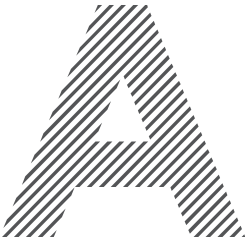


Building Civic Bridges through a Lens of Racial Justice

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s I write this, our country and our world are facing the worst public health crisis in living memory. At the same time, democracy in the United States and around the world is under severe strain. In the United States, we are experiencing political and social polarization, deepening economic inequality, and widespread racial injustice that is apparent in law enforcement and every other public system.

It is urgent that philanthropy invest in a dramatic expansion of civic bridging through an explicit lens of racial justice. This form of civic bridging entails multiracial, multiethnic relationship building, the creation of opportunities for people to share their stories and develop bonds of trust, and a deepening public understanding of the meaning and impact of structural racism on local communities and the whole country. Only as we build the capacity for this kind of civic connection in our local communities can we as a country develop the collective will and energy that will be required to create equitable solutions to serious, long-standing public problems. When civic bridging through a lens of racial justice becomes a core part of our civic life, people of all backgrounds will come to understand that our country cannot work well for some of us if it is not working well for all of us.

In making the case for focusing specifically on racial justice in civic bridging, I am drawing on my longtime experience as head of Everyday Democracy, a national civic organization that supports dialogue for equitable community change with a view toward advancing a more authentic, just, and participatory democracy at all levels of society. We have learned a great many lessons from colleagues and community partners across the country over the past three decades.

Early in our work, we came to understand that building civic bridges through an explicit lens of racial equity is foundational to a strong democracy. Building civic bridges—that is, people coming together to practice the art of civic association—“lies at the center of America’s self-understanding.”¹ Doing so through an explicit lens of racial equity makes it possible to address the rot at the heart of the American system—an underlying assumption of white superiority that was built into our founding and runs like a thread through our history.

We can trace this thread through the massacre of indigenous peoples and the explicit acknowledgement in our Constitution of slavery as a fundamental part of our country’s governing structure.² After the Civil War and the formal emancipation of enslaved peoples, that thread continued through post-Reconstruction policies that undermined racial equality for Black citizens: Jim Crow-era policies and practices, restrictive immigration policies, discriminatory home lending (“redlining”), and other government-backed policies that promoted housing segregation and other forms of disinvestment in Black communities. For decades, our country has experienced persistent “opportunity gaps” in education, tragic racial disparities in health outcomes, and a system of mass incarceration that perpetrates racial injustice on a massive scale.

As a country, we have never learned or confronted this history in a meaningful way, which has made it possible for public leaders to ignore or distort the factors that have impeded our national

progress. Many of them have used racist rhetoric and imagery to stir up white fears of “the other” to stoke division and shore up political support. Our country’s growing racial and ethnic diversity has been cast as a threat to the well-being of white Americans and the “American way of life.”

The spread of these fears has been made possible by the absence of education about our history and reinforced by the widespread separation of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds from one another. As Beverly Daniel Tatum has pointed out, the maintenance of structural racism does not require explicit buy-in from white people, many of whom unwittingly benefit from a system built to provide them with unearned advantages:

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. . . . Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around. . . . But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.³

The fact that structural racism has been invisible to so many white Americans has made it difficult to create systemic change. Recent psychological research underscores that point. Harvard professor Mahzarin R. Banaji has explored the patterns of long-term attitudinal change in several areas over the past decade. Noting the relatively rapid change in attitudes toward sexuality and the increased public support for gay marriage, she posits that this change was possible in large part because most heterosexual people have gay friends and family members whom they love. In contrast, “It’s hard for bias-challenging, face-to-face contact to take place when African Americans . . . , for example, are not well integrated into neighborhoods or social spaces due to both present-day and historic discrimination.”⁴ Building on that analysis, it is important to consider that most white Americans have gone through their lives without close friends or family members of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, they have failed to gain an empathetic understanding of the ongoing costs of racism to individuals and communities. This may help explain the comparative lack of support for systemic changes needed to secure racial justice.

This is related to the matter of public will. In a democracy, public understanding and public will are critical to achieving sustained changes in social relations and public policy. It has proven particularly difficult to create sufficient public will for racial justice because a vicious cycle has established barriers to justice that are mutually reinforcing. In this cycle, the very systems that

were created to give unfair advantages to white people have made it difficult to create the kind of civic bridges that could nurture the empathetic, multiracial relationships that could build public will for justice.

Important examples of this are residential segregation and other forms of disinvestment in Black communities. Created by laws and policies explicitly racist in their intention, segregation has been a major driver of white Americans' lack of awareness of racial injustice. Racial and ethnic segregation, which is still the norm in most places in the United States in 2020, has not only reinforced inequality but has made it difficult for people to establish relationships of mutuality and caring with people of racial and ethnic backgrounds different from their own.

A significant result of this dilemma is the ongoing racial and ethnic gap in educational opportunities and outcomes that has plagued public education in this nation since the early 1900s. In 1954, the Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down almost fifty years of legalized racial segregation in public schools. Yet, to this day, it has proven difficult to institute educational equity in systematic, meaningful ways. In part, this is because unequal education is related to many other inequities that have been created by policies and practices—in housing, jobs, criminal justice, and health care, for example—that unfairly disadvantage people of color. And with ongoing segregation, the widespread public will that is necessary to create and sustain equitable education for all children still does not exist.

The task of building civic connections across race and ethnicity and with a deep understanding of how racial inequity has shaped our public life is both difficult and paramount. Without widespread empathy and the deep understanding that people of all skin tones and cultures are an essential part of the American family, it will remain challenging to build public will for addressing racial injustice.

There Is Hope

These challenges are complex and daunting, but they are not insurmountable. The late US Representative and civil rights leader John Lewis reminded us of the importance of hope and sustained courage. There is evidence of a growing consciousness of the reality of racial inequality, and there are calls to live up to a powerful part of our core values as Americans—that is, respect for the dignity of every person as essential to the American experiment in democracy. There is hope because leaders of every background, in every generation since our founding, have worked to make this ideal a reality. When some white Americans mistake our current reality as the embodiment of our democratic ideals, they demonstrate their lack of understanding of the work that remains to be done.

In this moment of pandemic and protests, more Americans of all backgrounds are recognizing that something must be done, and many are looking for on-ramps into conversation and action that can lead to meaningful change. There is a serious need for civic bridging through a lens of racial equity. Just as bridges are a critical part of our physical infrastructure, bridging is foundational to our “civic infrastructure.” Such a civic infrastructure would support and maintain opportunities for multiracial, multiethnic relationships and power sharing and provide training for institutions and individuals to become civic bridge builders. There is also an urgent need to recruit and nurture leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and habits of the heart that are necessary to advance racially equitable community engagement, problem-solving, democratic governance, and public accountability.⁵

Building this infrastructure will require public and private investment. These investments will help lay the foundation for our country’s ability to become a strong, multiracial democracy capable of addressing the challenging issues we face.

What We Have Learned

Twenty years ago, Everyday Democracy took a public stance that racial equity must be at the heart of all civic engagement, problem-solving, and shared governance. We came to that conclusion because our work took us to so many different places across our vast country, and everywhere we went, we saw the impact of longtime, unacknowledged structural racism on people’s lives. At the same time, we made an organizational commitment to do our “internal homework.” At our founding, more than three decades ago, we were an all-white staff, filled with good intentions but lacking in knowledge about our country’s racial history. We have done a lot of learning since then, and we are still educating ourselves. We have learned from leaders of all backgrounds, across every sector, in every region of the country, and across all generations.

We have grown into a multiracial, multiethnic organization that is diverse in age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and viewpoint. We are all committed to organizational learning and internal policies that reflect our commitment to racial equity as a starting point for understanding and committing to other intersectional forms of equity. We have discovered how commitment to understanding structural racism opens the way to deeper understanding of all kinds of structural inequities. We came to understand that we could not ask communities to have difficult conversations if we were not willing to have them ourselves.

The need for “difficult conversations” is commonly mentioned in the work we do. The term deserves unpacking. Certainly, people of color are used to conversations about what it means to face racism in our society. White people are less accustomed to these conversations, and

engaging in them can produce discomfort, shame, guilt, and even anger at being asked to talk about something to which they never intended to contribute. Yet, working through this discomfort provides a way to an important psychological and civic breakthrough—a way to envision “a transformation that goes beyond an end to inequity and toward a society that centers a vision of well-being for all.”⁶ I don’t have the space here to recount my own experiences as a white leader who has been committed to this vision for many years and who is continuing to learn about racial justice every day. But I can vouch that these difficult conversations are well worth it in personal terms and in terms of organizational effectiveness. Without the transformation that comes from these conversations, we would not be able to support leaders of all backgrounds across the country as they build practices of racial equity into their communities.

Over the years, we have worked with thousands of leaders in hundreds of communities, and we have seen what is possible when people from all sectors and backgrounds have ways to bridge divides, form relationships of power sharing and mutual accountability, and stay in personal and civic relationships with one another. Through learning with community partners in places as varied as Lima, Ohio, and Los Angeles, California, we began to see patterns in what made it possible for people to come together across differences, listen to one another, dispel stereotypes, deepen their understanding of structural racism, consider the issues they were facing, and work with each other and community institutions—schools, police departments, mayors’ offices—to create greater racial equity. Working with grassroots and public leaders, we began to test processes in which cross-sector community groups could work together to organize diverse, inclusive dialogue structured to lead to collective action for individual and collective change. A number of large foundation and organizational partners have helped us develop tools and training in a variety of geographic regions and on particular issues.

People in different kinds of communities have remarkably similar visions of what a connected, engaged, equitable community should look like. Often, community foundations have helped support this local work, and sometimes a city government sees the value of funding these practices. The work of bridging and civic problem-solving requires the ongoing commitment of professional staff and volunteers across a community. Too often, leaders of these efforts carry the responsibility of this difficult work without adequate financial support. With coaching, training, and financial support, it is possible to create and sustain a racially just civic infrastructure.

What Philanthropy Can Do

There is a place for all funders in this important work, no matter their focus or scope. All philanthropic decision-makers should find themselves in at least one of these actions:

Make racial justice a core practice and goal of grantmaking through all portfolios.

For almost two decades, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) and other thought leaders and organizational partners have made a strong case that philanthropy must center racial equity throughout institutional practices and funding commitments. There is a growing body of knowledge about philanthropic approaches to address racial inequities, and an accompanying interest among funders to engage in peer learning about racial justice strategies. In recent years, and increasingly in recent days, funders have expressed a desire to strengthen their effectiveness in supporting racial justice outcomes. The current moment highlights the necessity and promise of building on the lessons of past decades. PRE's recently released *Grantmaking through a Racial Justice Lens* offers practical advice for this challenging work.⁷

Fund democracy, and do so through a lens of racial justice.

In recent years, a growing number of philanthropic leaders have committed to funding active civic engagement and strengthening democratic institutions.⁸ Within that group, a growing number are making the case that funding democracy cannot be color-blind; to be effective, it must incorporate an explicit commitment to racial justice.⁹ We join all who make these important calls.

Philanthropic investment at the intersection of democracy and racial justice must support civic bridging, leadership development, and civic infrastructure at local levels throughout our country at an unprecedented scale. *Our Common Purpose*, a report recently released by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (through its Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship), calls for large-scale philanthropic investment in civic bridging through the creation of a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure and through large-scale leadership development.¹⁰ Everyday Democracy is a champion of these recommendations. Because of everything Everyday Democracy has learned over the past three decades in its work with local community coalitions, formal and informal leaders, and state-level civic organizations, we believe large-scale investment in civic bridging through an explicit lens of racial justice can strengthen democratic capacity and infrastructure at every level of society.

Everyday Democracy has spent decades developing evidence-based, equitable practices of organizing, dialogue, problem-solving, and shared governance. Many of our colleagues are also cultivating multiracial democracy in a variety of important ways. Our anchor partners across the country provide coaching and leadership development on racially equitable civic practices as core to their missions. A range of organizations is cultivating multiracial democracy by helping people grapple with our racial history. The work of the Equal Justice Initiative, with the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, is a powerful example. Other organizations focus on tackling the racial injustice embedded in a particular public problem, such as racial and ethnic disparities in jails. A commitment to reduce and eliminate these disparities is at the heart of the MacArthur Foundation's large-scale Safety and Justice Challenge and of the local jurisdictions and communities throughout the country that are part of that work. Yet other organizations focus on cultivating particular kinds of leaders, as in the work of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), which helps local and regional government officials understand and address structural racism through institutional and community change. The Cooperative Extension Service, a long-time part of our country's civic infrastructure, is incorporating training on organizing and facilitating community conversations on racial justice into its work with university extensions in many states. And some of our other national sister organizations, including Civity, the Participatory Budgeting Project, and Mikva Challenge, to name just a few, emphasize racial equity as they support civic bridging, empowered decision making, and youth leadership development.

These and other organizations are facing unprecedented demands for assistance, as individuals of all backgrounds and a wide range of nonprofit, public, and private sector institutions are looking for ways to support racial justice. It takes leadership, training, and coaching to help people and institutions move from an emerging awareness of racial injustice to the ability to lead systemic, equitable change. Doing this at a scale that will have meaningful impact will require large-scale investments in:

- Multiracial, intergenerational leadership development both inside and outside public systems
- Building the capacity of organizations and public institutions to work in ways that cultivate and sustain authentic engagement, problem-solving, and accountability among people of all backgrounds
- Building a racially just civic infrastructure at every level of society and governance.

Philanthropy at all levels—local, state, and national—is critical to meeting this demand.

Now Is the Time to Invest in the Possible

The murder of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer on Memorial Day of 2020 sent shock waves across our country and around the whole world. Multiracial, intergenerational protests of a scale rarely seen in our country have created a growing demand for racial justice and for authentic democracy.

The late civil rights leader Vincent Harding once asked, “Is America possible?” He wondered whether our noble experiment in creating a multiracial democracy could work. Just a few years ago, not long before he died, he reflected that these were anxious times for many white people who did not understand how racism was being used to divide us and keep us from making progress. Asked if he thought it was still possible to create a democracy that worked for all of us, he answered, “Yes, but only as we make it possible.”¹¹

This is a moment of challenge, but it is also a moment of promise. The call to put racial justice at the heart of our democracy is entering our nation’s consciousness and discourse in ways our country has rarely seen. Investing in racially equitable civic bridging is a concrete, doable, and powerful way to work toward the promise of a multiracial democracy.

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Notes

1. *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 47.
2. Danielle Allen notes the racism built into the social contract of 1619 and the later prominence of racism within the political contract of 1787. Danielle Allen, “The Radicalism of the American Revolution: And Its Lessons for Today,” interview by Ezra Klein, Vox podcast, July 3, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/7/3/21311294/declaration-of-independence-fourth-of-july-american-revolution-the-ezra-klein-s-how>. In the podcast, Allen also makes the case that the Declaration of Independence asserted equality as a central value of American democracy. For a lengthier treatment, see Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright, 2015). On the Constitution and racism, see David Waldstreicher, “How the Constitution Was Indeed Pro-Slavery,” *Atlantic*, September 19, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/how-the-constitution-was-indeed-pro-slavery/406288/>.
3. Beverly Daniel Tatum, “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” and *Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 11–12.
4. “Americans’ Views Flipped on Gay Rights. How Did Minds Change So Quickly?,” *Washington Post*, June 7, 2019. For results of the ten-year study, see Tessa E. S. Charlesworth and Mahzarin R. Banaji, “Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes: Long-Term Changes and Stability from 2007 to 2016,” *Psychological Science* 30, no. 2 (2019).
5. See Xavier de Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). Briggs’s analysis of civic capacity and power-sharing relationships at the local level takes into account contexts of structural inequities and demonstrates the importance of investment in civic infrastructure. For example, see page 307 for Briggs’s description of civic relationships and trust building at the local level as foundational to democratic solutions for public problem-solving.
6. Rinku Sen and Lori Villarosa, *Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: A Practical Guide* (Washington, DC: Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2020), 1. The introduction to this guide offers a useful distinction between the concepts of “racial equity” and “racial justice,” which is beyond the scope of this article but worthy of consideration.
7. Sen and Villarosa, *Grantmaking*.
8. See Joe Goldman’s comments in “Can Philanthropy Save Democracy?,” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, October 1, 2019.
9. Stephen Heintz, “For Philanthropy to Achieve Its Goals, Democracy Must Work,” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, July 2, 2020. In this opinion piece, Heintz, one of the co-chairs of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, cites the commission’s recommendation to build a

National Trust for Civic Infrastructure. See also “PACE Members Announce Nearly a Quarter-billion Dollars in Commitments to Racial Justice,” *Medium*, July 20, 2020, <https://medium.com/office-of-citizen/pace-members-announce-a-quarter-billion-dollars-in-new-commitments-to-fight-systemic-racism-and-da817c9bb2e4>.

10. *Our Common Purpose*, 47–50.
11. Vincent Harding, “Is America Possible?” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being* podcast, July 2, 2020 (originally aired February 24, 2011), <https://onbeing.org/programs/vincent-harding-is-america-possible/>.