invest in immigration reform. Atlantic's support to campaigns, centralized vehicles well-positioned to unite the field, strengthened momentum and direction for comprehensive immigration reform. While having a well-defined and powerful legislative strategy attracted other funders, it also deprioritized other strategies—strategies that may have brought relief for some people more quickly. Atlantic's support also contributed to the creation of windows of opportunity by supporting campaigns that raised the visibility of the issue of immigration reform and put constant pressure on lawmakers.

Advantages

- Focusing on a single legislative strategy helped to create a unified message across the field increasing overall visibility;
- Creating a campaign with a singular policy objective helped to galvanize the field into coordinated action;
- The influx of new funding focused on federal immigration reform attracted other funders who may not have otherwise contributed to the field; and
- The magnitude of funding devoted to federal immigration reform allowed for a more defined and powerful legislative strategy.

Disadvantages

- A strong focus on changing federal policy placed high hopes on successfully navigating Congress in a time of partisanship and gridlock;
- Focusing heavily on a single legislative strategy may have deprioritized other strategies;
- Organizations pursuing different—yet effective—strategies may have become marginalized as more funding was contributed toward a single focused strategy; and
- Focusing heavily on legislative strategy and funding ad hoc campaigns may not be the best way to build long-term sustainability of the field.

Questions for Funders

1. What are the long-term goals held by leaders in your field of interest? How do those long-term goals fit with your long-term goals?
2. What type(s) of change(s) are thought to be necessary in your field to bring about improved conditions or outcomes? Might it require policy change? If so, at which level (federal, state, local, other)? Might it require another type of change, e.g., administrative/executive, judicial, or something else?
3. What is the current state of the field? How fractured or unified is the current field?
4. Who are the key players? How do they relate to each other or work together?
5. How do the different parts of the field connect with each other? How do funders, policy insiders, connectors, and the grassroots interact?
6. What other strategies are currently employed by the field? Are these strategies competing or synergetic? Where is the field seeing the most traction?
7. Given the decisions you are considering in this area, which groups may be marginalized? How might that undercut your strategy?

Considering 501(c)(4) Funding

The choice of funding mechanisms used by foundations to support their grantees may provide constraints which affect their work.

Atlantic's Strategy

Most of the \$70.3 million contributed by Atlantic to immigration reform was in the form of 501(c)(4) funding. This funding played a critical role in shaping the tactics used in the legislative battle for comprehensive immigration reform. It enabled organizations to engage in political and electoral battles necessary for federal legislative reform. Access to these funds provided advocates with a comprehensive menu of options to engage with the opposition and pursue a strong legislative strategy. All three campaigns funded by Atlantic (CCIR, RI4A, and A4C) have used their 501(c)(4) designations to engage in more diverse legislative tactics.

Implications

501(c)(4) funding helped the field to be more effective by enabling a broader menu of tactics, including lobbying. 501(c)(3) funding was also made more effective, as 501(c)(3) research or educational materials could be used for complementary targeted voter outreach and voter mobilization. While Atlantic's 501(c)(4) funding enhanced the ability of advocates to engage in the political and electoral processes of the immigration reform movement, the influx of 501(c)(4) funds had unforeseen effects. For example, 501(c)(4) funding went to organizations that had or that could establish a 501(c)(4) entity. 501(c)(3) organizations can accept 501(c)(4) funding without setting up a 501(c)(4) entity as long as it demonstrates a social welfare purpose; however, having 501(c)(4) status can be more attractive to 501(c)(4) funders. Larger organizations, especially organizations national in scope, were more likely to have or be able to set up 501(c)(4) affiliates. Smaller organizations, often more local in scope, were less likely to have or be able to set up 501(c)(4) entities and were therefore less likely to be funded through this strategy. These circumstances led some to perceive Atlantic's strategy as adding to the power of national organizations at the expense of local organizations. The volume of 501(c)(4) dollars entering the field encouraged organizations to build 501(c)(4) structures, making them attractive recipients for these funds; however, as Atlantic exits the field and 501(c)(4) funding disappears, the overall sustainability of these structures is in question.

Advantages

- Increased ability of advocates to be engaged in political and electoral processes;
- A greater menu of tactical options available to advocates to choose from;
- Increased influence over candidates, representatives, legislatures, and governing bodies;
- More focused messaging and communications;
- Increased effectiveness of 501(c)(3) activities—501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) activities often play a complementary role; and
- Increased ability of advocates to leverage the power of the electorate to take a stronger stance and influence politics.

Disadvantages

- Organizations may need to change their existing structure in order to accept 501(c)(4) funding;
- Funders and advocates may need to reprioritize organization tactics to focus on 501(c)(4) tactics (which can be a challenge to funders and advocates to create expertise in 501(c)(4) tactics);
- Potential for increased public scrutiny when 501(c)(4) activities catch the public's eye; and
- The challenge of continued sustainability of 501(c)(4) structures if funding dries up.

Questions for Funders

8. What is the current state of the field? Which funders provide 501(c)(4) funds?
9. How might 501(c)(4) funding be an asset?
10. How might 501(c)(4) funding enhance existing 501(c)(3) funding?
11. Which organizations are eligible to receive 501(c)(4) funding? What are the implications of funding those organizations (if any)?
12. What is the potential for collaborating with other funders in order to increase the volume of 501(c)(4) funding?
13. What would it take for your organization to be able to fund 501(c)(4) activities if you don't currently have that capacity?
14. In which other areas of the field can funders focus their efforts if 501(c)(4) funding is not an option?

Working with Grassroots and Grasstops

Pressure for policy change comes from many places, and who funders choose to work with can make a big difference.

Atlantic's Strategy

Early in Atlantic's engagement in immigration reform, their funding contributed primarily to building the capacity of "policy insiders." Funding traveled through the campaigns as well as individual organizations to bolster their advocacy and policy capacities, helping professionalize these organizations, and giving them the resources needed for policy battles they faced. Lobbying and issue and policy analysis were the most well-resourced tactics during the CCIR years (2004 to 2007). As time went on, however, it became clear that the politicization of immigration reform required advocates to enter the political game. By the A4C years (2013 to present), lobbying remained a dominant tactic (made possible by abundant 501(c)(4) funds), but other complementary tactics also gained traction, specifically communications, organizing and civic engagement, and rallies.

Implications

With Atlantic's entry into the immigration reform field and its initial support to CCIR, the fight for comprehensive immigration reform was conceptualized as a policy battle—a federal policy fight waged with a "grasstops" strategy. As the field grew in experience it moved away from its initial conceptions and evolved to focus more on engaging and activating the public to create a powerful, national movement with enough momentum to sustain pressure on Congress to get the job done.

The move from focusing on grasstops to grassroots signaled a growing realization within the field that to impact *policy* it must impact *politics*. CCIR was primarily meant to engage in lobbying policymakers. In its early days the campaign did not heavily pursue civic engagement, voter registration, voter mobilization, community organizing, and other forms of electoral engagement. But after the Senate failed in June 2007 to pass the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (S.1348), a reflection and learning convening of advocates led RI4A to shift its tactics in an attempt to be more effective, focusing instead on electoral tactics to bring the field more fully into political fights. RI4A saw this focus on the grassroots as an avenue to gain more leverage over policy.

Advantages

- A grasstops strategy can enable quick movement and execution of a policy goal; and
- A grassroots strategy can provide the political cover necessary to encourage policymakers to take action on your issue.

Disadvantages

- A grasstops strategy may fail when an issue is highly politicized and policymakers do not feel they have the support of the electorate; and
- A grassroots strategy is a long-term strategy and might not be particularly effective if it is only supported as a short-term endeavor.

Questions for Funders

15. Is your issue more benign or more politicized? How might this environment affect your strategy?
16. What might be some indicators that your funding will be best allocated for a policy fight? What might be some indicators that your funding will be best used for a political fight?
17. How might a grassroots strategy advance your issue? How might a grasstops strategy advance your issue?

Collaboration Options with Funders

Decisions on whether or not to collaborate with others already investing in an issue area may have far reaching implications.

Atlantic's Strategy

When Atlantic entered the US immigration reform field, it tended to make solo, strategic grantmaking decisions. On one hand, Atlantic made it a point to identify talent and skills in the comprehensive immigration reform field, channeling funding into that talent and those skills to build robust organizations, campaigns, and a communications machine. On the other hand, it chose not to join the Four Freedoms Fund, a funder collaborative that had recently been formed to strategically align philanthropic dollars within the immigration reform field. Atlantic maintained its approach of making solo, strategic grantmaking decisions for the duration of its immigration reform support.

Implications

The immigration reform field was already well-established by the time Atlantic began its comprehensive immigration reform funding. As a newcomer, Atlantic may have been expected to align its funding with other grantmakers in this area. It gathered information from these other funders about the field, but ultimately did not collaborate in setting strategy. Instead, it acted independently of other funders, creating and funding campaigns for federal legislative change. It then encouraged other grantmakers to contribute to these campaigns. The influx of Atlantic dollars, to some, acted as an enticement to also fund immigration reform: the field was increasingly well-resourced and well-poised for success. Ready-made campaigns existed that could easily receive funding, making action easier for grantmakers. However, many grantmakers were rubbed the wrong way, feeling ignored or bullied.

Advantages

- Acting independently can further the best interests of your organization;
- Acting independently can facilitate creating innovative grantmaking practices;
- Acting independently can allow you to be nimble in grantmaking: no need to wait for consensus on grantmaking and/or strategy decisions; and
- Collaborating can afford funders opportunities to leverage resources and experience, and build trusting relationships.

Disadvantages

- Other individuals and organizations in the field may feel bullied or ignored if you forego collaborating;
- Going it alone may result in missed opportunities for coalition building that otherwise may help advance the work of the field;
- Not collaborating increases the possibility of pitfalls in areas that may have been otherwise avoided because of missed opportunities to learn from the experience of others; and
- Collaboration may not be the most effective or efficient way to fulfill your mission, as coming to consensus can be a slow process and requires compromise from all parties.

Questions for Funders

18. Are you entering a new field? Who are the established funders and advocates? What are the existing dynamics among players already in the field?
19. What might be some reasons to work through and align with key actors within a field? What might be some reasons to take a different tack and diverge in your strategy from the field?
20. At what point does strategic divergence undercut the work of others working towards similar goals? Does the field just need more funders? Or would the field benefit from more strategies?
21. What gains might be had through collaboration? What might you lose through collaboration? What might you lose through not collaborating?

Supporting Leadership

Resourcing existing and emerging leaders in an issue area is often an endorsement of their strategy.

Atlantic's Strategy

Over the past decade, Atlantic relied on influential individuals and organizations in the immigration reform field to carry out their work toward comprehensive immigration reform. These individuals and organizations were seen as the experts in the field, and were instrumental in shaping strategy for the field. Stable grantmaking from Atlantic allowed for stable individual and organizational leadership, particularly amongst these key influencers. During the CCIR years, much of Atlantic's grantmaking focused on inside-the-Beltway strategies. Inside-the-Beltway leadership, therefore, remained stable over the years. Later, the field grew as a whole to include more grassroots and immigrant leadership, increasingly reflecting the heightened complexity and diversity of the field.

Implications

A steady supply of resources has been a constant feature of the field, creating some space for new leaders such as DREAMers. However, a small set of leaders who were present for the beginning of Atlantic's efforts has remained largely in place over the past ten years and has been steadily supported by Atlantic. This leadership was appreciated by some for the stability it provided, but criticized by others for stymieing the development of new and diverse leaders. Stability has been an asset, providing consistent guidance and recognized leadership. Conversely, because it has been so stable, it has been criticized as limiting the emergence of new ideas and new leaders (who may have wanted the field to move in new directions). There has been some growth in new leaders, especially among immigrants and organizations working with immigrants. The growth of the grassroots movement in the past few years has surfaced new leaders and strengthened existing leaders as well, though often as an unintended consequence rather than a purposeful part of the federal legislative strategy.

Advantages

- Long-term intellectual capital developed and sustained in the field;
- Trusted partners and deep relationships built between funder and grantees and between grantees;
- Ingrained leadership and ways of working streamline operations and decisionmaking; and
- Possibility for increased influence of established leadership: leaders who are around longer develop more relationships and may earn more credibility from decisionmakers.

Disadvantages

- New, innovative leadership and decisionmaking structures may be stymied;
- New constituencies may not be effectively engaged due to the lack of visible constituency leadership;
- Long-standing leadership may come to be seen as co-opted by the power structures they set out to change; and
- The field may be seen as "more of the same" rather than adapting to changing times.

Questions for Funders

22. To what extent is consistent leadership considered an asset to the field's development, contributing stability, continuity, and strength?
23. When is continuous leadership considered to be a weakness, as it may make a field less likely to be open to new ideas or shifts?
24. At what point should funders consider supporting organizations that are outside of this central network in the form of creative or alternative strategies that work to diversify the field's toolkit?
25. Is there a "sweet spot" in terms of when leadership change takes place? A time during movement building when new leaders emerge organically? How often is change useful and when does it impede forward movement?
26. Is it possible for funding to preserve an existing hierarchical and decisionmaking order, while still creating space for new leadership to emerge?

Ceding Decisionmaking to Advocates

A funder's decision to stay on the sidelines and trust those "in the trenches" can have a lot to do with whether advocates' strategies are oriented to the funder's strategic focus.

Atlantic's Strategy

Atlantic's role relative to the immigration reform field could be characterized as selecting the goal and the players and then trusting the players to play their best game and win the day. Atlantic was very engaged in developing its own understanding of the issue landscape and opportunities, but was more hands off than a typical grantmaker when it came to the campaign's tactical and operational decisionmaking. For example, Atlantic put incredible power in the hands of campaign members to decide how to allocate significant grant dollars. In other ways, Atlantic program officers were more hands on than a typical funder; program officers were instrumental in selecting the focus on comprehensive immigration reform and participated frequently in strategy calls. While Atlantic staff stayed in the loop with advocates and questioned and challenged their decisions, they saw their primary role as amplifying and enlarging advocates' efforts.

Implications

Atlantic's decision to rely on the existing talent and skills in the field empowered key players to collaborate and dictate strategy. Atlantic's funding was seen as an opportunity to empower and enlarge the efforts of advocates already working on comprehensive immigration reform by giving them funding and the space to make informed strategy decisions. These advocates became key players orchestrating the campaigns, and their strategic priorities dominated the field due to the magnitude of funding directed through the campaigns and to the organizations themselves. Pro-immigration reform groups that were more peripheral to federal policy reform saw their alternate strategies minimized, effectively marginalizing these peripheral organizations.

Advantages

- Central field advocates saw Atlantic's hands-off approach as trust, validating their direction and efforts;
- Strategy was set by organizations operating in the trenches, who had a better idea of the full landscape of immigration reform;
- Key advocates increased their collaboration and coordination in order to operate the campaigns; and
- The close ties between the field advocates and Atlantic allowed for a back and forth that helped identify strengths and gaps in the field and where further funding was needed.

Disadvantages

- Ceding decisionmaking and strategy decisions to key players in the field marginalized more peripheral immigration reform groups; and
- Ceding control of strategy direction to these key players reduced the diversity of possible tactics used to support comprehensive immigration reform.

Questions for Funders

27. Who are the key players/experts within your field of interest?
28. To what extent can you draw on the knowledge of field experts when making strategy decisions?
29. As a funder, how central do you want to be in establishing the guiding strategy of your portfolio? Of priority tactics used by grantees?
30. How do you currently interact with the field? To what extent do you partner with your grantees? How do your actions impact the direction of the field?
31. How might you partner with established talent existing in your field of interest?
32. How might these partnerships change the current structure or balance of the field?
33. Which advocates or other organizations stand to gain from your involvement in the field? Which ones stand to lose? What do advocates gain and lose?

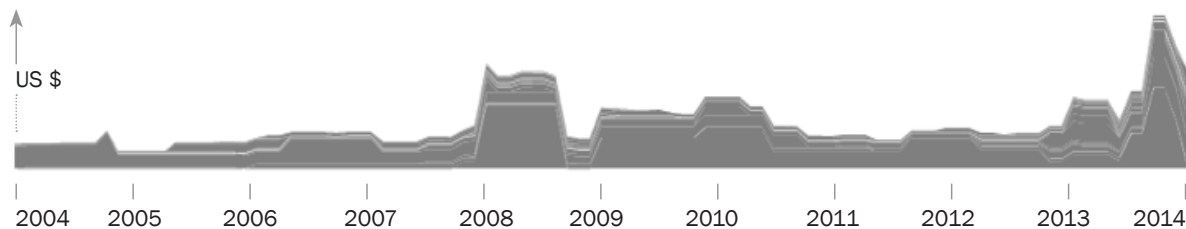
Providing Ongoing and Flexible Funding

Policy change can take years and is often unpredictable. Funding timelines and styles have real implications on advocate capacity across issue areas.

Atlantic's Strategy

Over the course of 2004 to 2014, Atlantic's grantmaking was a mix of patient capital and timely resource infusions. During this period, a consistent level of funding—patient capital—was maintained and was supplemented at key times with additional resources, often to attempt to create or take advantage of windows of opportunity.

The Shape of Atlantic's Grantmaking Dollars, 2004- 2014



The steady stream of funding supplied by Atlantic maintained focus on the issue of immigration reform over a relatively long time horizon. These ongoing funds also contributed to stable organizations and stable leadership in the field. Organizations were able to staff and maintain an organizational priority of immigration reform. Flexible funds were used in times of opportunity—to create opportunities for the field to advance or to take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. For example, timely resource infusions occurred in May 2008, January 2010, and February 2013.

Implications

Atlantic's approach to grantmaking allowed program officers a fair degree of latitude to increase and decrease funding to best support advocates. This flexibility enabled Atlantic to be proactive in supporting the Foundation's ongoing priorities, and reactive in adjusting its funding strategy as needed to respond to contextual and political changes. This flexibility was instrumental in giving the field the leeway it needed to adjust tactics as needed to both create and take advantage of windows of opportunity.

Advantages

- Patient capital allows the capacity of the field to be maintained especially during periods without windows of opportunity;
- Longer-term, steady funding allows for the creation of windows of opportunity and positions advocates to be able to react quickly to emerging opportunities;
- Funders that are able to adjust their funding strategies relatively quickly are more likely to provide support best matched to the field's most pressing needs; and
- Providing patient capital and flexible grantmaking allows a funder to be proactive and reactive.

Disadvantages

- It may be difficult to build a case for continued funding during periods of few windows of opportunity;
- The fruits of a patient capital funding strategy may take decades or even longer to see;
- Flexible grantmaking may be difficult to offer given the confines of some grantmaking institutions; and
- Flexible grantmaking may be viewed as overly reactive and disconnected from a longer-term, cohesive strategy.

Questions for Funders

34. How might your foundation provide patient capital? How might your foundation allow for providing nimble, flexible funds within a strategy?
35. Is your organization able to adjust its funding strategy as needed to capitalize on potential windows of opportunity?
36. How might grant dollars be structured to allow for more flexibility to adjust to changing contexts and opportunities that may emerge in a way that is both strategic and thoughtful?
37. To what extent is your foundation poised to support long-term funding strategies (i.e. patient capital) versus funding shorter-term strategies?
38. Does your foundation have the ability to ramp up and/or scale back funding in response to changes in your field or issue environment?

Summary of Questions for Funders

Selecting a Strategic Focus

1. What are the long-term goals held by leaders in your field of interest? How do those long-term goals fit with your long-term goals?
2. What type(s) of change(s) are thought to be necessary in your field to bring about improved conditions or outcomes? Might it require policy change? If so, at which level (federal, state, local, other)? Might it require another type of change, e.g., administrative/executive, judicial, or something else?
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7. Given the decisions you are considering in this area, which groups may be marginalized? How might that undercut your strategy?

Considering 501(c)(4) Funding

8. What is the current state of the field? Which funders provide 501(c)(4) funds?
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13. What would it take for your organization to be able to fund 501(c)(4) activities if you don't currently have that capacity?
14. In which other areas of the field can funders focus their efforts if 501(c)(4) funding is not an option?

Working with Grassroots and Grasstops

15. Is your issue more benign or more politicized? How might this environment affect your strategy?
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Supporting Leadership

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A Reflection on a Decade of Immigration Reform Advocacy, 2004-2014

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