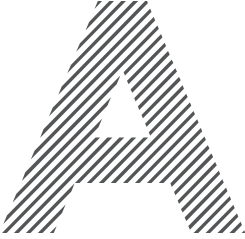


# Conformity Culture



**JANET TRAN**

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute



crossed her mind.

And then, a visible discomfort crept over her face. Her previously warm and friendly expression dissipated, and I could feel the company line emerging even before she opened her mouth. She assured me that she was only joking. After all, her notable foundation has accomplished so much for underserved students, considering our mounting societal problems. She maintained that philanthropy was duty bound to tackle long-term problems and not to be tempted by swift triage. She recited a little more of her foundation's well-researched theory of change and its unwavering commitment to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. She then graciously offered that she knew I was speaking in jest, as well.

I accepted her gesture of including me in this return to orthodoxy and changed the subject. After all, in gazing around at those milling about the lavish marble hallway of this reception space, why would anyone assume I was any less complicit in this view than anyone else? I certainly understand that there is a difference between charity and philanthropy. However, what I had wanted in that opening conversational gambit was to explore the levers of change and incentives to prevent ill-informed debt acquisition. I wanted to say that a well-educated citizenry is the last bastion of a functioning democracy. Students who borrow large sums of money and do not complete their post-secondary goals will inherit a compounding debt that will likely further erode their faith in institutions. It's a dangerous recipe that converts potentially educated individuals into skeptics.

I should have continued my half-hearted dissent, but I chose to conform. That conversation lingered with me. Why was there a need to be so binary? What changed that woman's demeanor? What prevented me from laying out the complexities and working out a problem with a peer? Why, in a field of people who hoard advanced degrees, was there not a space for intellectual dissent? The challenges of the next ten years are vast, but dissent is a critical part of the solution. First, we need to teach it, and then, more importantly, philanthropy needs to live it.

## **The Origins of Binary Thinking and Polarization**

As a teacher, I would often joke that we were raising the multiple-choice generation. But it turns out that, from an early age, students are taught that there are good guys and bad guys, winners

and losers, rights and wrongs. Breaking out of a true-or-false paradigm after years of schooling is complicated. This binary thinking is not helpful in the workplace when clear answers are not readily available and definitely not helpful when trying to solve political polarization.

Many attribute the root causes of deep polarization to broken politics or underfunded journalism.<sup>1</sup> However, the ability to rationalize and conceptualize beyond polarization ought to be a skill set taught in schools. Research suggests that individuals with more extreme views are less adept at metacognition and less reflective about how they are able to perform on other tasks.<sup>2</sup> Philanthropy needs to address this by investing in civic learning at an early age to combat the toxic polarization abroad today. An array of civic learning opportunities—in content, skills, dispositions, and identity—should be available to the next generation of Americans if we want to preserve a liberal democracy in this country.

Philanthropic organizations, like the vast majority of Americans, purport to support civics, but the flow of foundation dollars says otherwise. Few people are against civic learning; most are generally in favor of the concept, even complimentary. However, parents do not call school boards and actively demand more civics for their children. What exists is essentially a passive demand.

In an attempt to remain neutral, foundations use the lack of market demand as an excuse for merely dabbling in civics. Foundations don't want to get political even as the world becomes increasingly unable to navigate the political. A tepid interest in creating a national civic curriculum has emerged, but without a yearlong civics course, this is not a case of "if you build it, they will come." High-quality civic learning will not occur without building a business case and an active demand. Why is an industry worth over \$75 billion in assets shy about stepping into controversial areas?

Distrust in how civics education is delivered can be categorized into sweeping generalizations. We need to teach the art of discourse and challenging conversations and cannot assume that maturity leads to the ability to deliberate.<sup>3</sup> The loudest voices will prevail unless we take a more active interest in leveling the playing field. If it feels as though we are less able to talk through subjects, perhaps the response should be to properly fund civics instead of shying away from it.

## **Dissent throughout American History**

To truly understand dissent, we need a strong understanding of the historical underpinnings of this country. Dissent was the foundation of our country's birth, and in spite of its continuing presence in every chapter of American history, dissent is actually woefully addressed in curriculum and instruction. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams are remembered for their political sparring, but stripes of every color existed among the Founding Fathers. While homogeneous in some

demographics, the signers of the Declaration of Independence were, nevertheless, incredibly disparate in their views. Years later, during the Constitutional Convention, delegates walked out of the proceedings and protesters were a constant presence on the lawn. While *e pluribus unum* is one of the great American truths, it is also one of the great American myths.

Knowing that others before us have been in our position not only provides a sense of assurance of a path forward but also gives us context in which to navigate the complexities of progress. Instead of asking to see “both sides,” those interested in civic learning should look for multiple angles. Students need to leave school understanding that nothing in history is final, and nothing is unanimous. Emancipating the enslaved does not mean there was consensus. Passing civil rights legislation, while a victory, was not the end of the journey toward equality. As William Faulkner aptly noted, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

High-quality civic learning requires recognition of the complexity of the American story. Diagnosis of political dysfunction does not mean that the cure is unity. The antidote is constructive dissent that results in compromise and progress. Philanthropy’s investment here must be significant, long-lasting, and ultimately diverse in approach.

## **The Philanthropy Conundrum**

Whereas hindsight will venerate the dissenters, the present is seldom as kind. Philanthropy, in need of humility, may find dissenting voices a solution. However, dissent in giving is often construed as ingratitude. When philanthropists are criticized for their ill-advised investments, people (including myself) are inclined to rush to their defense. Would you rather they spend their excess money on gambling, fast cars, and other selfish indulgences?

The accepted premise is that generous individuals give of their own volition and should be recognized for their good intentions. This is not, however, an accurate depiction of organized philanthropy. Foundations are *required* to give—albeit not very much—in order to live in the protection of tax shelters. The law requires them to give at least 5 percent of their assets annually, and that is as much as many of them give away each year. The debate over whether this amount should be thought of as a floor versus as the norm has been ongoing. Ultimately, the sentiment that society should be grateful for the 5 percent of the hoarded one trillion dollars that has been amassed in the hands of giants with status and power is puzzling.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals trafficking in power can plant their money in large philanthropic foundations, which, of course, begs the question: How can we fight the status quo if we *are* the status quo? Too often in philanthropy, rhetoric does not match action.

Philanthropy has the ability to get ahead of this problem, and the solution, while perhaps

counterintuitive, is an investment in dissent—not a false unity, but a concerted effort to row in the same direction as we try to lift all boats. From climate change to racial injustice, we can't afford to have nodding heads and wagging chins in the room. We actually must bring the skeptics to the table.

## **Changing a Community of Practice**

To understand how to integrate dissenting voices, philanthropy needs to recognize its role as a community of practice, that is, “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”<sup>5</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger observed that the social reproduction cycle of a community of practice can alter its trajectory and redefine its practice. One focus ought to be the recruitment of staff from populations that philanthropy purports to support.

While the outcries for diversity, equity, and inclusion persist, the reality is that individuals within the philanthropic field are naturally concerned about their self-interest and employment. With rare exceptions, program officers stay for decades or move to other foundations. Tacit knowledge is presumed to be competence, or even worse, merit, and the same voices prevail. Legitimacy and authority are often contested in communities of practice, but the source of power and wealth can often stagnate. When the actual practice is that of giving wealth, an emergence of partisanship or polarization can come into play.

Diversity of thought and representation on the staff of philanthropic organizations are incredibly important in a country as disparate as ours. There are critical voices missing from the civic philanthropy space. Funders often speak of scale and impact. How can we scale if all the people in the room, working on the problem, are similar? Without dissenting voices, our civic imagination is limited. It's not only philanthropy's privilege but also its responsibility to reimagine.

## **Racial Diversity**

The contradictions of philanthropy have been particularly well documented in their failure to authentically champion greater racial diversity and inclusion. The decrease in diversity after the Diversity in Philanthropy Project's (DPP) formal assessment and campaign of need is, in so many ways, classic philanthropy.

The DPP statement that a three-year campaign achieved “new dialogue and action on diversity

and inclusion” is not insignificant. However, imagine a grantee responding that “our impact on the diversity performance of our field is more difficult to quantify.” Absolving itself and the field from progress, DPP cited the lack of consensus and unrealistic expectations. It then noted that comparisons to the private sector were unfair.

Philanthropy administrator Edgar Villanueva has charged that “diversity and inclusion tactics have been about getting different kinds of people in the door and then asking them to assimilate to the dominant white culture.”<sup>6</sup> However, in spite of the popularity of the #PhilanthropySoWhite hashtag, there remains little accountability. Ironically, it appears that philanthropy may be immune to call-out culture.

In seeking diversity, there is a fair amount of focus on boards and leadership positions, but program officers and associates require similar attention. When grappling with power dynamics in philanthropy, the imbalance of capital, compounded by a lack of cultural competency, can exacerbate poor communications between funders and grantees.

Perhaps even more disconcerting is that while 80 percent of philanthropy staff members are Caucasian, the prevailing “woke” ethos seems to absolve foundations from diversity work. This righteous mentality has resulted in rather small crumbs finding their way to communities of color. Villanueva estimates that less than 8 percent of philanthropic dollars are currently directed to communities of color.<sup>7</sup>

Representation, rather than faux outrage, “voxxing,” and other tools of call-out culture, seems a more effective way of equitably distributing funds. The focus on leadership remains important, but a greater diversity in program officers and people closer to the ground would mean expanded awareness of the needs of communities of color that historically are not trusted with philanthropic resources.

Other best practices for philanthropies include the establishment of more thorough searches for the best places to invest money. Foundations should interrogate their own doubts about grantees that do not fit the bill. The concept of capacity is riddled with assumptions and condescension. What does your foundation mean when it questions whether grantee organizations have “capacity for money”? Even the very language of philanthropy is obtuse, with the translation work incumbent upon the grantee to navigate. With as many foundations that claim to have a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion portfolio or are seriously addressing this work, a diverse staff should not be difficult to assemble.

A few token minorities, while perhaps better than none, will not provide the necessary changes to organizational structures, however. Currently, philanthropy supports a fair number of organizations that are only marginally involved in solving racial injustice or simply insincere in their efforts. Sometimes, it can be hard to tell whether organizations with strong public personas are authentic in their calls for action. Nonetheless, I feel confident that the lived experience of Black and indigenous people of color on foundation staffs would increase competency at grantmaking to organizations committed to and effective in securing social justice.

## **Diversity of Life Experiences**

As we try to solve the problems of inequity, those who have led underprivileged lives must help shape philanthropy in the next critical decade, and while they are interconnected with race, they should not be conflated as one voice. The challenges of leveling the playing field for those in poverty are core to charity and philanthropy; their life experiences will add authenticity to foundation staffs.

The difficulty of finding this particular dissenting voice includes the limited networks of individuals who work with wealth, the lack of data on foundation staff members, and, of course, the relative lack of opportunity for those who have grown up in poverty to hone their competence to eventually work in a philanthropic foundation. Asking candidates whether they have been poor is not standard interview protocol. However, it is not uncommon for those in positions of giving, and therefore power, to invalidate the experiences of those who have lived in poverty.

In my short time in the world of foundations, I have surmised that most people operating within the practice simply do not have the slightest concept of what being poor entails. Very few people making ground-level decisions in philanthropy, let alone in leadership, have ever lived in poverty. They have read the latest journals, support poverty thought leaders, and harbor outrage and a commitment to change the lives of the poor. They can cite the research that correlates the impact of trauma and poverty on the brain.<sup>8</sup> But they do not understand the chronic, toxic, and sickening stress of living in poverty.

A few years ago, my kitchen sink leaked, forcing me to throw out a few products I had stored underneath it and forgotten. While nothing was lost of any significant value, it took a few days for my accelerated heart rate to slow whenever I thought about the leak. I suppose my partner thought I was being dramatic or overreacting. After all, I am not poor now, not by a long shot.

I share this personal story not as virtue, but as perspective. When more people who have experienced poverty firsthand are part of the field, more trust is likely to be built with impoverished communities. There will be greater ease in studying related traumas and fears and in reading the subtext and code of grantees. Place-based philanthropy simply can't exist without human capital that can speak to and earn the trust of these communities.

I was once asked, "How can poor people influence good policy?" When a portfolio is centered on poverty, it's a best practice and should be a requirement that individuals on the team have more than just theoretical knowledge about life in poverty. Policy decisions in the absence of those who have lived the struggle are unlikely to be successful. To create lasting change, we need within the walls of foundations translators and bridge builders who are trusted in the communities they set out to help.

## Diversity of Thought

Philanthropy, an extension of academic thinking, is populated by only a handful of associates who identify as right of center. Ideological homogeneity creates a host of problems. Groupthink hampers the ideation needed to solve our current crisis. In an age when tolerance of different political ideologies has dwindled, a prevalent entitlement to comfort and homogenous thinking has reigned.<sup>9</sup> How can philanthropy invest in a thriving democracy without a free market for ideas and the inclusion of members who foster different viewpoints?

It is undoubtedly challenging to find common ground in the current political environment, especially when it feels as though Americans are finding their news sources from entirely different planets. Exacerbating this information discrepancy is a deep-seated mistrust of information from what we perceive as “the other side.” Studies show us that facts and beliefs are not necessarily operating in tandem, so when presented with factual evidence counter to our beliefs, our brains simply reject it.<sup>10</sup> The partisan brain proves to be more rigid, with tribal identification increasing mental rigidity in every facet of life and on multiple objective neuropsychological exams.<sup>11</sup>

The bubble of uniformity persists because selection bias is a condition that Americans now strive for, moving further into communities that are homogeneous in thought and consuming information from sources that reinforce their own beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Differences in approach can lead to more effective solutions. Conservatives tend to center on processes, whereas progressives may lean toward programs.<sup>13</sup> Both of these vantage points bring value. So how do we temper intense polarization as a country and harness the benefits of pluralism of thought? What is philanthropy’s role in this endeavor?

To start, we need to address how polarization plays out in philanthropy, where foundations (particularly in the civic space) are predominantly populated by well-educated, left-of-center individuals. It’s difficult to represent the spectrum when right-of-center or even centrist voices are often exceptions in the room. In addition, there generally is only a small appetite for foundations that linger in the center-right space. The truth is conservative organizations are invited and tolerated with the distinct privilege to agree with others at convenings.

In February 2016, I shared with a small group of colleagues that I thought then-candidate Donald Trump had a fair chance of winning, considering how the electoral process worked. My suggestion that the election would be anything other than a landslide for the first woman president was met with mockery, anger, and an array of visceral emotions. Needless to say, later that year in June, at a gathering of civic intellectuals, I merely raised an eyebrow in silence when the room proclaimed that supporters of candidate Trump were the “last gasps of white supremacy.” Voices echoed the proclamation in self-satisfied authority while I decided against raising my hand.

Foundation landscapes are incredibly homogeneous in thought. Ironically, even those who call for resistance expect that we should “resist” in the same way. The “resistance” has explicit



instructions for being part of the movement: you have to be outspoken, clear, and without nuance or context. Thus, even in resistance, there is a call for deep conformity. In reality, dissent comes in a variety of stripes. Philanthropy's hubris in approach and confidence in direction is in stark opposition to the convoluted and intertwined webs of societal challenges.

Right-of-center foundations need to similarly take stock of their intolerant stance against leftist ideas. Ultimately, philanthropy needs to assemble a team of rivals instead of a team of yes-people. The teams need differences to be substantive enough to engender different solutions or at least to ask different questions. Cohabitation of various ideologies within foundations may yield the finding that both the right and the left are concerned about the same issues but approach them with different tool sets. Policy solutions need to ensure that incentives push us away from our most extreme versions of ourselves. In the current climate, both sides could use patience in getting to their desired results.

## **Where to Start**

Speculating about the seismic changes in a post-Covid-19 world is an endless activity, but imagining a better world is certainly a worthy investment for anyone engaged in philanthropy. We know business models have morphed overnight and some brick-and-mortar stores will never return; social life is altered dramatically for the time being and perhaps forever; city living may become considerably less attractive to Americans in the wake of the virus; and, of course, we will forever mourn the toll of invaluable human lives. But perhaps a new social contract will emerge in this world, and impactful changes will result from protests against injustice, shedding light on a more perfect union.

What do we want to preserve from the old system, and what do we want to change? With so many dire needs and challenges to triage, foundations need to be strategic. A range of best practices should be brought into play to address the most pressing needs while continuing to invest in a better future. Endowments were amassed for times of crisis, and while the trials of tomorrow are unknown, pandemics occur at least once in a century. Philanthropy can work toward rebuilding public trust in institutions and incentivize the outcomes that best support a truly democratic infrastructure.

I'm among the Americans who believe that our differences are not so great that we cannot overcome them. Feel free to disagree.

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