

Democracy and Civic Life: What Is the Long Game for Philanthropy?



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A Better, Stronger America: Together

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this collaboration between the Knight Foundation and the Kettering Foundation. The affinity between the two goes back to the early 1990s when Kettering and Knight joined forces in public journalism. The collaboration has continued, thanks to the leadership of Knight president and CEO Alberto Ibargüen. This book is one of the results of this alliance.

Crisis upon Crisis

When I was asked to write this piece, the country was flooded by a tsunami of crises. The first of these was the spread of coronavirus pandemic, which was quickly followed by a faltering economy. Then the death of George Floyd and others reignited the struggle for racial justice.

These events were occurring when the political system had already been weakened by the steady erosion of people's confidence in our major authoritative institutions, including governments, higher education, the media, and philanthropy. (Although in 2020 a few of these institutions did a bit better in the polls, the composite of all of them remained significantly below 50 percent.)¹ Even more troubling, many Americans have come to doubt that "people like us" can make a meaningful difference in what happens in our country. All of this has taken place as the United States has been suffering from partisan polarization and societal divisiveness. Deeper still, the democratic foundations of our way of life are in jeopardy. A crisis in democracy itself makes it more difficult to deal with the effects of persistent, wicked, or structural problems affecting society.

Some Americans want fundamental change while others hope, just as fervently, for a return to "normal," meaning a return to a time when they believe the country was strong and guided by tried-and-true values. Now, respect for those with an opposing point of view appears hard to come by. Just trying to understand what is happening can be contested. I don't want to be too gloomy; perhaps there are people who don't fall squarely into any camp or those who want to see change on some issues while preserving other things. Maybe there is more common ground than is being recognized. These matters are outside the scope of this piece, but there is another side to the story.

The good news is people do agree that there is too much divisiveness.² And a sense of civic duty isn't dead. Many Americans believe they *should* make a difference, and they want to, although they aren't always sure how. Local civic life has been strong, as seen in the outpouring of people helping people. Americans have reached out across dividing lines to join forces when disasters strike. Our history is a testament to the country's resilience, which was evident in its renewal after the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the threat of domination by foreign powers.

Getting beyond the Turmoil

We can hope that the present turmoil will end with useful lessons learned and lasting, constructive results. That doesn't always happen, and when it does, it's certainly never easy. I suggest that there are ways to begin to move forward, though not without difficulty, by drawing on several sources, including insights coming from the Kettering Foundation, which isn't a grantmaking organization but rather a research institution. Kettering studies the role of the public in a democracy. In doing that, we have benefited from the experiences of trustees like the late George Gallup and Daniel Yankelovich, who were public opinion experts. Today, we also benefit from a nationwide and international network of civic, educational, and other institutions that exchange research with the foundation. Many of these institutions work directly with citizens from all walks of life.

Obstacles

In meeting the challenge of getting lasting, constructive results, we first have to recognize formidable obstacles. One, which I have already noted, is that authoritative institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, have been suffering a major loss of public confidence. This lack of confidence extends to the professionals who staff these institutions as well. And it's no passing wave of dissatisfaction, either. It has been building for decades.

Many institutions have tried to demonstrate accountability and stem this disaffection with well-intentioned efforts to reach the citizenry through public participation programs. These efforts don't appear to have been effective. Even as these efforts have grown, confidence has continued to drop. Institutions often defend themselves with facts, but that defense isn't working. Maybe people don't just want more information. Maybe they want a different relationship with the institutions, one based more on shared concerns than on facts alone.

Some scholars believe that the methods being used to consult with the public have actually made the relationship with the public worse and accelerated the loss of confidence. In certain cases, these efforts have cynically been labeled as "nonsultation" because it appears that the important decisions have already been made.

Furthermore, some institutional officials mirror the public's lack of trust with their own lack of confidence in the public. Some variation of the rhetorical question, "Many of the people are quite stupid, aren't they?" is likely asked at many dinner parties in Washington.³ The distrust is mutual. However, lasting improvements to this relationship may require more than actions that institutions alone can take. Trust has to be rebuilt by both parties.

Another serious obstacle, which I mentioned above, is that so many people doubt they have the power to make a meaningful difference in our political system. Money is power, and for many Americans, that's in short supply. Influence is power, and major institutions seem unaware or deaf to what ordinary folks have to offer. Yet institutions appear to hear special interest lobbyists quite clearly. Sometimes it seems that the powers-that-be want a democracy—but one without citizens.

Still, lasting improvements aren't likely without broad public engagement. As Abraham Lincoln wisely observed, "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed."⁵ That precept still holds in the modern era. Dean Rusk, secretary of state during the John F. Kennedy and Lydon B. Johnson administrations, said, "At the end of the day, the American people are going to have to decide. No president can pursue a policy for very long without the support and the understanding of the Congress and the American people."⁵

A third obstacle has to do with public judgment—or the lack thereof. Good judgment develops only when public issues are framed so that the decisions will be made in a way that encourages people to move from their first impressions and impulsive reactions to more shared and reflective judgments. Unfortunately, controversial issues are often framed and discussed in ways that make this movement (and lasting improvements) impossible.

My friend and colleague Harry Boyte, who was on the front lines of the American civil rights movement and was later involved in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, is quite aware of how much depends on the way issues are framed. He has issued a strong warning recently against what he calls the accusatory approach to problem solving. Those being blamed may or may not be blameworthy, but they are likely to respond to accusations in a hostile manner, which dooms any possibility of working together for constructive results.

Meeting the Test of Time

Even constructive measures don't last forever. Circumstances change, new problems emerge, what were once solutions no longer work, and some reform efforts prove ineffective. For example, consider the number of efforts to reform policing that failed to have any significant results.⁶

First Steps: Reframing Issues for Deliberative Decision Making

Reforms that last long enough to make a difference endure for more reasons than can be covered in a piece like this. However, there are opportunities today to make improvements even in this time of cascading crises. As noted above, they have to do with the way issues are framed. All

the crises we face present numerous issues that require collective decisions and action. At this writing, schools were due to open for in-person classes in fall 2020. The issue was how this could be done safely, but in a way that was educationally sound and took into account the psychological well-being of children, as well. Adding to the complexity and tensions, this was also an issue of who gets to make these decisions: Educators? Health officials? Local school boards? Government officials? Parents? There are experts with useful knowledge, but there are no experts on what is the right answer. That requires exercising our best judgment. When this decision making is done deliberatively, it can accelerate the movement from hasty reactions to good judgment.

As Harry Boyte recognized, how issues like these are framed is crucial. Decisions have to be made, and there are usually several plausible options to consider. However, they will all have costs and consequences that might be difficult to accept. If the attempts at this decision making degenerate into groups blaming one another in a power struggle, it will reduce the chances that a sound decision will emerge and that all the parties will work together. That doesn't have to happen.

What Could Help?

What happens in these situations depends on whether there is a fair and careful weighing of the pros and cons of all the options, particularly the less popular ones. That is my definition of deliberation, which is the exercise of our faculty for judgment in collective decision making for collective action. Human beings have an inherent faculty for judgment. That ability doesn't have to get "up to scale." We all have it, even though, like other abilities, we may not use it when we should. People deliberate privately on personal issues like marriage and careers. But deliberating publicly with others, often with strangers, is more difficult. That recognized, you can hear elements of this deliberation in the everyday speech going on at many dinner tables. Of course, everyday conversations are often intermittent and inconclusive. Movement from first reactions to more informed judgments proceeds slowly. But it can be accelerated.

The movement picks up speed when people consider what is most dear to them, which goes deeper than interests or even "values" and beliefs do. These are the things that humans have long considered essential for their survival. These include such primal imperatives as being safe from danger, having the freedom to do what is considered most essential for well-being, and being treated fairly. Most basic of all, human beings have wanted enough control to give themselves a reasonable chance to get what they hold dear.

Everyone, except maybe daredevils, is influenced by these survival imperatives; still, in given circumstances, they can be in tension with one another. For instance, what makes us safe from danger can interfere with our freedom. Working through these tensions requires exercising our faculty for judgment. Fortunately, there are now efforts to help people recognize and use this faculty whenever decisions are being made. There are civic, educational, and other nonpartisan

organizations like those sponsoring the National Issues Forums and other deliberative exercises. Most of these efforts are local although many of them are linked in a national network. Deliberative forums held all around the country over the past 40 years have shown that the movement from reaction to judgment can be given a jump start.

Who Else Could Help?

The media frame issues every day. They might consider framings that encourage public deliberations. In fact, some have. They have considered how the public sees an issue and laid out the major options for dealing with it. (Almost always there are more than two options.) And then the journalists have pointed out the difficult trade-offs that have to be considered. Journalists at newspapers, radio, and television stations have also encouraged public deliberations by reporting on forums. The newspapers in the *USA TODAY* network and the public radio stations that make up America Amplified have done this with many of the issues in the 2020 election.⁷

Higher education also has a role to play. Colleges and universities naturally tend to see issues in expert and professional terms. Still, they could add terms people use in making decisions. These terms reflect people's experiences and what they hold dear. (Some centers in academic institutions already do this.) And there are institutions of higher education that have helped students recognize their abilities for collective decision-making and action. These institutions are writing a new chapter in education for citizenship.⁸

Grantmaking foundations have a key role to play in tandem with the media, higher education, and other institutions that are experimenting to find better ways of strengthening democracy. These institutions are breaking new ground, which requires encouragement and support. The most innovative experiments often fail, and it is impossible to know in advance what the results will be. The Wright brothers often crashed in their attempts to develop an airplane. When asked why, an air force general explained, "They didn't know how to fly." That's true for many inventors. Grantmaking foundations have played a critical role in backing risky ventures, and there has seldom been a time when our democracy needed more risk takers than we do now. Last year, the Kettering Foundation and the Council on Foundations issued a report saying that the challenges facing our democracy raised difficult questions for grantmakers.⁹ In the discussions leading up to the report, foundation officers knew they had addressed problems *in* our democracy, but they weren't sure they had taken on the fundamental problems *of* democracy itself, problems that kept democracy from working as it should.

Big Steps: Recognizing Citizens as Producers

Although Americans have to come together to make critical decisions, their biggest obstacle is the pervasive feeling that “people like us” can’t make a difference. And no wonder, citizens are treated more like the objects of the agency of others than agents in their own right. They are readers, viewers, patients, consumers, and clients. They respond, but seldom produce. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in 2009 by demonstrating the need for citizens to be agents or producers. She noted that there are things our largest, most expert institutions can’t do without what she called the “coproduction” of public goods by citizens. Recognizing citizens as producers is a big step.

I would add that there are some things *only* citizens working together can provide. For instance, while hospitals can care *for* people, only other people—families, neighbors, friends—can care *about* them. Studies now show that this care is a powerful medicine. And it is needed.

With the People

Ostrom’s argument and Kettering’s own research have led us to suggest adding another preposition to President Lincoln’s plea for a government *of, by, and for* the people. What about more governing *with* the people? We have a new research report coming out that elaborates on that idea. The gist of the idea is in the report’s title: *With*. It is just a different way of thinking about the troubled relationship between citizens and our authoritative institutions. What its practical application could be in foundations, institutions of higher education, the media, and other fields like public administration will take the kind of experimentation noted above. Using a *with-the-people* strategy could also be a way for institutions to keep the loss of public confidence from morphing into what is even more dangerous—a loss of legitimacy.

Treating citizens as producers also speaks to the doubts about people’s ability to make a difference. Producers are powerful; think about what has happened when citizens have joined forces, whether building a playground to provide a safe space for neighborhood children or organizing the Civil Rights Movement, whose antecedents go back decades to what scholars see as its origins—thousands of nameless acts by thousands of nameless people. Over time, these unknown citizens produced a well-known movement that changed the country.

American Inventiveness

The United States is known for the creativity of its citizens. Charles Kettering, for whom our foundation was named, was one of many inventors. Inventors, however, aren't lone individuals. They are products of a culture that values creativity and encourages curiosity. This country has benefited from that culture throughout its history. We can see signs of this culture now in our communities as people, despite distancing, “invent” ways of working together to combat a pandemic, soften the blows to our economy, and try to overcome problems in race relations.

In this piece, I'm not proposing specific changes. There is no model here to copy. Instead, I am making a case for American inventiveness, which has been a prime source of our resilience. People working together as producers and institutions working not just *for* but *with* the people are just ideas. What their applications are has to be discovered. And that will require the experimentation that needs the support of grantmakers (and others) willing to encourage inventiveness.

In today's crises, we can survive anything except the fear that causes us to lose confidence in ourselves and our ability to make a difference. We have prevailed in the past; we can again.

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2. Will Friedman and David Schleifer, “Divisiveness and Collaboration in American Public Life: A Hidden Common Ground Report,” Public Agenda (2019), <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/divisiveness-and-collaboration-in-american-public-life-a-hidden-common-ground-report/>.
3. Jennifer Bachner and Benjamin Ginsberg report as much in their book *What Washington Gets Wrong: The Unelected Officials Who Actually Run the Government and Their Misconceptions about the American People* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016), 9.
4. Paul M. Angle, ed., *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 128.
5. Philip Geyelin, “Dean Rusk’s Pursuit of Peace,” *Washington Post*, February 8, 1984.
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7. See <https://www.usatoday.com/hiddencommonground/>.
8. The Democracy Fellows program at Wake Forest University is just one example. To read about this effort, see Jill J. McMillan and Katy J. Harriger, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).
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Philanthropy's Role in Strengthening American Democracy: A Diverse Agenda

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What is the most important challenge or opportunity facing American democracy over the next ten years? What role can philanthropy play in addressing that challenge—or in seizing the opportunity?

This volume explores answers to these two urgent questions.

We are not disinterested observers. The Kettering

Foundation and the Knight Foundation are independent organizations that invest private funds in pursuit of the public interest. Both foundations operate on a core belief that an informed citizenry is critical for an effective democracy, and we fund a range of ways to get there.

Paradoxically, things seem to be changing very quickly and very slowly at once. Across the ideological spectrum, there is heightened anxiety that our democratic enterprise is imperiled. Our own polling shows Americans divided and suspicious of each other. A deadly pandemic continues to rage, endangering public health and the economy. A historic swell of protests in response to endemic anti-Black racism has produced a moment of reckoning—and new tensions. And we have yet to come to grips with how to deal with social media and modern systems of communication.

Many of these challenges—deep inequality of wealth, persistent discrimination in access to opportunity, the hollowing out of institutions, the digital intermediation of society—are decades in the making and will require years to unravel.

Rebuilding and reforming our democracy will require interventions that respond to both our near-term challenges and the underlying long-term phenomena. We need to get control of Covid-19. We need to provide economic relief to struggling Americans. We need to ensure free and fair elections and get back to a point where the results are regarded as legitimate by the vast majority of Americans. We need immediate action to reverse racial oppression. Addressing these challenges now is necessary.

Necessary—but not sufficient. We must also do the hard, involved work of structural reform. There is substantial and reasonable debate about what this process entails and whose interests it should serve. There is less debate about the need: vast swaths of the American public believe our institutions are failing.

Some features of our democracy should be reimaged, not just reformed. This imperative is most profound in response to the ways that technology and, in particular, social media have reordered our lives. The reality of always-on, many-to-many, ubiquitous, often anonymous communication has upended centuries of assumptions about information, truth, knowledge, and association. How creatively our democracy responds may well determine its vitality and longevity.

Given these many issues and questions, it's no surprise that the essays in this collection present a diverse set of responses, both to the priority of challenges and to the role of philanthropy.

Contributed by scholars, thinkers, and practitioners from diverse disciplines and viewpoints, the essays in this volume tug on many threads—some familiar and some new—at the intersection of democracy and philanthropy.

Brian Hooks of Stand Together and the Charles Koch Foundation and Antonia Hernández of the California Community Foundation each argue, albeit in different ways, for a comprehensive restructuring of institutions and civil society. Scholars Francis Fukuyama and K. Sabeel Rahman provide practical agendas for reform: Fukuyama's to revitalize the public sector and Rahman's to reverse the concentration of power in our economy. Several authors focus on organizing, gathering, and engaging. Stanford University's Lucy Bernholz argues for the creation of new spaces for gathering, especially in a digital context. Martha McCoy of Everyday Democracy encourages building new civic infrastructure for connection and engagement, with an explicit focus on racial justice. University of Chicago political scientist Cathy J. Cohen exhorts philanthropy to build and sustain new movements of protest to put an end to the killing and exclusion of Black Americans.

Many authors focus on polarization and its consequences for our democracy. Yascha Mounk of Johns Hopkins University offers prescriptions to restrain populist movements. Daniel M. Rothschild of the Mercatus Center suggests how philanthropy can depoliticize expert knowledge. Political scientist Shanto Iyengar condemns "affective" polarization—disdain for the other side—while Talia Stroud sees promise in practices that deliberately bridge these divides. Brown University's Melvin Rogers recalls John Dewey to inspire us to renew our democratic culture and Emily Chamlee-Wright of the Institute for Humane Studies offers a recipe for civil but critical exchange. Yuval Levin of the American Enterprise Institute asks us to recover the "we," a common purpose and identity in a pluralistic society.

Some authors explicitly address the nature, structure, and aims of philanthropy. Janet Tran of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute discusses foundations' homogeneity, both demographically and ideologically. Data and Society Research Institute's danah boyd and Janet Haven caution against "techno-solutionism"—the idea that technology can solve all problems. And two scholars who have written extensively on technology, Safiya U. Noble of UCLA and Mary Anne Franks of the University of Miami, both press radical cases for philanthropy to dismantle itself (in a sense) by reversing the kinds of wealth accumulation that make independent foundations possible.

Should we be hopeful about the future of democracy and philanthropy? For democracy, the many challenges cited suggest our system is in a deep rot. But they could also be taken to suggest that our democracy is in a state of change, with an opportunity to emerge more resilient. We prefer to think it's both: the challenges are real and deep, but so is the promise of renewal.

We also believe that philanthropy can help accelerate the reimagining of our democracy. Philanthropy can be a part of the solution, if it is open to continually rethink its own assumptions about how and where to be most effective. Experience tells us that we are not the ideal investors for every solution. We do our best work when we target challenges that exceed our means, and we make change most effectively when we leverage or accelerate trends in society.

One idea not directly represented in the essays that we at Knight Foundation believe belongs on the list of urgent challenges for which philanthropy is well suited to make a difference is the collapse of local news.

Our country's vastness, combined with its regionalism and our proud sense of rugged individualism, makes America a parochial nation. We remain rooted in and connected to the places in which we live.

This helps explain why local news plays such a vital role in this country. Without local news, you can't know who you're voting for, or what issues, challenges, and opportunities are facing your community. Local news cools the heat of national partisan shouting matches. Our foundation is the legacy of John S. and James L. Knight, who built one of the largest and most successful newspaper companies in the middle of the last century—a collection of proud, independent-minded local papers. The Knight brothers believed that a well-informed community could best determine its own true interests and was essential to a well-functioning, representative democracy. In other words, they believed local news was crucial to democracy.

Today, the business model for local news has collapsed, but the values that animated it have never been more relevant.

In partnership with Gallup, we recently surveyed 20,000 Americans for their views on the media. We found that the news has become yet another battlefield in the partisan war of all against all for the future of the country. The survey found that an overwhelming majority (83%) of Americans believe news coverage is politically biased. Many see animus: 74% say the news organizations they distrust are trying to persuade people to adopt a certain viewpoint; 9% say the news organizations they distrust are trying to ruin the country. Many believe perceived inaccuracies are intentional—52% believe reporters misrepresent facts and nearly a third (28%) say reporters make up facts entirely.

We know that local news is more trusted than national news. And, as our polling revealed, local news spurs civic engagement. Those who follow local news closely are more likely to say they feel attached to where they live, more likely to know how to volunteer and get involved in the community, and more likely to vote regularly. Those who follow local news closely are less likely to express the belief that they have no say in government.

We therefore would add to the thoughtful suggestions in this collection our recommendation for philanthropy to address the challenge of rebuilding local news. More specifically, to invest in the identification, support, and growth of sustainable local news business models. It is a priority for us at Knight Foundation, and we're ready to partner with other philanthropic organizations who share our commitment.

There is no shortage of fatalism about the future of local news. The lamentations are familiar: the audience is aging out, there's no money in advertising, the business cannot scale. We agree that many of the basic assumptions that made the great reporting and great profits of the last century possible will undoubtedly need to be revisited. The future (and present) is digital, which means a different relationship to the audience and a different product. Subscriptions may eclipse advertising as the most significant source of revenue. This will bring new challenges: attracting and retaining digital subscribers requires different skills and capabilities than the same exercise in the world of newsprint.

But what sector is immune from self-reflection in the twenty-first century? If there is a single takeaway from the essays in this volume, it is that our current institutions, structures, and conventions are not getting the job done.

If there's another, it is that the role for philanthropy in preserving and strengthening our democracy is a rich terrain. There is much to be done. Different foundations will take different approaches. That's what foundations do—and do well. But sitting this one out is not an option.

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Gathering: A Prerequisite for Democracy

LUCY BERNHOLZ

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Shall we gather at the river?

—Traditional Christian hymn, Robert Lowry, 1864

Organize the hood under I Ching banners,
Red, black, and green instead of
gang bandanas
FBI spying on us through the
radio antennas
And them hidden cameras in the
streetlight watching society
With no respect for the people's right
to privacy

"Police State," dead prez, 2000



urning is a collective act. Refugees and diasporic communities know the pain and sorrow of mourning from afar; now this truth of geography has become a pandemic truth. Dying alone, mourning alone compounds the sorrow. We are social beings. We gather to mourn.

And we gather to build societies. Coming together for friendship, worship, play, learning, commerce, protest, governing, mourning, or celebration is fundamental. The desire to be with others is innate; the right to do so is declared universal, and the design of spaces—both physical and digital—to encourage or prevent gathering defines countless professions. At the root of civil society is the need to gather, the right to

assemble, the ability to voluntarily associate.

The pandemic of 2020, shelter-in-place orders, and protests against endemic racism have brought new attention to our desire and right to assemble. The object of this attention is legitimate: our abilities to gather together are threatened though many protesters raising concerns in this context have misdiagnosed the cause. Public health directives to manage viral spread by means of sheltering and mask-wearing are not the problem. Street protests are an expression of our right to gather, not a threat to that right. On the contrary, our ability to assemble and gather is threatened by the same combination of forces that have so damaged our experience of free expression: the private, digitized control of the spaces where gathering happens and state limitations on the right to assemble.¹ This essay focuses on those digital threats.

Profit-maximizing corporate control of online communications channels has changed who dictates the rules for speech as well as how and where it takes place. Public governance is changing in response, and policy makers, scholars, and activists are retheorizing everything from antitrust to employment law and elections to protect public interests.² Efforts over the last three decades to define and protect our rights of expression in digital spaces reveal the magnitude of what's needed to protect our rights of assembly.

The magnitude of the challenges we face in maintaining our rights to assembly and our rights to free speech is similar, but the location is different. Assembly occurs in person, online, and in the spaces that connect the two. To protect our ability to gather, we first need to reconceptualize time and space.

Living in the Liminality

The places and ways in which we gather are changing. The consequences of this can be seen in how we take collective action as well as in the role of philanthropy. To follow this logic, we must first consider how we understand “digital spaces,” physical spaces, and the liminal area between them. We are hampered by our own language and metaphors. The phrase “going online” persists, as if the internet is a place that is separate from “real life.” This distinction no longer holds.

There are more objects than people connected to the internet today.³ By embedding digital controls in doorbells and traffic lights, we have “turned on” our physical spaces. The internet serves as the unseen infrastructure tying all these devices together and serving as a globally networked on/off switch for our physical spaces. Everything that happens in such connected spaces—and every institutional function connected to the sensors—becomes dependent on the digital network. By installing audio, visual, and data sensors throughout our built environment and public places, we have effectively digitized our physical spaces.

People with mobile phones, functioning electrical grids, and affordable internet access spend their days phase-switching between active, passive, and remote digital data generation. The active phase involves sending text messages or emails, storing documents in the cloud, shopping online, or videoconferencing with colleagues, congregations, or community groups.

The passive experience may begin when you wake up if your only digital device is a smart phone that you grasp upon rising. If you have connected thermostats, voice assistants, or other devices in your home, you were online even while sleeping. These devices emit trails of data beyond our sightlines that make us visible to external service providers. Moreover, these devices generate digital data trails that announce where we are and with whom.

The remote phase of our digital existence begins when we leave our homes, as street cameras, license plate readers, and employer-owned software all track our actions.⁴ Wherever we go in most US towns or cities, we are “seen” by our built environment.⁵ When we leave those spaces for the rural outdoors or our domestic indoors the majority of us bring along our own location-aware, data-generating devices.

Being “online”—in the sense that we are generating digital data that is collected by third parties—is now our default state. We switch invisibly across these phases of active, passive, and remote, weaving trails of digital data that tie us to time, place, resources, and other people. For many of us, now, it takes effort to go offline and become untrackable since our normal state is to emanate digital signals.

Most of us move through these phases, but the consequences of doing so are unjustly more burdensome on already marginalized communities. The liminal is no less racialized and discriminatory than the physical and virtual spaces it sits between. Black people and their communities are not only over-surveilled, they are used as deliberate testing grounds for technologies such as facial recognition, license plate readers, and Stingray devices that feed cell phone IDs to police.⁶ Despite pervasive digital monitors, these same communities are also the ones most likely to lack reliable, affordable internet access of their own.⁷

Being watched changes how we gather. Leaders trying to build trust in their communities may seek to gather in places away from external gaze—a feat that becomes harder to do as we digitize ever more of our physical spaces. Activists gather and disperse quickly, design obfuscating coverings to mask themselves from sensors, dispose of their technology, and rely on coded language and encrypted software. Savvy communities must now incorporate a deep and adaptive understanding of the digital environment into their work, regardless of whether their mission focuses on education, health, poverty alleviation, environmental justice, or political participation.

Those who know what it is to be watched also know how to evade, obfuscate, and confuse the watchers. Black and indigenous leaders, environmental and human rights activists, and journalists tend to be on the cutting edge of the learning curve for digital monitoring. They are the first to be subjected to “innovations” such as gait recognition or geofencing. They have been watched for so long they have adapted their gathering practices accordingly. They interrogate

every new technology through the lens of discrimination and information asymmetry. Some people within these communities also build adjacent systems—from cooperative banks to mutual insurance companies to digital technologies—to provide the services they need under rules acceptable to them.

People who work in fields, hospitals, factories, and transportation systems are monitored, and their assignments are mediated by algorithms. These dynamics are coursing upward through the professions. People working from home, as well as on site, are monitored by management through shared public calendars, software configured on company laptops, videoconferences, and collaboration software logs. Productivity software installed by employers, fitness monitors provided by insurance companies, metadata embedded in every email and memo, and proctoring software used for test-taking all watch professionals and students as they go about their daily work.

Public health directives that closed doctors' offices and other health care facilities have revealed the breadth and depth of our digital dependencies though, once again, they did not create these dependencies. Artists and yoga teachers have shifted their practices to streaming apps and payment platforms. Community theaters and dance instructors, seminar leaders and therapists, medical doctors and kindergarten teachers, boards of directors and volunteer coordinators now interact via video services and shared documents. We are adapting the norms of offices, examination rooms, courts and government facilities, board rooms, theaters, cafes, and classrooms into the design constraints and regulatory preferences of commercial software providers. We have been extending our dependencies on digital systems for years. They are newly visible and rapidly expanding, but they are not newly created.

Seeing this phenomenon as clearly as we can, now, might be just the spark we need to take action. As we embed every element of daily life into these digital systems, we also transplant the power relationships that shape online discourse into our parks, streets, schools, community centers, and the halls of government. These dynamics include the challenges of instituting public oversight of privatized infrastructure, opaque product designs that determine who sees what and whom, and "spaces" that are maximized for profit instead of participation, equitable access, personal safety, or collective deliberation.

For millennia, we have sorted and clustered ourselves. For centuries, rulers and religions have categorized people using the technologies of their times from counting to advanced statistics. Today, massive sets of data collected from our activities in virtual, physical, and liminal spaces power the corporate and state algorithms that tag, divide, and cluster us. Sorting people into groups is something we do and is done to us. However, today this is being done with an ever more powerful set of tools, ruled by an amalgam of global companies and nation states, using increasingly inscrutable methodologies. Scholars and advocates have made some progress in raising awareness and policy activity about these phenomena when it comes to online speech. Our challenge now is to bring the same intention to protect our ability to assemble online, offline, and everywhere in between.

Today's policy battles about online discourse, political advertising, and hate speech are informed by decades of scholarship that position the internet as communications infrastructure. Now that digital infrastructure supports physical interactions, we need to consider the implications for assembly. As the lines between physical and digital spaces blur, these challenges are being repotted into the soil of public life. Unfortunately, we do not have decades for study before these forces irreparably harm our ability to voluntarily gather, plan, mobilize, and take collective action.

What We Need Now

The first step is to recognize that our associational lives now operate in both physical and digital spaces. From the 1990s' enthusiasm for online communities to the subsequent proliferation of social media "groups" and "circles," the internet has long promised bigger, easier, and more diverse associational options and spaces for assembly. But the reality is more complicated, as marginalized communities have long experienced. We have no window into how the sorting and clustering designed to serve digital ads bounds our online experiences. What variables do the platforms use to define you or those with whom they think you might share common interests? How do the machines see each of us, and how does that categorizing shape with whom we associate?

We have studied trolls, bots, misinformation, and platform governance, and we need to explicate how they shape the human relationships that contribute to and result from them. Most analysis of these phenomena focuses on them either through the lens of violence or speech, but we also need to inquire about them as examples of manipulated assembly. In a similar vein, driving women and queer people off online spaces through harassment, targeting Black citizens with fake information about elections or coronavirus, or livestreaming armed attacks within houses of worship all need to be understood as forms of associational suppression and threats to assembly.

Moderators online do more than shape speech; they shape relationships. We don't know whether those relationships align with how we see ourselves or what we're looking for. How can we exert our own agency and define our own communities in an environment of inscrutable, profit-intermediated choices? We don't know what rules, variables, or personal judgments are behind digital decisions to promote or obscure protest information, community announcements, or even meet-ups. We are repeating the mistake we made with online speech, assuming, for decades, that giving access to more and more voices meant that everyone would be heard and all would be well. We've learned the fallacy of this assumption the hard way; we must avoid repeating the mistake with assembly and association.

People now need adaptive expertise about product design and platform priorities in order

to organize, communicate, and mobilize with others both online and in physical spaces. This expertise involves reverse-engineering social media and search priorities, evolving security concerns, and situational awareness about state and corporate boundary-setting on associational spaces via regulation, subpoena, or product design. It requires ongoing attention to unacceptable consequences, such as repurposing health data for economic gain or geofencing certain groups for political messaging.⁸ The social effects of massive data collection, concentration, and analysis are seen in the outsize power of a small number of corporations, filter bubbles, and the feeling that we've lost control of online speech. Unless we intervene now, we are on a similar trajectory of corporate enclosure of our choices for physical and virtual gathering.

The second step is to recognize and support the expertise that already exists. Leaders at the Detroit Community Technology Project and MediaJustice in Oakland repeatedly demonstrate the digital expertise of community organizers. Native American communities organize horizontally and ecosystemically, flowing like water away from hierarchical watched spaces. In their 2020 book, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, Sasha Costanza-Chock reminds us that communities know what they need. Philanthropists need to respect and support these communities, help them share their knowledge, and aid them in imagining, teaching, and building alternative technological futures.⁹

On June 20 and 21, 2020, more than one million people participated in the Mass Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington, a digital gathering supported by videoconferencing, radio, social media, and telephone dial-in services. Religious organizations, labor unions, Black fraternities, veterans, environmental advocates, and digital rights activists organized their members and built the digital scaffolding for the event. The aspiration had been for a physical gathering reminiscent of the 1963 March on Washington. In some ways, the digital version was more inclusive, but the arrangements for participants and organizers changed as the event shifted from streets to screens. Instead of the masks, water, and medics they would have brought to the National Mall, the organizers brought passwords to video lines, protected the chat rooms, and used redundant servers to prevent being taken offline by opponents. Bringing people together now requires constantly learning and updating a mix of physical and digital safety measures for individuals, their online presences, and entire communities. Supporting diverse alliances of community groups and digital advocates is fundamental to civic and political engagement today.¹⁰

Hierarchical and mostly white nonprofits and foundations, on the other hand, scrambled to find this kind of expertise when shelter-in-place orders required them to disperse overnight. Smart managers, of course, will work to move forward under these new conditions, engaging their staff and board members in the kinds of ongoing digital safety practices that their critical missions deserve. Doing so will mean encouraging the distribution of expertise throughout the organizations they work with, a small step toward helping nonprofits adapt to their dependence on digital systems.

Third, Big Philanthropy needs to expand its investments beyond the instrumental nature of digital technologies. Simply helping nonprofits expand their use of digital technology without

questioning the effects of our digital dependencies will do more harm than good. The move to public interest technology is a positive step, but it must widen its focus to take into account the digital controls shaping every domain. This vision must expand to address the effects of digitized meeting spaces on assembly, to weld community-based expertise about safety and vibrancy to decisions about public digital infrastructure, and to create the networks of expertise that can identify, critique, prevent, and provide alternatives to a digital takeover of public physical spaces. Starting places include Catherine Sandoval's framing of net neutrality as a public safety issue and efforts to articulate critical digital infrastructure for democratic participation.¹¹

Finally, institutional philanthropy needs to shift its policy focus. For fifty years, the policy agenda of the nonprofit sector has been tax and corporate law.¹² From an equity standpoint, this agenda is misguided—it prioritizes institutional self-interest over tax provisions that would mitigate against extreme wealth inequities. If foundations aspire to any legitimacy in struggles for justice, equity, or sustainability, they need to support policies that expand people's ability to take collective action, to associate with whom they choose, and to give time, money, and data safely and with agency. All these actions are now digitally dependent, and so philanthropy's policy agenda must follow.

The policy domains that matter to the existence and functioning of all nonprofits and philanthropic organizations are those that directly implicate the core values upon which civil society exists in democracies: access to information, participation, pluralism, and freedom of assembly and speech. Our lived experience of these values now depends on an intersection of public policy and corporate product choices.

Undergirding all of civil society are digital transmission systems to which we need affordable, reliable access and assurances that our information will be treated fairly. The policy concerns of all philanthropic enterprises should be those that protect the public's access to information, the people's ability to participate, the freedom of expression and assembly, and the existence of digital, physical, and liminal spaces that encourage pluralistic participation. These are the requirements for gathering and for taking collective action; they are the underpinnings of civic space. Philanthropy, especially such legally privileged, institutional forms of philanthropy embodied by foundations, is a subset of civic space; it exists within the broader frames of assembly and association. Big foundations exist only because laws allow them to—laws that are just barely more than a century old. Those laws are negotiated through the mechanics of our democracy. They are grounded in a societal commitment to allowing people to come together to use their private resources for public benefit. The changing nature of how and where we assemble, and how we protect our ability to do so, is an existential threat to civil society and its most familiar US institutions: nonprofits and foundations. Protecting the space for civil society should be fundamental to institutional philanthropy, for the latter can't exist without the former.

In the decade ahead, we will be obliged to rebuild all our public systems, from health care to housing, education to food systems, and transportation to employment. Each is broken in unique ways, but rebuilding them requires beginning at the root level. Foundations prefer to silo these

domains and approach them independently. There is neither time nor capital for that. Real change will require massive public investment in these pillars of democracy. Philanthropy's rightful role will be to support and sustain the infrastructure for broad, inclusive community leadership; the space for assembly and associational life; and a commitment to a thriving, independent digital civil society. We have before us the opportunity to reimagine it all.

Otherwise, we will mourn alone for the democracy that we let die.

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Notes

1. Several US states have considered or passed legislation limiting the rights of people to protest or to assemble in public parks. Strategies range from burdensome permit requirements to raising fees to regulatory investigations of get-out-the-vote organizations. See “Anti-Protest Bills around the Country,” American Civil Liberties Union (2017), <https://www.aclu.org/issues/free-speech/rights-protesters/anti-protest-bills-around-country>; “Reforms Introduced to Protect the Freedom of Assembly, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (2020), <https://www.icnl.org/post/analysis/reforms-introduced-to-protect-the-freedom-of-assembly>; and Tiffany D. Cross, *Say it Louder!: Black Lives, White Narratives, and Saving Our Democracy* (New York: Amistad Press, 2020), 131–42.
2. See Lina M. Khan, “Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox,” *Yale Law Journal* 126, no. 3 (January 2017): 564–907; Karen E. C. Levy “The Contexts of Control: Information, Power, and Truck-Driving Work,” *Information Society* 31, no. 2 (March 2015): 160–74; and Anna G. Eshoo, “Rep. Eshoo Introduces Bill to Ban Microtargeted Political Ads,” press release, May 26, 2020, <https://eshoo.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-eshoo-introduces-bill-ban-microtargeted-political-ads>.
3. See Laura DeNardis, *The Internet in Everything: Freedom and Security in a World with No Off Switch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).
4. Zach Whittaker, “CBP Says It’s ‘Unrealistic’ for Americans to Avoid Its License Plate Surveillance,” TechCrunch, July 10, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/07/10/cbp-license-plate-surveillance/>.
5. The next frontier for remote trackers includes olfactory sensing. See Kyle Wiggers, “Aryballe Raises \$7.9 Million for Odor Detecting AI Sensors,” Venture Beat, July 10, 2020, <https://venturebeat.com/2020/07/10/aryballe-raises-7-9-million-for-odor-detecting-ai-sensors/>.
6. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
7. Sumit Chandra et al., *Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning* (San Francisco: Common Sense Media; Boston: Boston Consulting Group, 2020).
8. Heidi Schlumpf, “Pro-Trump Group Targets Catholic Voters through Cell Phone Technology,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/pro-trump-group-targets-catholic-voters-using-cell-phone-technology>.
9. Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
10. Lucy Bernholz, Nicole Ozer, Kip Wainscott, and Wren Elhai, *Integrated Advocacy: Paths Forward for Digital Civil Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society,

2020), <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/publication/integrated-advocacy-paths-forward-for-digital-civil-society/>.

11. Catherine Sandoval, "Cybersecurity Paradigm Shift: The Risks of Net Neutrality Repeal to Energy Reliability, Public Safety, and Climate Change Solutions," *San Diego Journal* 10, no. 1 (2019): 91. See also Argyri Panezi, Jessica Feldman, and Lucy Bernholz, "Critical Digital Infrastructure Research," Ford Foundation, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/campaigns/critical-digital-infrastructure-research/>, and Ethan Zuckerman, "The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure" (New York: Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, 2020), <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure>.
12. Here, I am speaking specifically of nonprofit and philanthropic trade associations that advocate on behalf of nonprofits and foundations, not the actions of individual foundations per se.

The Conversations of a Self-Governing People

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f the American experiment is to succeed, we must improve the quality of our conversations—our political, academic, and civic conversations.

I can appreciate the skepticism with which this assertion will be met. As I write, the country is in the throes of a global pandemic, unemployment has soared to heights not reached since the Great Depression, and communities are reeling in the wake of police violence. Improving the way we listen and speak to one another may seem to be a low priority right now. But consider what comes next.

Ahead of us is the challenge of how to balance public health concerns against the devastating human costs of a prolonged economic downturn. We have to soberly assess what we did right in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, what we did wrong, and figure out the best way forward. We have to break down the structural barriers that impede economic opportunity. We have to fundamentally rethink our systems of education, policing, and criminal justice. We have to bridge the divides and heal the wounds that these systems have created.

In short, we are faced with a very American question: How do we govern ourselves as equal citizens? This is *the* question that the American experiment poses. It's well understood that a liberal democratic order requires specific formal arrangements: constitutional guarantees that constrain authority and protect a robust private sphere. But alongside these formal arrangements are informal sensibilities that govern much of the day-to-day interaction in which we, as a diverse, independent, interconnected people, engage. Human conversation is the medium through which this informal governance unfolds.

How we talk to one another sets the stage for how we treat one another. The better the quality of our conversations—the more good conversations we have than bad ones—the easier it is to recognize the humanity in one another and the more likely we are to succeed in governing ourselves as equal citizens.

The Power of Naming What We Already Know

A “good conversation” is easier to identify than to define. At a minimum, good conversations allow us to manage our affairs with others peacefully. Better still, they leave us with the sense that something new has been created or discovered. They leave us feeling challenged and curious in ways that lead to new conversations. Ultimately, all good conversations are about connection, a connection in which one mind meets another.

While we know what it feels like to be part of a good conversation, we seem to be having a hard time getting our conversations right. Particularly since the 2016 presidential election, we have seen habits of civility and thoughtful debate replaced by the new norms of vitriol, ad hominem attacks,

moral grandstanding, contempt, and a flagrant disregard for the truth. A Knight Foundation/Gallup report finds that while social media constitutes the primary public forum for university students to discuss ideas, only 29 percent believe that online discourse is usually civil, down significantly from 41 percent in 2016.¹

The consequences of our diminished ability to engage in productive civil discourse are serious. According to the Pew Research Center, 71 percent of Americans believe the country is sharply divided along political lines.² This is up from 47 percent in 2012. Pew also finds that social trust is in serious decline, making it harder to build the civic capital required to solve social problems together.³ Ultimately, our inability to engage in civil and productive conversation means losing our ability to see one another as partners in the self-governance project, putting the future success of the American experiment in doubt.

An important step in getting our conversations right is to develop a common language so that we can identify the essential requirements—the “design principles”—of a good conversation, principles that have long been known at a tacit level, but infrequently named.

Seven of these principles are described below. Though most will sound familiar, my goal is not to recapture some idealized past. Arguably, social media and a charged political climate have merely exposed and amplified weaknesses within our public discourse that were always there. If that's the case, we have an opportunity to see those flaws more clearly and identify the principles that can fortify our conversations going forward. Over time, through deliberate practice, we can coach ourselves and one another to do better.

This discussion is intended to be a starting point. My hope is that it will inspire others to contribute their own insights and direct resources toward advancing conversations that tap into and extend our humanity.

Presumption of Dignified Equals

Good conversations begin with a mutual recognition that we are one another's dignified equals. Either of us may possess greater expertise on a given subject, but we both have equal standing in the broader social world.

In 1838, Angelina Grimké addressed the Massachusetts legislature. Before turning to the matter at hand—20,000 Massachusetts women petitioning to overturn slavery—she first had to justify her presence. This was the first time a woman had addressed an American legislative body. And because slavery was political, she noted, “It has often been tauntingly said that woman has nothing to do with it.” Grimké countered:

Are we aliens, because we are women? Are we bereft of citizenship, because we are the mothers, wives, and daughters of a mighty people? Have women no country—no interests staked in public weal—no liabilities in common peril—no partnership in a nation's guilt and shame? . . . [W]e are citizens of this republic and as such our honor, happiness, and well being are bound up in its politics and government and laws.⁴

Grimké knew, in other words, that if she were to have any influence, she would have to overcome the presumed default that she was not the dignified equal of the men who comprised the Massachusetts legislature.

Today, overt and sweeping denials of human dignity strike most of us as morally obnoxious. Nonetheless, examples abound. In his role as president, Donald Trump has adopted this rhetorical habit as a signature brand, describing immigrants as criminals and rapists, journalists as liars, Democrats—particularly women of color—as enemies of the country. Disturbingly, extremist hate groups, which have become more emboldened on social media and in the public square, provide further examples.

But if our scrutiny extends only to those who are at the ideological and behavioral extremes, we run the risk of taking ourselves off the hook too easily. When we find ourselves ignoring an argument because it comes from a Gen-Z social justice warrior or a boomer or a cis-gender white male, we are letting a rhetorical cheat slip in. We're telling ourselves that we do not have to do the difficult work of listening carefully and thinking through the other person's argument because of who he or she is. If we respect our conversation partner as our dignified equal, such cheats are off the table.

Knowledge-Seeking Humility

Humility opens the cognitive space we need to learn from one another. A knowledge-seeking posture puts that humility to work by actively aiming our curiosity in the direction of collaborative discovery.

Imagine a giant mirror. It's a magical mirror given to us by the gods. With it, we can see all that is knowable in the world. But as the mirror descends from the heavens, something goes wrong. It slips, falls to the ground, and shatters, its shards scattering across the peoples of the world. Each of us holds a shard that allows us to glimpse a bit of what is knowable. But it's only a glimpse. The knowledge we acquire is always partial and always from a particular angle.⁵

Scientific expertise gets us only so far. Direct experience gets us only so far. We need others if we are to extend our cognitive reach beyond what we can know through formal training or direct experience. We need others if we are to see the same world from different perspectives and gain access to the local knowledge that can come only from lived experiences we haven't lived.

Further, if we are to foster good conversations, it's not enough to simply acknowledge our cognitive limits. We need to transform passive humility into an active knowledge-seeking curiosity. The best way to do this is to ask sincere questions that tap into the insight of others. We need to ask others to help us see what they see in their piece of the mirror. In doing so, we turn our conversation partners into collaborators in pursuit of discovery.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the intellectual habit of setting aside one's prejudices—including one's prejudgments, intellectual biases, and preferred conclusions—to create space for reasoned and open inquiry.

One of my favorite children's stories is "The Emperor's New Clothes," not so much the Hans Christian Andersen version,⁶ but the one that sits in my memory. In Andersen's rendering, the emperor's vanity is exposed by a child's innocence. The boy doesn't know any better, so he cries out, "But he hasn't got anything on!" My mother—a Unitarian turned Quaker—has always had a healthy skepticism when it comes to authority, especially when it comes to pompous men in robes. It must have been her telling of this story that made me see the kid not as an innocent, but as a badass, a fearless call-bullshit-what-it-is hero. He knew exactly what the swindlers were up to. He knew he'd get into trouble if he said what was, to him, obviously true. And he said it anyway. Others doubted the evidence right in front of them. But our hero was a critical thinker. He possessed a liberated mind.

This is the heavy lift that critical thinking offers—it sets the mind free from dogma and prejudice. It allows us to weigh evidence, interrogate what we've been told, what we know, and what we think we know. Further, as I imagine the boy in my version of the story knew, critical thinking is a check on tyranny. Critical thinking checks authority by taking "because I said so" off the table as a reasonable response to the question, "Why?"

Critical thinking can also be playful, especially when accompanied by an actively curious humility. When we rely on critical thinking as the go-to process before committing firmly to a conclusion, we develop a sort of playful confidence in the exchange of ideas. We invite not only the scrutiny of the question, "How do you know you're right?" We also invite the playfulness of the question, "What if my foundational assumptions are all wrong?" We let critical thinking take us wherever it leads. And we awaken the creative response inspired by the question, "What if?"

Assumption (and Practice) of Good Faith

Assuming good faith means that, unless we have good reason to believe otherwise, we assume that others enter the conversation with a sincere desire to understand our point of view and to deal honestly with us in advancing their own. Practicing good faith means that we enter the conversation with the same sincere intentions.⁷

The first twenty years of my career were spent teaching economics at a small liberal arts college in Wisconsin. Beloit College is a marvelously quirky place that draws students from around the world, from across the country, and from its own backyard. Some students arrive sophisticated, fully equipped with the cultural capital they need to feel confident participating in difficult conversations, such as those about race, gender, sexual identity, and class. Some arrive without these tools. During my time at Beloit, I had a tender spot in my heart for the well-meaning but inexperienced students who, predictably, would trip up and betray their naivete about such matters. Ironically, the lack of sophistication was often connected to some aspect of diversity. International students, for example, were often perplexed by progressive American attitudes about sex and gender. The poor white kid from rural Wisconsin, whose family scrimped, saved, and incurred debt to get him there, had a hard time wrapping his head around the notion that his whiteness meant that he had reaped the benefits of unearned privilege. These students were not willfully ignorant. They had sincere questions but lacked the language to pose them elegantly.

What happened next made all the difference. More times than I can count, I saw a naive student betray his or her naivete in the company of a patient interlocutor—sometimes a faculty member, sometimes a fellow student—who saw past the fumbling expression to engage the sincere question. These moments were magical. Learning was happening.

I wish I could say that we always got it right. We didn't. When we failed to assume good faith, it was often because we didn't maintain the vigilance required to listen for the sincere question that lay beneath the clumsy phrasing. Practicing good faith requires a similar sort of sustained effort. Entering into a conversation in good faith requires that we listen sympathetically, that is, make a sincere effort to understand the other person's argument and perspective. Listening sympathetically means suspending judgment long enough to understand how it is that another sincere and intelligent human being looking at the same world draws a different conclusion.

When we exercise the good faith principle, we listen more and engage in moral grandstanding less. We are better able to see nuanced positions that rest between ideological poles. Conversation partners who proceed in good faith can draw attention to errors without accusations of moral turpitude. We can explain why someone's talk offends without assuming that it was the person's intent to offend.

Courage with Civility; Civility with Courage

Courage in conversation seeks truth and resists pressure to do otherwise. Civility in conversation is the demonstration of respect. Most conversations benefit when both virtues—truth-seeking courage and respectful civility—are present.

On July 4, 1852, abolitionist Frederick Douglass addressed a crowd in Rochester, New York. Leading citizens in the Rochester community had invited him to speak at the Independence Day celebration. Douglass knew he was meant to laud the ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Instead, he spoke of the hypocrisy of celebrating American liberty while four million Black Americans remained in chains. Rather than celebrating the country's liberty, he described the nation's conduct, past and present, as "hideous and revolting."

Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!⁸

Was Douglass's speech courageous? Perhaps not in the usual sense. As an experienced public speaker, it likely took little emotional effort to say things he knew to be true. But in another way, it took great courage to say those words—on that platform on that day—as he risked losing the support of influential political moderates for the abolitionist cause.

Was Douglass's speech civil? Some might say no, because if one's aim is to be civil, one does not insult one's audience. But this judgment, in my view, conflates civility with politeness. Civility is not about conforming to expectations of polite society. Civility is about demonstrating respect. And we demonstrate respect by holding one another to our mutually shared moral standards. If the people in the crowd truly valued liberty, then they should not celebrate until liberty had been extended to every human being in the country. Seen in that light, Douglass's speech demonstrates the height of civility.

Great orators such as Douglass are great, in part, because they are practiced at summoning courage and civility simultaneously.

Honesty

Honesty is a commitment to truth-telling and fair dealing in conversation. These commitments inform and govern what we say to others. Just as importantly, they inform and govern what we tell ourselves.⁹

The honesty design principle is implicated in each of the foregoing principles. For example, if we genuinely recognize that we are all dignified equals, then we have a moral duty to speak truth and to deal fairly. Similarly, truth-telling is essential if we are to practice good faith. If, in the course of a conversation, we realize that the other person has the better argument or if the conversation has given us reason to doubt our prior position, practicing good faith requires that we exercise the honesty, as well as the humility, civility, and courage, to acknowledge these realizations.

Honesty, in other words, is the connective tissue that allows the individual principles to work together as a system.

Contestability

Good conversations require an environment of openness in which ideas and points of view can compete with one another freely, in a spirit of fearless inquiry.

I have reserved the contestability design principle for last because it is somewhat different from the others. Rather than describing a personal practice, it describes the institutional environment—the rules of the game—in which our conversations take place. The First Amendment to the US Constitution, for example, provides the arena in which ideas are permitted to compete freely with one another in the public square.

That said, most of our conversations take place outside the public square, in our living rooms, classrooms, workplaces, and professional communities. Parents, teachers, employers, and experts in a given field curate these conversational spaces to achieve specific goals. A university professor, for example, sets parameters around the topic and the readings she and her students will discuss in a given gathering, and appropriately so. These limits help to achieve the goals of teaching and learning.

The trick, though, is to not limit the conversational space to the point that ideas can no longer be challenged. It would be inappropriate for the university professor to insist that only her preferred point of view be considered in a given discussion. And it would be inappropriate for her to insist that other professors should be banned from discussing topics that she does not personally approve. Both these violations of the contestability principle undermine the very purpose of the university.

More generally, the contestability principle is the institutional analogue to the humility principle. Given the fundamentally dispersed nature of knowledge, we need rules of the game that make it possible to openly test, challenge, and improve ideas, whether those ideas represent the frontier of new knowledge or well-worn, accepted wisdom.

Good Conversations and the Just Society

In his book *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell explains the concept of “truth default”—the phenomenon that, most of the time, most people assume that others are telling them the truth.¹⁰ This default can be problematic, of course, as it lets liars and cheats take advantage. But he also notes what a great deal this defaulting to truth is for human society. For the price of an occasional deception, we reap the dizzying benefits of social cooperation. Conversely, when we lose the default to truth, Gladwell warns, the consequences can be devastating. He makes this point by telling the story of Sandra Bland.

In one version of the story, the salient facts are these: On the afternoon of July 10, 2015, Bland was pulled over by Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia for failing to signal a lane change. After a heated exchange, Encinia ordered Bland to get out of her vehicle, which she refused to do. They struggled. Encinia called for backup and placed Bland under arrest. She was taken into custody on felony assault charges. Three days later, Bland was found hanging in her jail cell. Though there was much speculation that Bland had been murdered, the investigation into Bland’s death concluded that her death was a suicide.

Gladwell’s retelling focuses our attention not on the arrest or the events that followed, but on the conversation that led up to the arrest. It was in that conversation, Gladwell contends, where the trouble began.

It’s worth reading Gladwell’s account in its entirety, but the key takeaway is this: The conversation between Bland and Encinia went horribly wrong not because Encinia failed to do what he was trained to do. “It was the opposite,” Gladwell concludes. “It was because he did exactly what he was trained to do.” Encinia had the truth default trained out of him.

Encinia was working from a particular playbook: stop-and-search police tactics developed in the 1990s at the height of the US-led global “war on drugs” campaign. According to Charles Remsberg, author of *Tactics for Criminal Patrol*, these tactics could turn ordinary traffic stops into major felony arrests.¹¹ Stop the motorist for a minor infraction, a broken taillight, say. Or nudge the motorist toward an infraction. In Bland’s case, Encinia accelerated toward her from behind, causing her to change lanes abruptly—too abruptly. She forgot to signal, giving Encinia the justification he needed for the traffic stop. Once the motorist is pulled over, the police officer looks

for clues—physical and behavioral “tells”—of criminal activity. For the protocol to work, a police officer has to suspect the worst of every motorist he or she stops. The smallest detail that seems out of place or the slightest note of agitation warrants interrogation and escalation. Stop-and-search policing, in other words, is *designed* to create bad conversations, and that design flaw can easily lead to injustice.¹²

Bland, we can hear in the audio, is irritated. She’s upset that she moved quickly to get out of the way of a fast-approaching police vehicle only to be pulled over. With the default to truth trained out of Encinia, he reads Bland’s agitation as a clear sign that something’s amiss. After checking Bland’s license and registration from his patrol car, he returns to Bland’s vehicle. She lights a cigarette. Encinia escalates the encounter by asking her, in a tone that is more demand than request, to put it out. She refuses. She has the right to smoke in her own car, she says. Another tell, he is trained to believe. He orders Bland out of the car. She refuses, insisting that she does not have to get out of the car if she is not under arrest. Another tell. Yelling now, pointing his taser at her, Encinia orders her again, “Get out of the car! I will light you up!”

What of good faith? Stop-and-search tactical training first trains the officer to act in bad faith—provoke an infraction—and then *assume* bad faith, to read a motorist’s agitation and need for a cigarette as signs of criminal intent. The Sandra Bland case illustrates the point that how we speak to one another sets the stage for how we treat one another.

In the wake of George Floyd’s death, Gladwell’s insights about policing protocols take on even greater weight. Understandably, when we examine the videos that capture the encounter between Floyd and four members of the Minneapolis Police Department, we focus on the eight minutes and forty-six seconds in which the police have Floyd pinned to the ground.¹³ In these nine minutes we hear Floyd’s agonizing cries of “I can’t breathe” as Derek Chauvin continues to press his knee on Floyd’s neck, as officers J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane pin down the rest of Floyd’s body, and as officer Tou Thao stands guard while the assembling crowd implores Chauvin to release him.

With Gladwell’s insight in mind, our attention should also be drawn to the first minute in which officers Lane and Kueng confront George Floyd. Like Encinia, they were primed for a confrontation. A store clerk called 911 when he suspected that Floyd had used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill to pay for a pack of cigarettes. Let’s assume that the bill was counterfeit. If you had counterfeit bills in your wallet, would you know? Probably not. It’s the perfect moment when defaulting to truth, when assuming good faith would be completely appropriate. “Sir, you may have unknowingly used a counterfeit bill at the market just now. Would you mind waiting while we check out the situation?”

We don’t know what was actually said in the initial encounter. We have the visual record only from a bystander’s video. But it’s clear that, within seconds, the exchange became confrontational. The conversation was designed to go wrong, right from the start.

This volume is dedicated to advancing a deeper understanding of the liberal democratic ideal, one that represents a pluralistic and just society in which people of different cultural backgrounds, religious traditions, political beliefs, and life experience live peacefully and productively together.

Our conversations weave their way through the social fabric. We cannot have a good society if our conversations are, by design, bad conversations.

At this moment in our country's history, we are understandably focused on the content of the conversations we need to have. But if we are to achieve a good society, we also need to focus on the quality of those conversations, both individually and institutionally. A great many American institutions, from universities to police departments, depend on the collaborative, often contentious exchange of words and ideas. Advancing work that improves the quality of our academic, political, and civic conversations is fertile ground for philanthropic leaders interested in supporting the health of liberal democracy.

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6. Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," trans. Jean Hersholt, Hans Christian Andersen Centre, last modified September 19, 2019, https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html.
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Death and Democracy

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**come celebrate
with me that every day
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.**

—Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me,” 1991¹

**Those who profess to favor freedom,
and yet deprecate agitation, are men
who want crops without plowing up
the ground; they want rain without
thunder and lightning. They want the
ocean without the awful roar of its
many waters.**

—Frederick Douglass, “West India Emancipation,”
speech delivered August 3, 1857



ince the video of the execution of George Floyd was made public, I have, at times, found it hard to sleep. I am haunted by the cavalier expression on the face of Derek Chauvin, with his hands in his pockets and his sunglasses pushed back on his head, as his knee pressed the life out of George Floyd.² As has been reported, Mr. Floyd told his state-authorized killers more than twenty times that he could not breathe.³ Eventually, all he could do was call out for his mother as the life was literally squeezed out of him.

In my waking hours, I find it hard not to think about the words of twenty-three-year-old Elijah McClain, who was killed after he was accosted by police officers while walking home from a convenience store. The officers were responding to a call about a suspicious person wearing a mask. Mr. McClain, who “suffers from anemia and sometimes gets cold” was wearing an open-faced ski mask. Through the officers’ body cam transcript, we learn that Mr. McClain

cried, apologized, and tried to explain to them that he “wasn’t that type of kid,” declaring “I’m just different! That’s all!” The officers on the scene in Aurora, Colorado, ignored Mr. McClain’s instructions to “let me go” and instead put him in a carotid hold, a form of chokehold that cuts off blood flow to the brain. Eventually, like Mr. Floyd, Mr. McClain would tell those on the scene that he could not breathe. Summoned paramedics injected Mr. McClain with ketamine, a potent sedative, as he lay on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back. On the way to the hospital Mr. McClain went into cardiac arrest and later died there, declared brain dead.⁴

There are no video or audio recordings to tell the full story of Breonna Taylor’s death in Louisville, Kentucky, from her perspective. It has been reported that Ms. Taylor was alive for several minutes after being shot eight times by the police.⁵ We are left to wonder how she made sense of officers bursting through her door, executing a no-knock warrant for someone who was already in police custody.⁶ What were the last looks Ms. Taylor exchanged with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, as she tried to figure out what was going on? Like Mr. McClain and Mr. Floyd, might she have, with difficulty, whispered that she could not breathe? Or, like Mr. Floyd, did she call out to her mother, hoping for some tender reprieve from the pain of dying after her body was riddled with bullets?

It may seem strange to start this essay by focusing on death when it is meant to answer the question of what the most important challenge facing our democracy over the next ten years is and what role philanthropy can play in addressing that challenge. However, for me, as a Black queer woman in a country built on anti-Blackness and the physical and emotional slaughtering of Black people, that is the way I understand democracy and its future. There is no saving, repairing, or reimaging democracy, at least for me, that does not start with the cessation of our systemic death. To save democracy, first and foremost, you have to stop killing us.

By killing us, I do not mean only the public spectacles of policing by both state-sanctioned officers and wannabe vigilantes, captured increasingly on cell phone video, that end with the brutal murder of yet another Black person. I mean also—and especially—the systemic killing of Black people in disproportionate numbers that is routinely made evident in public health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In these moments of crisis, the veil is pulled back and we are able to see (again) the uneven distribution of coveted resources such as housing, health care, wealth, and education and how such inequality and insecurity—resulting from a system of racial capitalism⁷—leads to “disproportionate” death in Black communities.

Marcella Nunez-Smith, director of the Equity Research and Innovation Center at Yale School of Medicine, notes in an interview on NPR, “that these racial ethnic disparities in Covid-19 are the result of pre-pandemic realities. It’s a legacy of structural discrimination that has limited access to health and wealth for people of color.” She goes on to explain that “African Americans have higher rates of underlying conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease, that are linked to more severe cases of Covid-19. . . . They also often have less access to quality health care and are disproportionately represented in essential frontline jobs that can’t be done from home, increasing their exposure to the virus.”⁸

The truth is that the pairing of death and democracy is not new to political science, which is my discipline. Numerous books, articles, and reports have been written recently about the impending demise of our democracy.⁹ In many of these texts, there is a deep concern that the traditional guardrails of democracy, such as adherence to and respect for the Constitution, an attitude of mutual toleration, and the practice of forbearance have been under assault in recent years, especially during the Donald Trump administration, threatening the health and, dare I say, survival of our democracy. As political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of *How Democracies Die*, write:

Democracies work best—and survive longer—where constitutions are reinforced by unwritten democratic norms. Two basic norms have preserved America’s checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives. These two norms undergirded American democracy for most of the twentieth century. . . . Norms of toleration and restraint served as the soft guardrails of American democracy, helping it avoid the kind of partisan fight to the death that has destroyed democracies elsewhere in the world. . . . Today, however, the guardrails of American democracy are weakening.¹⁰

Thus, for these authors, it is the death of democracy, not the death of any specific group of democratic citizens or participants that has generated such concern. And while Levitsky and Ziblatt acknowledge that “the Civil War broke America’s democracy,” and that “the norms that would later serve as a foundation for American democracy emerged out of a profoundly undemocratic arrangement: racial exclusion and the consolidation of single-party rule in the South,”¹¹ theirs is still a story of rebirth, with American democracy once again establishing guardrails that would facilitate its growth. Left unattended in this account and so many other accounts of American democracy are how the history of slavery, the white supremacist legacy of Jim Crow, and the current era of mass incarceration imperils any claim to a fully functioning democracy in the United States. What Saidiya Hartman so aptly calls the “afterlife of slavery,” I believe, continues to be the biggest threat to our democracy:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of

slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.¹²

Hartman brings into focus these questions: What is the fundamental crisis that democracy faces? Is it a threat to the functioning of a system of governance that Levitsky and Ziblatt define as “government with regular, free, and fair elections, in which all adult citizens have the right to vote and possess basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association”?¹³ Or is it that democracy seems to function despite the fact that significant numbers of its citizens continue to suffer from systemic racism and inequality, unable to fully participate in or benefit from it? The significance of this juxtaposition of analyses, I believe, is that it substantially alters what we think must be done to prop up, rein in, and reimagine democracy. I suspect that those who start with a concern about democracy will emphasize a response that includes restoring citizens’ faith in our institutions, addressing the deep polarization that plagues policymaking and governing, reestablishing governing norms such as mutual toleration and forbearance, and ensuring that every citizen has equal and full access to the ballot.

While I agree that all the issues detailed above are fundamental challenges that must be addressed, these are issues that can be solved without the significant shift in power that would protect and preserve the lives of Black people living under this democracy. For example, solving the problem of polarization will not prohibit millionaires with no understanding of the underbelly of racial capitalism from continuing to dominate the ranks of Congress. Moreover, ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to vote does less than we might like to admit to guarantee that politicians, once elected to office, will pursue an agenda meant to address the structural disinvestment that continues to burden far too many Black communities. Similarly, addressing the cultural norms thought to undergird our democracy might return us to an era when political polarization was less extreme and worrisome, but it will not address the fact that in such an era the most marginal among us were routinely ignored when policy was made by both parties.

Again, I believe all the aforementioned issues must be addressed if we are truly to have a working democracy, but these reforms alone will not produce the systemic transformation needed to stop the killing of Black people and to ensure that our humanity and longevity are recognized and protected by our democracy. Such a transformation will happen only through a shift in power to the people, not only through periodic votes, but through continuous organizing. The rebirth of our democracy lives in the possibility of protest, organizing, and, as Frederick Douglass famously insisted, agitation.

Thus, I am urging philanthropy to invest in what may be the most important guardrail of all: protest and organizing. Creators of the GroundTruth Project note that as populist leaders in Brazil, Colombia, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and India seem to be using “the same playbook in exploiting divides, undercutting institutions and attacking the media,” people in those countries are taking to the streets to support and serve as their own guardrails to democracy.

In Italy, the “guardrails” have been reinforced by millions of protesters who have mobilized in opposition to right-wing Lega Party’s policies that target immigrants. . . . In Colombia, people are protesting against a conservative government’s efforts to undercut the peace treaty that the country voted for. They’re taking to the streets and, to be sure they are heard, they’re banging pots and pans with cooking utensils, a form of protest called “cacerolazo.” And in India, protestors of various faiths are standing up to the Hindu Nationalist government’s efforts to strip millions of Muslims of their citizenship.¹⁴

The impact that protest—and, more importantly, those movements—can have in helping our democracy reach its promise is also currently on display in the United States. During these unprecedented times, we are watching people—a great many of them young people—take to the streets in all fifty states in support of justice for George Floyd, but also seeking to address the current failures of policing, criminal justice, the economy, and the existence of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. It is through participation in activist and protest organizations that young people are provided a deeper analysis of root causes, presented with an alternative political education, introduced to mobilization and protest strategies, taught how to build winning campaigns, and connected to groups of similarly situated young people insisting on systemic change in their lives. And because of their efforts our political domain is forced to grapple with new and courageous ideas and policies such as defunding the police, abolishing prisons, ending mass incarceration, and implementing a comprehensive strategy of divest/invest in communities ravaged by racial capitalism.¹⁵

There is an understanding among scholars of social movements that what often garners the most attention is people taking to the streets in protest, but what achieves institutional change are the myriad organizations, networks, and indigenous institutions that help facilitate the sustained collective participation demanding a shift in power. For example, sociologist Aldon D. Morris reminds us that only by understanding the infrastructure of the civil rights movement can we understand what it takes to produce systemic change. In his seminal text on that movement, Morris writes, “Mass protest is a product of the organizing efforts of activists functioning through a well-developed indigenous base. A well-developed indigenous base includes the institutions, organizations, communication networks, money, and organized masses within a dominated group.”¹⁶

Morris points us to the broad infrastructure of movements needed to build power controlled by marginalized communities. So, while Morris writes about Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership and the work of movement organizations such as the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), he also

examines the work of the Highlander Research and Education Center, the American Friends Service Committee, and the War Resisters League, among other groups and organizations he calls “movement halfway houses,” all necessary entities “involved in [and supporting] efforts to bring about a desired change in society.”¹⁷

More recently, historian Barbara Ransby, in her book *Making All Black Lives Matter*, details the extensive movement infrastructure undergirding the coalition M4BL (Movement for Black Lives). Like Morris, Ransby details important movement organizations such as BYP100 (Black Youth Project 100), the Dream Defenders, and SONG (Southerners on New Ground). She also points to intermediary entities or “halfway houses” such as BOLD (Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity), Blackbird, and the BlackOUT Collective that are integral to the work of M4BL. She writes that these organizations engage in what she calls the “political quilting” of the movement infrastructure.

Thus, it is not just protest that will safeguard our democracy, but the building of an extensive movement infrastructure that will sustain our much needed protest. And it is the funding of such movement infrastructure across the country that I believe philanthropy should devote itself to over the next ten years. By movement infrastructure, I mean the seeding and growth of organizations, networks, movement halfway houses, and other “political quilters” needed to bring people together to articulate their concerns, sustain collective mobilization, shift power, and hold our precious representational democracy accountable for the systemic change people are demanding. The Grassroots Policy Project reminds us that an investment in movement infrastructure will move us closer to “our nation’s ideas and aspirations for a more equal, just and democratic society.”¹⁸

I recognize that the call for funding movement infrastructure may seem abstract or unwieldy, but I believe that such work can be pursued by many philanthropic organizations. For example, funders might set as a goal ensuring that the neighborhoods, cities, and regions where they work are *movement ready*. To evaluate movement readiness, they might ask the following questions:

- Is there a comprehensive civics curriculum in local schools available to all K–12 students that teaches that social movements, protests, and organizing are central acts of democratic political participation and that allows students to practice democratic participation?
- Are substantial funds available to sustain existing organizations and seed new ones committed to organizing in marginalized communities?
- Are there funds to support intermediary organizations, centers, and movement halfway houses that will offer political education and convene activists across various sectors to strategize and work collaboratively?

- Are there funds to support investigative and participatory civic media that will publish research and reports meant to hold public officials accountable, uproot systemic corruption, and support activist campaigns?
- Are there funds for data-gathering projects through which researchers and community and activist groups can work together to monitor the attitudes and preferences of the public and amplify their voices, especially those most vulnerable and too often ignored?

Sadly, we know that democracy, as a system of governance, did not save the lives of George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. It has been only through extended protest and uprisings, facilitated by strong movement infrastructures, that our country has been forced to respond to their deaths and sweeping demands for systemic change. Thus, if we are truly committed to moving toward a fully functioning democracy, we must do all we can to ensure that vibrant movement infrastructures are in place and protected across the country. It is an effort that philanthropic organizations would do well to bolster as it might produce the most important guardrail of all for Black lives and for the full promise of our democracy. Such work may lead us to a time when Black people will be able to alter Lucille Clifton's prophetic words to say that "every day something has tried to kill me" *no longer*.

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The End of Philanthropy

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To speak of challenges facing American democracy is to assume that American democracy exists. To speak of philanthropy's role in alleviating those challenges is to assume that philanthropy *can* serve the interests of democracy. But American democracy does not yet exist due to the same phenomenon that allows philanthropy to exist: the concentration of unearned and unchecked power. Power, like all energy, obeys the law of conservation: it is never created or destroyed, but only transformed or transferred from one form—or one group—to another. Enormous accumulations of wealth and privilege by one group testify to the deprivations of the same for other groups, a reality that is obscured by the twin myths of merit and benevolence. In the United States, these myths serve to naturalize white men's continuing disproportionate share of social, political, and economic capital. For philanthropy to counteract the failures of democracy, it must count itself among them, and work to dismantle the structural inequalities of gender, race, and class that have made its existence possible.

A country built on the exclusion and exploitation of women and nonwhite men cannot properly be described as a democracy. That is why there is no question of *preserving* democracy in the United States; there is only the question of *achieving* it. And this achievement will not be possible without atonement for the foundational legacy of white male supremacy. It is not enough to grudgingly concede that what the framers of the Constitution meant by “we the people” was “we the wealthy white men” before celebrating the fact that the most overt and absolute forms of gender and racial subordination have eroded over time. What is required is an accounting of how multigenerational affirmative action for white men continues to pay dividends in the present day. Such an accounting must highlight how white men have benefited from playing fields cleared of nonwhite, non-male competitors; how their households, businesses, schools, and infrastructure have been enriched by the uncompensated civic and material labor of women and nonwhite men; and how they have enjoyed freedom from the demoralizing, distracting effects of entrenched sexism and racism.

Grotesque inequalities of wealth and influence are fundamentally incompatible with democracy. Democracy must, at a minimum, provide all its citizens equal access to opportunities and equal protection under its laws. All of the grave social ills facing the United States today—sexual and domestic violence, poverty, disease, mass incarceration, domestic terrorism, unemployment, discrimination, climate change, harassment, police brutality, disenfranchisement—can be traced to this country's original sin of white male supremacy, and none will be healed without providing restitution to its victims. The Me Too and the Black Lives Matter movements are only the most recent and most visible cries of protest against this country's long history of unjust enrichment through sexism and racism.

What role can philanthropy play in the belated achievement of democracy? The answer turns, first, on what we mean by the term. The word “philanthropy” means “love of humankind,” and it could be persuasively argued that this concept is the essential ingredient of democracy. The love

of humankind is the antithesis of selfishness, tribalism, and domination; it embodies the sharing of power. In the first recorded use of the term, the Greek playwright Aeschylus used “philanthropy” to describe Prometheus’s motive for sharing with humans the gift of fire, previously enjoyed only by the gods.¹ Prometheus, whose name means “forethought,” chose to ease the suffering of humans even though he knew it would mean increasing his own: as punishment for his actions, Prometheus would be condemned to live each day of the rest of his immortal life in agony, chained to a rock with an eagle feasting on his liver.

If philanthropy in modern times were understood in this ancient Greek sense—that is, as improving the welfare of others regardless of the impact on one’s own well-being—local charities and small nonprofits would fit the bill most readily. The individuals behind these operations often contribute huge amounts of labor, expertise, and time to people in need and do so at low or no cost despite not being particularly wealthy or advantaged themselves. For those who fight against sexism, racism, and other forms of bigotry, the cost of this work frequently includes risk to their personal safety and psychological health.

But such labor is not what most people think of when they hear the term “philanthropy.” Most often the term is understood to refer to large charitable donations made by extremely wealthy organizations and individuals, sometimes termed “Big Philanthropy.” Given that Big Philanthropy requires an enormous surplus of wealth, it is not surprising that major philanthropic foundations and organizations are dominated by white men. In 2019, almost 90 percent of billionaires around the world were male.² Of the 615 billionaires in the United States in 2020, only six are Black.³

Big Philanthropy tends to be associated with narratives of personal success and munificence: the origin of many foundations commonly involves captains of industry altruistically deciding to “share the wealth” with others less fortunate. While it is doubtless true that many exceptionally wealthy individuals are exceptionally talented and hardworking, talent and good work ethics are far more common in society than billionaires are. The chances that a person will be able to amass the kind of vast wealth that makes philanthropic ventures possible are greatly increased if that person is white, male, politically connected, born into a wealthy family, and well versed in the machinery of capitalism. The myth of merit in wealth acquisition was succinctly punctured by US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s assertion that “no one ever makes a billion dollars. You take a billion dollars.”⁴

While not all billionaires are predatory robber barons, every entity with the resources to fund million- and billion-dollar philanthropic efforts is a testament to a fundamentally distorted—and thus antidemocratic—market. In the same time that nearly 43 million Americans filed for unemployment due to the Covid-19 pandemic, American billionaires became \$565 billion richer.⁵ Martin Luther King Jr. once cautioned that philanthropy “must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice that make philanthropy necessary,”⁶ but it is equally important that the philanthropist not overlook the circumstances of economic justice that makes philanthropy possible.

It is sometimes argued that this reality provides all the more reason to be grateful to the individuals who choose to use their disproportionate wealth and influence for good. In this view, philanthropists should be praised for “giving back,” especially when the alternative is to simply hoard all their profits for themselves, further entrenching the disparities between the haves and the have-nots.

But on this point, it should be noted that modern philanthropy often requires no real sacrifice as many mass fortunes are of a magnitude that could never be spent in a human lifetime. For example, the net worth of Jeff Bezos, estimated at \$120 billion in April 2020, is greater than the GDP of several small countries. Bezos added a record-breaking \$13 billion to his net worth on a single day in July 2020,⁷ the same month that saw the US unemployment rate hit 11 percent.⁸ Any praise for the philanthropic gestures of multibillionaires should be tempered with this observation from Henry Ward Beecher: “When the crumbs are swept from our table, we think it generous to let the dogs eat them; as if that were charity which permits others to have what we cannot keep.”⁹

That philanthropy may require no actual sacrifice does not, by itself, resolve the question of philanthropy’s relationship to democracy. The strongest argument for philanthropy’s salutary effects on democracy is its power to provide alternative avenues for social change and advancement of the public good. This power is especially compelling when the government has abdicated its responsibilities for the welfare of its citizens and when the public sector has become corrupt, incompetent, or both.

But philanthropic giving helps perpetuate inequality and public sector dysfunction in several ways. For one, the very existence of private sector alternatives undercuts the urgency of demands to improve the public sector. Unethical government actors are more than happy to let private entities shoulder the burden of education, infrastructure, and health care. “Letting the market handle it” has long served as a pretext for government shirking.

Another is that the generous tax exemptions given to charitable donations deplete the funds available for public goods. Political science professor Rob Reich notes that “charitable donations will cost the US government \$750 billion in lost revenue over the next ten years. Citizens pay (in lost tax revenue) for foundations and, by extension, for giving public expression to the preferences of rich people.”¹⁰ In a trenchant critique titled “Is Philanthropy Bad for Democracy?,” Gara LaMarche writes, “However many well-intentioned and high-minded impulses animate philanthropy, the favorable tax treatment that supports it is a form of privatization. Money that would otherwise be available for tax revenue that could be democratically directed is shielded from public control for private use.”¹¹ The important question, LaMarche continues, is “whether the record of philanthropy justifies the foregone tax revenue that in our current dire fiscal state could be used to keep senior centers and libraries and after-school programs open, hold tuition within reach at public colleges and universities, expand internet access in rural communities, and on and on.”¹²

Rather than redirecting unearned wealth to the public, philanthropy tends to move wealth around among the members of an elite class and their chosen beneficiaries. What is more, the

relationship between donors and recipients generally replicates, rather than repudiates, the power asymmetry that creates extreme wealth inequality to begin with. Far too often, the very people who can do the most good in the communities that need the most help are sidelined by Big Philanthropy,¹³ and the ones who are graced with funding and attention are forced to cater to the whims of donors. As Joanne Barkan describes it:

The power relationship between grantor and grantee has always been one-sided in favor of the grantor. Sycophancy is built into the structure of philanthropy: grantees shape their work to please their benefactors; they are perpetual supplicants for future funding. As a result, foundation executives and trustees almost never receive critical feedback. They are treated like royalty, which breeds hubris—the occupational disorder of philanthro-barons. By taking over the roles of project originator and designer, by exercising top-down control over implementation, today's mega-foundations increasingly stifle creativity and autonomy in other organizations. This weakens civil society. Some mega-foundations even mobilize to defeat grassroots opposition to their projects. When they do, their vast resources can easily overwhelm local groups. This, too, weakens civil society.¹⁴

Philanthropy is an exercise of power, and “in a democratic setting, wherever power is exerted, it deserves our scrutiny, in order to understand whether it's serving democratic purposes or undermining them,” writes Reich.¹⁵ One early philanthropy skeptic criticized the ability of philanthropy to “deaden, by its large benefactions, a public criticism which otherwise would be as formidable as inevitable.”¹⁶

With its accumulation of unearned wealth, depletion of public resources, exercise of power without accountability, all obscured by the mythology of the benevolent self-made man, philanthropy of this nature would be better termed “malanthropy” given its tendency to perpetuate an antidemocratic status quo propped up by hierarchies of gender, race, and class.

And yet, another kind of philanthropy is possible, one that both harkens back to the ancient Greek concept of “love of humankind” and recognizes the role it can play in the unfulfilled promise of American democracy. The noblest forms of philanthropy seek to address the root causes of social ills, and the root cause of this nation's failures of democracy is inequality based on gender, race, and class. It is possible for philanthropy to openly acknowledge that the vast accumulation of

wealth in the United States relies on the extraction of labor from the groups originally excluded from “we the people.” Such philanthropy would focus on the needs of women, minorities, and the poor—not as an act of benevolence, as benevolence implies the absence of obligation, but as an act of restitution. In the words of John Rockefeller Jr., “Every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty.”¹⁷

For philanthropy to truly serve the ends of democracy, it must be reparative. It must seek to transform the structural conditions of injustice rather than merely offering individual reprieves. Reparative philanthropy must be transparent, self-critical, accountable, and transformative. In his gloss on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther King Jr. provided a glimpse of what reparative philanthropy could look like:

On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.¹⁸

We can see glimpses of reparative philanthropy in the example of Julius Rosenwald. Rosenwald made his fortune as part owner of Sears, Roebuck and Company, and donated much of it to charitable causes. Half of these philanthropic contributions were made to African Americans. Together with Booker T. Washington, Rosenwald built nearly five thousand schools for Black children in the South between 1912 and 1932. According to the *Washington Post*, “During the early 1930s, one in every three black children in the South attended a Rosenwald institution.”¹⁹ Rosenwald school alumni include Maya Angelou and the late US Representative and civil rights leader John Lewis. Rosenwald also gave grants to support Black artists and writers, among them Marian Anderson, James Baldwin, and Langston Hughes. And Rosenwald used his fortune to support Black colleges, to build YMCA and YWCA community centers and urban dormitories for Black youth, and to fund a third of the litigation costs of *Brown v. Board of Education*.²⁰

In “The Principles of Public Giving,” an essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1929, Rosenwald claimed that, “while charity tends to do good, perpetual charities tend to evil, blessing neither him that gives nor him that takes.” He went on to ask:

What could happen . . . if the billions tied up in perpetuities in this country should be released over a period of fifty or one hundred years? What would become of

scientific research? How could society care for the sick, the helpless, and the impoverished? The answer is that all these needs would be as well provided for as the demands of the day justified. Wisdom, kindness of heart, and good will are not going to die with this generation.²¹

There is a rare humility in Rosenwald's approach to philanthropy, and his reflections on the virtues of philanthropic self-dissolution were not merely theoretical. The Rosenwald Fund "was the first major foundation in American history to voluntarily 'sunset' itself out of existence, in order to have better immediate results."²²

While his sustained dedication to the advancement of racial equality in both the private and public sectors is profound and illuminating, Rosenwald's "give while you live" approach to philanthropy did not go so far as to seek to dismantle the conditions of wealth inequality, and his reparative focus seems to have been blind to the injustices of sexism. A compelling, contemporary example is offered by MacKenzie Scott, one of the world's few female billionaires. Scott's approach to philanthropic giving is in stark contrast to that of her notoriously miserly ex-husband, Jeff Bezos. In a July 28, 2020, blog post, Scott wrote:

Life will never stop finding fresh ways to expose inequities in our systems or waking us up to the fact that a civilization this imbalanced is not only unjust, but also unstable. What fills me with hope is the thought of what will come if each of us reflects on what we can offer. Opportunities that flowed from the mere chance of skin color, sexual orientation, gender, or zip code may have yielded resources that can be powerful levers for change. People troubled by recent events can make new connections between privileges they've enjoyed and benefits they've taken for granted. From there, many will choose to share some of what they have with people whose equal participation is essential to the construction of a better world.²³

Scott is one of the signers of the Giving Pledge, a campaign begun in 2010 by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett that encourages extraordinarily wealthy individuals to contribute a majority of their wealth to philanthropic causes within their lifetimes. As of July 28, 2020, Scott had donated \$1.7 billion to causes explicitly devoted to gender and racial equity, economic equality, education, and public health.²⁴ In June 2020, Scott and Melinda Gates announced the Equality Can't Wait Challenge, which will "award \$30 million to the organizations or the coalitions of organizations with the most compelling ideas to help expand women's power and influence in the United States by 2030."²⁵

Scott's efforts offer a vision of philanthropy in its deepest sense. The love of humankind

demands an end to the radical inequality of sexism, racism, and classism. In the words of John Rockefeller Sr., “The best philanthropy is constantly in search of the finalities—a search for a cause, an attempt to cure evils at their source.”²⁶ While the immediate goal of philanthropy should be the advancement of equality, its ultimate goal should be the dismantling of the conditions that have made philanthropy both possible and necessary. The end of philanthropy should be the end of philanthropy.

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Comprehensive Public Sector Reform

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ne of the most important reform issues that American democracy will face in the coming years concerns the rebuilding of its public sector, particularly the federal bureaucracy. The United States has not seriously attempted such a reform since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 and the “reinventing government” effort in the first term of the Bill Clinton administration, but recent events have shown why having a capable, professional civil service is of critical importance to the future of American democratic government.

Public sector reform has been at the bottom of the reform agenda for both Republicans and Democrats for the past two decades. There is a deeply ingrained hostility toward the state—particularly the federal bureaucracy—in American political culture, and politicians of both parties love nothing better than to inveigh against it.

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated even more vividly the importance of a professional career civil service. At the time of this writing, the pandemic continues to pose enormous risks to Americans’ health and security and requires a response drawing on the knowledge of public health experts, of whom there are many in the US government. Although he received warnings of a potential crisis in early 2020, President Donald Trump nonetheless insisted on downplaying the pandemic’s danger. This crisis set up a particularly intense struggle between professional expertise and political self-interest within the executive branch. Some of the president’s defenders tried to shift the blame to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which did indeed fail to produce a timely Covid-19 test in February 2020. But the CDC’s capacity had been weakened by budget cuts, the appointment of poor leaders, and the elimination of an entire office within the Trump administration devoted to pandemic preparedness.

One of the administration’s central themes has been its relentless promises to destroy the “deep state” and to replace it with actors aligned with the president’s own political views. In this narrative, the deep state is simply code for the permanent civil service. As will be seen below, there are reasons to be unhappy with the performance of that civil service in many areas, but it is hard to find a precedent for the kind of full-throated populist attack on the idea of bureaucracy itself that the Trump administration has waged in the last two hundred years—since the Andrew Jackson administration in the 1820s.

Bureaucracy and Populism

There has been a prolonged struggle between the need for a modern, professional civil service and the populist forces generated by American democracy. The country’s early government,

pioneered by proponents of a strong federal executive, such as Alexander Hamilton, was both small and relatively elite, recruited from the merchant-planter classes that provided the United States with many of its Founding Fathers.¹

This all began to change in the 1820s as many American states extended voting rights to all white males, not just those who owned property. The electorate added millions of new voters, and politicians faced the new problem of how to mobilize them on election day. As in many developing countries today, political entrepreneurs quickly discovered that the simplest way was to bribe voters with a bottle of bourbon or a job in the Postal Service. Andrew Jackson, the poorly educated hero of the Battle of New Orleans, was one of the first national figures to exploit this populist wave, defeating the Boston Brahmin, John Quincy Adams, in the 1828 election. On reaching the presidency, Jackson said, in effect, that as the people's choice he had the right to determine who worked for the US government and that any ordinary American was qualified to enter public service. Thus began what historians label the patronage or spoils system.

The system began to change in the 1880s as the American economy modernized under the influence of revolutionary technologies, such as railroads, that knit the country together in a vast single market. The kind of corrupt and politicized government that existed at that time did not provide a level playing field for new businesses nor deliver the kinds of impersonal services demanded by the new generations of better-educated citizens beginning to emerge—a coalition of business interests, civil society groups, and trade associations that demanded an end to patronage and corruption and the creation of a merit-based civil service.² The assassination of newly elected President James A. Garfield by a frustrated office-seeker paved the way for the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, which established the first US Civil Service Commission and provided for a merit-based classification system. It was not until the time of the First World War, however, that a majority of American civil servants were recruited under the merit system; patronage politicians continued to fight a rearguard action to preserve their control over the bureaucracy. In many cities, such as New York, Boston, and Chicago, these patronage systems survived into the middle of the twentieth century.

The high point of the US modern civil service probably came shortly after the middle of the twentieth century, following two World Wars and the Great Depression. Since that time, however, a number of public administration experts have noted evidence of declining performance and morale in federal agencies.³ At no point did the American bureaucracy really resemble those of high-performing countries in Europe or Asia with much longer state traditions. In a typical European parliamentary democracy, a change of political parties usually leads to replacements of ministers, a few vice-ministers, and a small personal staff. In the United States, by way of contrast, a change in administrations—even when the same party retains power—typically leads to the turnover of some 4,000 high-ranking officials, of whom 1,700 require Senate confirmation.⁴

While the loss of state capacity has become particularly acute under the Trump presidency, the decline of the civil service long predates his arrival in office. Any reform that takes place in the

future should focus not simply on recent abuses, such as the firing of inspectors general or the corruption of the Justice Department, but also on the accumulated dysfunctions that have grown up over the past three generations.

Problems of the Bureaucracy

The problems of the federal bureaucracy have been extensively analyzed over the past three decades. The late Paul Volcker, former chair of the Federal Reserve, led two Volcker Commissions, in 1989 and 2003, producing reports that outlined many of the public sector's problems. By and large, very few of the recommendations of his commissions were put into practice, so the same problems remain today. These problems can be grouped into several categories: recruitment and retention, excessive outsourcing, limited bureaucratic autonomy, and, finally, leadership and organization.

Recruitment and Retention

The federal government has had growing problems attracting capable young people to the career civil service, with the consequence that the average age of public officials has been steadily rising over recent decades. The government has also had great difficulty retaining its most capable officials while, at the same time, it has provided excessive job security to less qualified workers.

The pipeline between higher education and the federal workplace has been broken for many years. The brightest and most ambitious graduates of US universities tend not to go into government. If they are oriented toward public service, they will often choose a nongovernmental organization, an international organization, or even the private sector as a way of fulfilling their ambitions.

There are several reasons for this broken pipeline. First, federal pay scales and promotion possibilities are not attractive compared to those in the private sector. The current system of GS classifications was last revised more than fifty years ago and was designed, in the words of one critic, for a "government of clerks." These classifications do not take into account the changes that have taken place in the civilian labor market nor the explosion of high-end skills required of people in government service today. This makes it hard to recruit highly qualified new entrants and makes retention of high-performing executives much more difficult.

New recruits are also deterred by the highly burdensome process of complying with required disclosures. This issue was noted in the 1989 Volcker Commission report, and yet compliance requirements regarding former employment, travel, conflicts of interest, and financial disclosure

have only increased since then. That report also noted that there is not a single place one can go to find listings of job opportunities, which would require a simple fix but has not been implemented to date.

As the Volcker Commission reports also note, the federal government makes both hiring and firing workers very difficult, so it is also hard to discipline poorly performing workers and to weed out redundant ones. Many public employees, particularly at the state level, have formal tenure in their jobs, so removal becomes a costly and time-consuming judicial process.

Finally, retention of the best government executives has become much harder because so many senior positions are occupied by political appointees. As noted earlier, each incoming administration gets to make about 4,000 appointments, and in many agencies virtually all the senior positions from deputy assistant secretaries on up are claimed by political appointees—so-called Schedule C officials. Given the number of opportunities for doing virtually identical work for a private government contractor, the temptation to leave one's government position early is very high. A young person seeking high government office would do much better working on a successful presidential campaign and then entering the bureaucracy laterally than by working his or her way up the promotion ladder from an entry-level job.

Excessing Outsourcing

Many people are convinced that the size of the federal government has been growing relentlessly and would be surprised to learn that it employs about the same number of full-time workers as it did in the mid-1960s, approximately 1.8 million.⁵ What has been growing are the revenues and expenditures that this workforce has been expected to oversee, which have approximately quintupled over this period. John J. Dilulio Jr. and others have argued that, as a result, the government is seriously understaffed. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services within the Department of Health and Human Services, for example, oversee a budget of about \$300 billion with a staff of only 2,200 employees.⁶ These employees are expected to enforce complex rules of compliance and root out fraud while distributing money to tens of millions of Americans.

What happened to make this possible does not necessarily reflect greater efficiency on the part of government; rather, it was political sleight of hand whereby a huge amount of government work was outsourced to an enormous range of private and nonprofit organizations. The outsourcing craze took off in the 1980s and 1990s when private-sector, free-market approaches were touted as solutions to the problems of government. There was, in fact, a certain logic to this: workers at the Department of the Treasury or Department of State, for example, were not experts in food service; better to have a food service company such as Sodexo run their cafeterias.

Public-private partnerships have been used very effectively to control costs and delivery schedules in many other countries. Some of the outsourcing impulse, however, was based on

free-market ideology, a belief that the private sector could always outperform the public sector even though this had not been empirically demonstrated in many sectors. Another reason for contracting out was to get around the compensation limitations imposed on the federal civil service. Oftentimes, a government worker can earn a multiple of his or her salary for doing the same job with a contractor. Lastly, there was a push on the part of people on the political left who believed that many government agencies had been captured by business interests and felt more comfortable having services delivered by the nonprofit sector.

As a result, a huge number of government operations, from running prisons to delivering social services to regulating the financial sector, were contracted out to private organizations. A number of agencies, such as the Department of Energy and the US Agency for International Development, spend the great majority of their budgets on contractors; their full-time employees are usually specialists in contract management rather than in the substantive work of their departments.

While outsourcing has certainly produced numerous efficiencies, there are a number of downsides to this practice. The first has to do with lack of transparency and accountability. An administration's partisan opponents would love nothing more than to expose an instance of wrongdoing by a federal official; the same is not necessarily the case for a contractor or subcontractor. A second problem concerns incentives. Civil service employees work for the US government. A contractor has dual principals: the government agency letting the contract and the contractor's employer. When those interests conflict, it is usually the private firm's owners who win out.

Finally, extensive outsourcing raises constitutional and legal issues regarding delegation.⁷ Article II of the Constitution provides that the president "take care" to see that the laws are faithfully executed and to demand the "opinion, in writing, of the principal officer of each of the executive departments." The Presidential Subdelegation Act of 1950, passed by Congress in the wake of the Hoover Commission's findings, gives the president explicit authority to delegate powers within the executive branch without the express consent of Congress. Since this act enables subdelegation only to officers of the United States, it can trigger congressional concern when such powers are passed to private contractors. The conservative turn that began in the Ronald Reagan administration saw privatization of many government functions as desirable, and this impulse was codified by OMB Circular A-76, which was amended in the early 2000s by the administration of George W. Bush to further encourage outsourcing. The A-76 process requires all federal agencies to publicly distinguish between "inherently governmental" and "competitive" activities under their purview and to open the latter for bidding by private parties. While this ruling seeks to define "inherently governmental" acts, it is not linked to any body of theory, legal or otherwise, about what constitutes an "intrinsic" government function.

The limits of contracting appeared most vividly during the Iraq War, when operatives of Blackwater, a State Department contractor, were prosecuted for murdering Iraqi civilians. Many people believed that life-and-death decisions should not be delegated to a for-profit company.

Rules and Autonomy

Philip K. Howard has written extensively over the years about how American bureaucracy is made slow and inefficient by the inexorable accumulation of detailed rules.⁸ Approval for a large infrastructure project, for example, needs authorization from more than a dozen federal agencies, which review the project sequentially rather than simultaneously, after which it is handed over to the state authorities, who replicate many of the same reviews. The project is open to litigation at federal and state levels; in California, the California Environmental Quality Act gives standing to every resident of California to sue the project, with no statute of limitations.⁹ This leads to what I have elsewhere labeled “vetocracy,” in which authority and veto powers are distributed so widely within the US government that it is often impossible to reach agreement on doing anything.¹⁰

I have argued that to achieve bureaucratic efficiency, one must avoid two extremes: highly detailed rules that seek to micromanage the behavior of the official, and the unlimited delegation of authority that allows officials to substitute their preferences for those of the political principal. I have also argued that the degree of delegation will depend on the capacity of the employee: one can safely delegate more authority to highly skilled officials who need to make complex, context-dependent decisions, but would want to place more constraints on less experienced employees.¹¹ For any kind of delegation to work, ultimate accountability is needed to ensure the official is actually serving the public interest.

This trade-off between rules and authority was at the core of many of the New Public Management reforms undertaken in a number of Commonwealth democracies during the 1990s and 2000s. Senior officials were given contracts in which performance criteria and benchmarks were explicitly set; rather than being restricted by ex ante rules, they were given substantial leeway to implement policies in whatever way they saw fit as long as the desired outcomes were achieved.

This is not, by and large, the way the United States has chosen to manage its public officials. Americans begin with an ingrained distrust of bureaucrats; blaming officials for mistakes has become a weapon in partisan political combat, which has been exacerbated in recent years by heightened polarization. The reasons the Federal Acquisitions Regulations or the guidelines for hiring government personnel stretch to thousands of pages lie in scandals, mistakes, or corrupt acts that occurred long ago, which induced Congress to mandate the writing of detailed rules to prevent these incidents from repeating. If one wanted to “try common sense,” as Howard suggests, one needs to permit public officials to exercise more judgment, holding them accountable for long-term outcomes but not micromanaging their performance in the short run.

Autonomy can be eroded not just by detailed rule making, but by politicization as well. Not content with simply setting broad mandates, politicians interfere in lower-level implementation of those mandates. The partisan warfare that has characterized American politics in recent years has spread to many parts of the government heretofore regarded as politically neutral. The Federal Reserve, the Justice Department, the professional military, the Centers for Disease

Control, and even the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration have seen their autonomy challenged under the Trump administration.

Leadership and Organization

The final issue that must be addressed in any consideration of the US public sector reform concerns the overall organization of the government and the way in which it manages personnel across agencies. This has been a perennial topic of the various commissions and reports that have looked at the failings of the US government. Many issues have been raised in this regard, including:

- Far too many programs and agencies overlap responsibilities in the executive branch.
- Most government agencies do not have consistent ways of training their officials either as public administration generalists or as specialists in their specific sector. In particular, very few agencies train their workers to be managers and leaders.
- While the US government is constrained in its ability to use pay as a means of distinguishing good performers from bad, it has been unsuccessful in using other kinds of status rewards as a means of motivating its workers.
- The Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Personnel Management are supposed to play the role of human resource managers for the whole executive branch, but their authority has been weakened over the years by politicization.

The first and most important change in a comprehensive reform agenda lies less in the realm of policy than in the realm of culture. The United States has never trusted its public servants, but, since the 1980s, the denigration of bureaucrats, the Washington milieu, and government in general has intensified. While this denigration is loudest on the right, the left has participated as well, raising deep suspicions about the motives of the military, the police, the CIA, and other disfavored agencies. There is a general feeling that the government is incompetent and cannot be trusted to manage anything.

What is lost in this culture is the older view that public service is an honorable calling and that citizens do not simply have rights, but also responsibilities—a view perhaps most eloquently expressed by President John F. Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

We will never entirely recover from the cynicism that has crept into our consciousness in the decades since the Second World War. But just as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher

were able to shift cultural attitudes away from public service, so too could future leaders move the needle back.

A second reform would increase the flexibility of the government's ability to hire and fire personnel. A balance must be struck between the unfettered right of political principals to hire and fire workers and unlimited job tenure. This could involve, for example, at-will hiring of officials under fixed-term contracts that exceed the length of election cycles. Stronger educational and skill requirements or mandatory training could also be set for all new hires, including political appointees.

A third reform has been suggested at many points, namely, a sharp reduction in the number of political appointees. This will require bipartisan agreement to gradually phase out such appointments and streamline the Senate confirmation process, for example, by changing rules that allow a single senator to put an anonymous hold on an appointee.

A fourth reform would be to hire more full-time government workers and to scale back the number of contractors currently fulfilling inherently governmental functions. Dilulio has argued that we need to hire about a million new bureaucrats, a number that is, politically speaking, wildly implausible.¹² Nonetheless, rebuilding capacity should become a central issue for every government manager and every agency head.

A fifth reform would restore the pipeline between higher education and government service. The government needs to recruit young people with a wide and ever-expanding set of skills: computer programmers, public health experts, financial specialists, and the like. Compliance rules need to be streamlined and limited to those empirically demonstrated to have an effect on later job performance. Strict time limits should be placed on making hiring decisions.

Sixth, the US government should consider adopting some of the New Public Management techniques in recruiting high-value talent into senior executive positions. This would mean sidelining much of the current classification system and sharply increasing the flexibility of government pay scales to pay competitive wages for high-skilled workers.

Finally, we need a systematic overhaul of the structure of the executive branch to consolidate programs into mission-related departments that would eliminate much of the duplicative and overlapping responsibilities of existing agencies. Congressional committees, which often have equally overlapping and confused responsibilities, ought also to be reorganized to match this new structure.

Conclusion

We are at an interesting crossroads with regard to public sector reform in the United States. The issue has been dormant for the past two decades, but the failures of the Trump administration, particularly in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, have put restoration of the civil service front and center in terms of policy priorities. Many more people would be receptive to the need for greater government capacity in health care and other realms now than at any time in the recent past.

Philanthropy can play a major role in preparing the ground for such a reform. As I have noted, the most important change is not in policy but in culture: young people need to be inspired to want to work for the US government again. In recent months we have seen a huge number of young people mobilizing around causes such as racial justice. Many are driven by inchoate feelings of anger that are not being channeled into productive pathways to real policy and social reform. The idea of national service has been around for a long time but remains a rather fringe issue. Philanthropy could help by preparing the way through education and programs that would channel young people into public service careers. Working for the government needs to be seen as something to which an ambitious young person can aspire. The media on both the right and left are happy to portray government failures that breed cynicism and distrust, but never talk about how individual government officials have helped to save millions of lives and billions of taxpayer dollars through their quiet work.

The Partnership for Public Service, the premiere advocacy organization for public sector workers, holds an annual event in Washington around the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals (popularly known as the Sammies). The stories behind the individuals being honored are always inspiring, but the event has very little reach and limited effect on public perceptions of their own government. Private philanthropy could do a lot to expand public knowledge of the positive impact of the individuals whose work in the government has a direct impact on Americans' lives.

A national service program, in which American young people would spend a year or so serving in either the military or a civilian capacity, would build a sense of citizenship. Private philanthropy could play an important role in lobbying for such a program and in educating young people about duties that need to balance rights in a functioning democracy.

If we are to move to a comprehensive reform of the public sector in a new administration, the overall shape of the proposed legislation needs to be prepared largely outside of the government. Although a great deal of the knowledge of how the government works (or fails to work) is held by insiders, they also have vested interests that make them less than ideal reform agents. Private philanthropy could work to support organizations such as the Partnership for Public Service and the Volcker Alliance and academics who study these issues to create a nonpartisan plan for improving government performance and to build a coalition in favor of such reform.

US government service has always been a critical route for upward social mobility for racial

and ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalized groups. The US military remains one of the few large organizations in which racial groups have the experience of working with one another—indeed, in which white recruits often serve under African American NCOs and officers. The US Postal Service is another, though it is currently under substantial stress. The policy challenge here will be to provide ample job opportunities for underprivileged groups without undermining the principle of meritocracy around which public sector reform needs to be built. Thinking through these problems in advance is something that private philanthropy needs to support.

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result, passenger screening operates under a long series of detailed steps, including taking off one's shoes, going through a scanner, limiting liquids, and the like. This contrasts sharply with the way Israel has handled this problem. There, security agents at airports are given substantial training and spend time individually interviewing passengers entering and leaving the country. They are allowed to use their judgment in deciding who poses a danger and, in some cases, have been able to detect a person of interest who would have been missed by a rules-based method.

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Philanthropy's Techno-Solutionism Problem

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Modern American democracy is inextricably intertwined with both the benefits and harms of globalized capitalism. Meanwhile, globalized capitalism has allowed the rise of new centers of power with little or no accountability. Two such power centers, the tech industry and contemporary philanthropy, will be key actors in the next decade of American democracy. We argue that American philanthropy must use its position and power to help design and put in place new forms of hard accountability for both sectors.

Our challenge to American philanthropy is twofold. First, it must use its power, influence, and money to dismantle “techno-solutionism”—the idea that technological solutions are the key to strengthening American (or any) democracy. Technology is not and never will be the solution to social and political problems, but the fetishism of technology in the public sector has been extremely lucrative for many private companies. All too often we have seen how technology, adopted in the name of progress, actually exacerbates and entrenches society's problems. Modern capitalism and the technologies arising from it are strangling the very ideals of democracy in the United States. Combined with a rise in nationalism and nativism, this version of techno-solutionism is reinforcing structural inequities, systemic racism, and economic injustice.

Second, we must acknowledge and reform philanthropy's own dependence on techno-solutionism. The tech sector's runaway financial success—enabled by a deafening regulatory silence—has propped up the economy, and philanthropy's endowments, for the last two decades. This has birthed a new class of philanthropists informed directly by the tech-solutionist logic of the tech industry. During this time, philanthropy has spent uncounted millions advancing and funding a narrative that posits new technologies as the solution to our most pressing social problems. Completing the cycle of globalization, American tech companies and philanthropic organizations have come together to export that narrative to much of the rest of the world, driving the agenda of both humanitarian aid agencies and development organizations.¹

Today, philanthropy and the tech industry are balanced on the same precipice. Most who participate in these sectors do so with considerable expertise in their fields and the best of intentions; they intend to use their money and power to do good. Yet, without structures in place to serve as checks on capitalism and tech power, both sectors are bound to reinforce persistent structural inequities and thus to undermine democracy. Capitalism and tech both need to be reined in by mechanisms demanding much stricter accountability if democracy is to flourish. Philanthropic organizations have a choice. They can either commit to democracy by helping to build those guardrails, fully cognizant that doing so will limit their own power, or they can become increasingly complicit in the maintenance of structural inequality.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Today, in the United States, techno-solutionism is thriving as never before. Given the economic and cultural power of the technology industry in the United States, technologists, politicians, theorists, and philanthropists are all eager to propose new technologies as the solution to structural, systemic, and political problems. But here's the dilemma: technology consistently mirrors and magnifies the good, the bad, and the ugly of society.²

Consider that, over the last decade, we've seen the widespread adoption of data-centric technologies in our criminal justice system, from policing to the courts.³ The rule of law and the desire to enact equal justice for all are at the heart of the American experiment in democracy. And yet we know this goal has not been realized, that both legal remedies and just outcomes continue to be denied to many. The protests against police brutality and violence—including, most notably, the uprisings in defense of Black lives that have swept the country in 2020—have, correctly, brought these urgent concerns to the forefront of American life. These protests have occurred against a backdrop of rising technological solutionism in our justice system. Over the past ten years, we've seen the rollout of police body cameras to record interactions with members of already over-surveilled Black and brown communities as a mechanism for police accountability;⁴ they were deployed with little research backing claims that they would, in fact, increase police accountability and a lack of clarity around the policies needed to create that outcome.⁵ We've seen the inclusion of algorithmic risk-assessment systems in courtrooms that provide guidance to judges—using biased and unverified data and data models—on sentencing and bail, landing individuals in jail with no legal recourse to challenge the tool that sent them there.⁶ And the highly anticipated use of facial recognition technologies by law enforcement, again with no recognition of the ways in which those technologies abrogate civil liberties⁷ and basic principles of democratic practice, has been paused only recently because of the multiyear and concentrated efforts by a coalition of rights groups and scholars of color who understood the potential harm from the outset.⁸

Each of these technologies was originally developed either as a neutral effort outside of the context of criminal justice or as a solution to efficiency needs that also purported to solve long-standing biases within the field. Yet, good intentions do not prevent technologies from doing harm.⁹ And the harm keeps amassing.¹⁰ Fundamentally, these technologies entrench existing practices of surveillance and over-policing of marginalized populations and deepen inequalities through the falsely perceived neutrality of data. Moreover, these technologies cost significant taxpayer money or are paid for through abusive fees and fines levied disproportionately on Black and brown communities.¹¹ This inequity adds up. It sows distrust for the institutions of democracy among these many unfairly targeted communities and further undermines our shared future.

Democratic values are challenged by techno-solutionism in every sphere of public life. Social media platforms, for instance, promise to give all users the ability to broadcast their voices but

have demonstrated that they also reinforce long-standing issues about whose voices have power and authority. Platforms have, at times, interpreted the First Amendment to mean that more speech is good speech,¹² a position that fails to account for how individuals and whole communities are systemically silenced when others exercise their right to speak.¹³ Social media have enabled many people to come together but also helped produce a public square easily captured by harassment and hate.¹⁴ This cannot be fixed by creating yet another social media platform.

To be sure, technology can be used to challenge the status quo: activists mobilize through online platforms, witnesses livestream abuses of power, and advocates share information faster to broader publics thanks to the internet. Yet there is nothing inherently democratic about these technologies. These same tools are often used to harass people, spread disinformation, and amplify hate. It is because these technologies give us both what we want and what is most destructive to the fabric of democracy that nuanced and socially grounded responses are needed to mitigate the worst harm and protect communities from the re-entrenchment of long-standing violence and inequity. Unfortunately, this is not what powerful and well-resourced voices in the tech industry are calling for as an antidote to our current woes. Theirs is, rather, an apolitical, unreflective “build” mentality, with a focus on speed and techno-solutionism and no answer to the question, “For whom?”

We need philanthropy to focus on supporting the social research, translation, and advocacy that will enable data-centric technologies to play the role of advancing justice and equity in our society that so many imagined they would. Researchers working in areas such as fairness and accountability in machine learning,¹⁵ sociotechnical security,¹⁶ and media manipulation¹⁷ are pushing the conversation forward through new findings that expand how we understand the role of technology in society. This research allows us to understand where good intentions can go terribly awry and gives us pathways to strategically mitigate that harm. This work showcases the importance of focusing on structural changes rather than on ad hoc responses to signs of democratic distress.

Over the next ten years, philanthropy should not be concerned with building new technologies; the concentration of capital and power in Big Tech ensures that this will happen commercially, and the drive for adoption within the public sector is unlikely to subside. Rather, philanthropy should act as a bulwark and counterweight against technological solutionism. Philanthropy can clear and hold space for the multiyear, expensive, and radically necessary work to ensure that technology serves just societal outcomes. All too often, technology will feel like a “safe” investment with tangible returns that please boards of directors and living donors. But apps do not and will never produce the hard-to-demonstrate long-term societal change that is needed to ensure a democratic future.

The Role of Philanthropy in Rebuilding Democracy

Philanthropy and democracy are uneasy bedfellows. Modern American philanthropy was born from the spoils of the last Gilded Age and benefits hugely from the wealth generated by this cycle. A handful of living donors and institutions with large endowments determine what is deserving of funding. In assuming this role and taking advantage of our charitable giving laws, they become only nominally accountable, unelected centers of power. Philanthropy needs to grapple with its own position of power and privilege; it cannot become a check on capitalist power unless it chooses to fundamentally reform its sources of power and authority. The sector must reckon with the ways in which American legal structures and tax codes supporting charitable giving reinforce and deepen inequality.¹⁸ Moreover, it is critical for philanthropy to grapple with how these structures centralize unchecked power in private entities rather than in public institutions supported directly by taxpayer dollars.

Our current version of globalized capitalism has led to the financial and political dominance of the tech industry, the invasions of mass data collection and profiling, and the concentration of power in a tiny number of investors and companies.¹⁹ Like the previous Gilded Age, this wave of lightly regulated capitalism has produced widespread inequity even as wealthy individuals, stock markets, and endowments flourish. This is what requires American philanthropy to support the reform of both the norms and the laws that anchor techno-capitalism.

This is not rapid-response, reactive work. Rather, philanthropy must do more to center its attention and influence on what it means to uphold justice at the intersection of technology and democracy. First and foremost, this means a long-term commitment to building and sustaining an array of organizations that are doing that work. The past five years have seen a flowering of new, powerhouse, tech-focused organizations combining research and advocacy with an eye toward racial justice in the United States.²⁰ There are also a growing number of scholars and university centers producing an evidence base, hosting workshops and fellowships, and supporting a new generation to think about socially informed governance of data-centric technologies and to think about these issues as their problem. Many civil rights groups are fighting for new checks on tech power. And yet, each of these organizations, scholars, and networks grapples with the precarious balancing of short-term funding realities with the need for longer-term strategy and with the limitations of building the network of actors when the norm is one-year fellowships or two-year funded roles in organizations.

Second, philanthropy must commit to supporting whole organizations. The ongoing shift in philanthropy from project support toward general support is very positive. That must continue and expand and must be matched by multiyear runways that allow receiving organizations to thrive. To strengthen and retain new talent, organizations need sustainable structures enabling the development of nonprofit career paths that don't require staff to move to other industries for stability and advancement. Building a strong ecosystem of organizations that can work together

strategically over the long term also means strengthening leadership training. Talented and dynamic leaders start organizations and persuade funders of the value of their ideas. Often, funders aren't willing to support the infrastructure costs of running a healthy and sustainable organization. Many foundations, if they cover indirect costs or overhead at all, will cap these contributions at 10–15 percent of direct programmatic costs. The MacArthur Foundation, in a study released last year, found that the real cost of administering a stable and healthy organization is 29 percent of direct costs—nearly double its previous rate.²¹ Philanthropy must commit to supporting the internal equity and justice processes—from training in equitable management to support for building ethical fundraising structures to ensuring inclusive and robust hiring practices—at the organizations they support. This work is crucial, expensive, and time-consuming and can be done only with full commitment from organizational leaders and empathetic funders with a realistic understanding of what organizational sustainability really looks like.

The third commitment that philanthropy can make is to proactively identify areas in which technological solutionism is driving major investment from corporations or government—and then, robustly support a field-level response of the counter-weight work that will clearly bring to light the social impacts of technology. Philanthropy can support the crucial chain of work that needs to be done: basic research to identify new frames of understanding, applied research to build an evidence base of specific instances of harm, advocacy movement building, policy-making, enforcement, and, wherever possible, lobbying to shift those investments in the first place. At the time of this writing, a bill before Congress, the Endless Frontiers Act, proposes a \$100 billion investment in the National Science Foundation, creating a technology directorate and featuring ten key topics for research attention over the next decade.²² This is a tremendous opportunity but, unfortunately, not one of those ten key topics is about the social impacts of technology.

A fourth commitment that philanthropy can make is to prioritize inclusion in both funding decisions and internal staffing. First, philanthropic organizations should build funding programs that are explicitly intended to support historically underrepresented leaders, activists, and scholars in the field. This would include structural support for platforms, training, and long-term financial stability. Building truly inclusive programs inevitably means making hard choices, such as withdrawing long-standing support to organizations or individuals who have done great work but by their very structure and leadership reinforce structural inequality. It means internal foundation accountability mechanisms designed to review portfolios and programs before commitments are made to assess core questions: not only, “Where is the money being directed?,” but also, “Who has defined the core assumptions and hypotheses driving the work?” If the answer does not include broad gender representation, people of color, and those with a range of expertise that goes beyond recognized credentialing, then those mechanisms need to be revisited.

These commitments are about ensuring a robust and healthy array of organizations to carry these fights forward over the coming decade to challenge the core precept of techno-solutionism: that technology alone will solve intractable social problems. What these organizations will need to do is continue

the work of determining what real accountability to society and particularly to vulnerable communities looks like for these centers of technological power and then putting those mechanisms into place with robust enforcement. This in itself is a tremendous challenge. But that leaves open the question of philanthropy's own complicity through the very structure of American charitable giving laws.

We believe that for American democracy to flourish in the next decade, American philanthropy needs to lead a public conversation about reining in its own power and shifting that power to other, more democratic, venues. To do this, philanthropy will need to acknowledge three core points: its power to set and enact broad social and political agendas, the lack of accountability that is a hallmark of philanthropic giving under the current system, and the reality that both of those conditions are upheld by the immense financial power that has accrued to technology companies—and their shareholders—through US adherence to a system of globalized capitalism.

Unchecked concentrations of power undermine democratic practice. We see those concentrations of power in both the tech industry and in philanthropic organizations. We also see that most individuals in both sectors undertake their work with the best of intentions. What needs to be challenged and remade are the structures—tax codes, regulatory frameworks, and legacy legislation—that allow persistent inequities to become further entrenched. Even benevolent dictators are dictators. Globalized capitalism and data-centric technologies both need stronger public controls if democracy is to flourish in the coming decades. Philanthropy is in a position to help reframe and amplify this stance and then drive the design and adoption of those controls. If successful, this will limit its own power—and we believe that will contribute to a more robust democracy in the decades to come.

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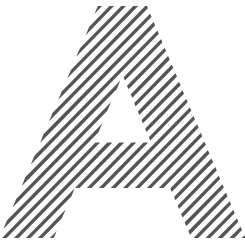
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Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the Twenty-First Century

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At the time of this writing, the United States is being buffeted by three staggering events, any one of which would be enough to destabilize our society: a fast-spreading pandemic, a severe economic recession caused by the pandemic, and a nationwide resurgence of the civil rights movement, with its urgent demands for social justice. All three have brought about serious threats to our democracy and have exposed long-festered inequalities caused by ingrained racism.

Even before these events, we had been retreating to our respective tribal corners amid deep-seated polarization. Some would say that our current form of government no longer serves its purpose and that a representative democracy no longer works in our pluralistic society. As head of the California Community Foundation (CCF) in Los Angeles County, and a member of the philanthropic community, I could not disagree more strongly. Yes, we have issues that will challenge us. But as someone who works in the community, I am convinced we can face this crisis and create a society that lives up to the ideals enumerated in our Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution's Bill of Rights.

But first, we must acknowledge that these founding documents were inspirational and not even reflective of the society of the time in which they were conceived. After all, a number of the nation's Founding Fathers owned slaves, the voices of free African Americans and Native Americans did not count, and women were excluded from political participation. In the beginning, the privilege of participating in our nascent democracy was limited to white male landowners.

Although we have made progress by amending the Constitution and enacting laws to keep up with the huge changes since its enactment at the Constitutional Convention of 1789, we are far from fully realizing the rights enshrined in that document. Living up to the revolutionary ideals of the eighteenth century has not been easy. We fought a civil war to free enslaved people, the right to vote for women was not won until the early twentieth century, and it was not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that we began to make small, incremental progress toward becoming an inclusive society. The struggle to obtain equal rights for all is ongoing.

So, why am I feeling optimistic about our future despite a crisis fueled by our hardening political differences? Today, we better understand the misperception that we were a homogenous society at our founding or have ever been so since. I believe that we now possess the maturity and understand the necessity for redefining what it is to be an American and, at the same time, strive to make our system of government better serve our national interests. Americans have shown themselves to be good at coming through great difficulties in better shape than before. As the cliché goes, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste." This one must be tackled head-on. While the present circumstances seem dire, we are in that pivotal moment. Workable solutions are within our grasp if we have the courage to make the necessary changes that will allow our democratic system to function better for all.

Three years ago, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences created a task force to examine the health of our democracy and to make recommendations for reforms essential to ensuring

the future of our democratic institutions. The task force is composed of over thirty members, representing all segments of our society. It convened on multiple occasions to discuss the state of our national polity and conferred with constitutional scholars, political experts, and historians. But most importantly, its members embarked on a national tour to meet with a cross-section of everyday Americans and listen to their views on where we are as a nation and where we should be headed. The result is the report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.¹

I was a member of the task force. We talked with and listened to people for over two years and, although our members came at the issues from every conceivable perspective, we reached unanimous consensus on thirty-one recommendations for systemic change. That was not an easy task. But the fact that we were unanimous underscores our willingness to compromise, incorporate divergent viewpoints, and expand our thinking for the common good.

The recommendations cluster into six areas: 1) promoting equality and amplifying voices and representation to make our political institutions and practices more inclusive and accessible; 2) empowering voters and encouraging them to take responsibility for the common good by actively engaging in the process of governance; 3) ensuring the responsiveness of our political institutions to convince people that our elected officials are directly accountable to them; 4) invigorating and expanding civil society to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to engage, that people understand that political participation is not limited to just voting, and that all of us, especially young people and immigrants, know that we have a role to play by volunteering and engaging to bridge differences; 5) reinvigorating our civic infrastructure to support a common purpose so that the experience of being an American is not narrowly defined by race, ethnicity, gender, age, or class, but rather a universally shared ideal that must be reaffirmed in order to hold us together as a nation; and 6) creating a culture of commitment to living in a democratic society.

We are at a moment when some may feel overwhelmed or paralyzed by the multiple challenges we face. But it is during these difficult moments when individuals open up to the possibilities of transformational shifts. The task force report provides a blueprint for instituting structural changes to reinvigorate our democracy. This report is not the byproduct of a group of ivory tower intellectuals coming together to dream up their own version of how best to reform our democratic structures. It is, in large part, the result of holding more than fifty listening sessions with people from all over the United States, conversations with thousands of individuals from every walk of life who talked about what unites us, what tears us apart, and what our nation must do to modernize our constitutional framework.

The report has been well received and now the hard work of dealing with today's crisis of confidence in our democracy begins. In particular, how do we spread the word? How do we implement the multifold recommendations? One way is through community foundations such as ours. A community foundation has unique knowledge of local needs and broad relationships with nonprofits and other local organizations. With histories spanning one hundred years or more, community foundations are well trusted and have the expertise to lead stakeholder alignments.

Moreover, since we are seen as neutral brokers with track records of lending community support, we can help unify people around common objectives.

I am ready to begin implementing the task force recommendations. I live in the perfect laboratory for reaffirming our democratic form of government. Los Angeles County is one of the most diverse areas in the world. Its residents range from traditional Europeans and Latinos to immigrants from every part of the world. Over one hundred languages are spoken here, and the richness of the world is reflected in its distinct communities. Travel to the town of Artesia, one of the eighty-eight municipalities in the county, and you find yourself in Little India; journey just west of downtown LA and, within a mile, you have traversed neighborhoods of people from Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Korea. Drive into the San Gabriel Valley and you find many people from China and other parts of Asia. The areas surrounding UCLA and out in the San Fernando Valley are Iranian communities. Glendale has the largest number of Armenians outside of Armenia. Everyone is familiar with the cultural richness of the African American and Latino neighborhoods of LA. Altogether, it is a diverse population living, working, and navigating differences, yet united by the yearning of its people to live in a free democratic society.

I do not want to paint too rosy a picture. Our progress in the matter of living together in peace has been hard won. We have suffered through terrible times of civil unrest that severely affected African Americans, such as the 1965 Watts riots and the civil unrest in 1992 following the police beating of Rodney King. During World War II, soldiers and white residents went into Mexican neighborhoods and beat up residents and destroyed property. The Japanese community has not forgotten the loss of their homes and businesses after being herded into internment camps during that war. But from those incidents and others, we learned that we are stronger when we form common goals and respect community differences.

Living among Los Angeles County's ten million people is a large immigrant community. Most of these immigrants are legal residents, but their numbers also include up to a million undocumented persons. It is our immigrant population that provides the focus for our work in implementing the task force recommendations. Most immigrants, like myself, came to this country to pursue dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Many fled from repressive governments, seeking to live in a society without political restraints. Others sought freedom to create a business. Some came to study in our premier universities and stayed to enrich our country with their knowledge and drive. Today, despite all our problems, people continue to want to migrate to this country. The desire to live in a free and democratic country continues to be a strong pull.

But we cannot assume that our newly arrived immigrants understand all the responsibilities of living in a free and open society. This is our challenge and our opportunity. At the California Community Foundation, we invest in the development of immigrant civic muscle. We have learned that engagement does not come naturally to many immigrants. For the most part, these are people who have made personal commitments to live, work, and grow themselves and their families in this country. While many struggle to get by, they are not going away.

It is not easy to adapt to new ways of doing things, especially for people coming from vastly different backgrounds and cultures. We know that arriving immigrants initially interact with three main institutions (aside from their employers): schools, religious establishments, and local government. We work with these institutions to acquaint immigrants, but this is just a first step; it requires a greater commitment and investment than we are making. Many states, such as New York and California, devoted large public and private resources to immigrant resettlement programs at the beginning of the twentieth century when our shores were flooded with European immigrants. We can do it again, for all immigrants. We must if we expect our democratic institutions to retain vibrancy.

In addition to resettlement and adaptation, legal citizenship is an imperative. Becoming a US citizen opens the possibilities for stability, economic advancement, and civic participation. Immigrants are eligible to become citizens following five years of residency. This is easier said than done, of course. The citizenship process requires immigrants to learn English, take civics lessons, and understand our complicated systems of government.

While this process is arduous, it is essential. It is a key to the continuing vitality of our democracy. But it must be appreciated that immigrants often cannot do it alone. This is the simple reason that, for example, hundreds of thousands of people in Los Angeles County from every corner of the planet have not crossed over the citizenship barrier. But it can be and has been done by millions of others. Anyone who has witnessed a naturalization ceremony has seen in the eyes of those new American citizens a joy and hope beyond description and a profound desire to be part of their new country.

At CCF, many of our donors have recognized that the naturalization process is the perfect way to reinvigorate our democracy. Several years ago, CCF embarked on a massive citizenship effort and, within a year, we helped naturalize over 30,000 people. That push was a success, but only a start. We undertook this focused effort with an appreciation that naturalization means more than political participation. Equally important are the economic benefits. Within five years of becoming a citizen, a newly naturalized person's economic condition improves by over 15 percent. Citizenship also opens paths to many occupations and professions limited to citizens. Thus, becoming a citizen not only benefits an individual, but it strengthens the entire community by adding to its collective economic well-being.

We are planning to mobilize resources for another large-scale citizenship drive for the 800,000 legal residents of Los Angeles County who are eligible for it. We recognize the reasons many do not seek citizenship. The process is very expensive, slow, and bureaucratic. Moreover, fear is a daunting factor. In the current climate of national anti-immigrant fervor, immigrants are not eager to make themselves known to government officials. On top of that, many recent immigrants come from countries where democracy is not practiced, where volunteerism is not the norm, and participation in civic life is discouraged or frowned upon.

So, there are many good reasons that many immigrants would prefer to stay under the radar at this time. But there also are strong reasons for encouraging and facilitating naturalization of our

immigrant population, particularly at this moment when we have a population ready and willing to engage if the means are made available. Thus, the task force recommendation to inspire a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy could not come at a better time.

In my prior job, as head of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), I worked to develop programs that encouraged immigrant parents to engage with their children's schools. We understood that education is a high priority for immigrants. So, we started with the premise that immigrants paid taxes that supported schools and, therefore, engaging with the schools was a natural and important starting place. We impressed upon recent immigrants the importance of engaging with teachers and schools, particularly at the elementary level. A parental leadership program gave them the tools necessary to approach schools and to assist their children in bettering their educational opportunities. The program was a success. Progress was incremental, but we were able to build partnerships between parents and local schools that improved the education of many students.

With the success of this program, we went on to develop a leadership program for adults that prepared them to serve on nonprofit and public sector boards. I have heard from many of those people since then. As one of them said, "You may not remember me, but I was a parent who participated in your program years ago. I began participating in the programs at my child's school and then took that experience to become active in the PTA." Others have told me that they took the training a step further and ran for a school board—something, they explain, that would have been inconceivable had they not been through our program.

Thus, parent education programs work and can have huge civic participation benefits. Philanthropy needs to expand funding for these programs if for no other reason than to expand the capacity of civil society organizations to build bridges across lines of differences. At CCF, our education portfolio funds nonprofit organizations that are working with parents in these ways. We partner with educational leaders to reinforce the importance of engaging parents in the education of their children.

We have recently had an election in which some of the task force recommendations have come into play. In California, through legislation actively pursued by our Secretary of State, all voters received a ballot to vote by mail. Many were automatically registered to vote when they applied for or renewed their driver's licenses. We must be committed to making it as easy as possible for people to exercise their right to vote since it plays such an important role in ensuring participation in our democratic system of government.

For this reason, the task force report makes some additional recommendations, such as aligning state and local elections with our national elections in the hope of increasing voter turnout. The report further recommends scheduling presidential elections on Veteran's Day, already a federal holiday in November when people can go to the polls. This particular holiday makes symbolic sense as well, since on this day we commemorate the sacrifices our military forces have made to secure our freedom. Advocating for such a simple and commonsense change is a practical innovation in

which philanthropy, and specifically community foundations, can play an important role.

We are a diverse country that is becoming more diverse all the time. Certainly, our conversation over more than two hundred years about who is an American will continue. I reflect upon this virtually every time someone asks me that common question, “Where are you from?” I can well imagine the reaction of some to my answers of “I’m from Los Angeles” or “I’m from California,” especially when I travel outside of LA. “Hmm,” they think, as they look at my non-European complexion, “she doesn’t look like she comes from here.” To those people, I do not look like what an American is “supposed” to look like. I may be an immigrant from Mexico, but I am American through and through. Pasadena is my hood. Los Angeles is my stomping ground. California is my state. And the United States of America is my country. The sooner we change the misperception of what an American is supposed to look like, the easier it will be for all of us to live together in our complex American society. The notion that people of different races, religions, and backgrounds will just “go back to where they came from” or retreat to enclaves of “people like themselves” is long over in our heterogeneous society. We must all embrace our larger selves as Americans.

Our challenges in reinvigorating the democratic ideals so many Americans believe in are many. Having worked at the national level, I understand that some of the task force recommendations will require national action. Promoting systemic change for the entire country is challenging. But many of the recommendations can be implemented at the local level. And it is here that community foundations can play a starring role. Their local community is not only where people feel more connected and personally involved, it also is where the possibility of change may not seem so overwhelming. It is surprising how many things can be achieved where people are familiar with their neighbors, have built a variety of relationships with fellow residents, and know on whom they can rely to get things done. Time and time again, we have seen that no matter where people come from or how they look, they can be united by a common desire to ensure safe neighborhoods, good public utilities, and improved schools. As Americans, our common interests and mutual reliance often stand out as more important than the political differences that divide so many of us today.

Community foundations are an integral part of these communities. They are intended to represent, reflect, and work to improve the communities in which they serve. Can they serve any higher civic calling?

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Notes

1. *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020).

To Save Democracy, First Save Society

BRIAN HOOKS

Stand Together



early 250 years after the Declaration of Independence, democracy in the United States is showing its age. Extreme polarization is rising.¹ Trust in government is falling.² A majority of people have lost faith in our country's future.³

These challenges are indicative of deeper fissures. Our democracy is a reflection of our overall society and if democracy is stumbling, it is because people are struggling. If our democracy is falling apart, it is because many of our fellow citizens are falling behind.

In looking for a fix, it is tempting for philanthropy to focus on changes to the formal systems that administer our democracy. But progress will require a more comprehensive approach, one that emphasizes the uniquely American ideals of inclusion and empowerment.

The American experiment was unique at the time it was launched. That's because it was predicated on the idea that all people are created equal and that when they are empowered to pursue their vision of happiness in harmony with others' ability to do the same, society as a whole is better off. Underlying this idea is the recognition that all people are born with innate abilities to contribute to the lives of others. And, by implication, when people are empowered to realize their potential, we all benefit.

But even as the ink was drying on our founding document, the violations of these ideals were evident to anyone who cared to look. Two centuries later, the brutal killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, sworn to uphold those ideals, is a tragic reminder of how far we still have to go to live up to them.

The history of our country is one of continuous struggle to move closer to these ideals—albeit in fits and starts. Each time we have, we experienced progress beyond anything that had ever been achieved. Now, as in the past, a commitment to inclusion and empowerment must guide our actions to improve our democracy.

Our task is urgent. For a growing number of people, the gap between those ideals and the day-to-day reality is getting wider. And as a result, America is sprinting toward a two-tiered society.

To be sure, parts of the country are thriving. These are the vibrant communities where about half of all Americans live, according to a 2019 McKinsey study.⁴ The best opportunities are concentrated in a handful of cities. The people who live there are poised to create and benefit from the next generation of jobs, growth, and progress.

Meanwhile, more than 150 million Americans live in parts of the country that are muddling along or crumbling. These are the one-in-five US ZIP codes where, on average, more than a quarter of residents live in poverty.⁵ In these areas good jobs are harder to find, good schools are few and far between, and families struggle to stay together. According to Stanford University economist Raj Chetty, children born in the 1940s had a 90 percent chance of earning more than their parents. This dropped to a fifty percent chance for the children born in the 1980s.⁶ In the most vulnerable communities, the chances are even lower.

It's as though people are looking out on two different countries, with two very different futures.

These trends predate the coronavirus pandemic, which came as a gut punch to people who were already struggling. Of the tens of millions of people who lost their jobs, workers in lower-paying fields have been disproportionately affected.⁷ According to the University of Chicago, only about 37 percent of people have jobs that can be done from home and these tend to be higher-paying jobs.⁸

In short, millions of people are losing ground. And a growing number are losing their lives.

The suicide rate, which has been rising for more than two decades, is now higher than at any time since World War II.⁹ Drug overdoses are also soaring, claiming 70,000 lives in 2017—quadruple the number of lives lost to overdose in the late 1990s.¹⁰ And alcohol-induced deaths have risen by 50 percent since 1999.¹¹

Economist Anne Case and Nobel Laureate Angus Deaton call these “deaths of despair,” and they help explain why US life expectancy saw a decline in recent years, even before the coronavirus pandemic.¹² In fact, such a sustained multiyear decline hasn't happened since the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918.¹³ Those in communities that are struggling have borne the brunt of this despair.

The Choices We Face

American philanthropy has always helped address challenges like these. The question is not whether we will rise to the occasion, but how we can be most effective in doing so. The way we understand the cause of the problem will determine the approach we take and ultimately whether we succeed.

If we see the current challenge as one caused by the pace and magnitude of change, the solutions will reflect that. If the reason people are falling behind is that they simply can't keep up, then we really only have two choices: slow things down for everyone or make sure those who fall behind are made more comfortable.

But accepting rapid change as the explanation for our current problems leads to actions that fundamentally give up on people. This is at least part of the intuition behind proposals such as universal basic income, for example, an idea embraced by some on both the political left and right. However well intentioned, they concede that some will inevitably be excluded from participating in our country's progress. Acting from this perspective will cause our society to continue to come apart, taking our democracy along with it.

The alternative approach is one based on inclusion and empowerment—the belief that all people can contribute, no matter the pace of change. This requires that we commit to helping empower everyone to realize his or her potential.

And we all need a little help in order to succeed.

For that help, Americans have always relied on the institutions that underpin our society—high-quality education, strong communities, dynamic businesses, and sound government policies. All have a role to play in helping people succeed.

When firing on all cylinders, these institutions empower people to adapt to the dynamic world around them, realize their potential, and contribute to the lives of others. Education helps us discover our gifts, develop them, and learn to apply them; strong communities provide family and fellowship; business helps us express our gifts through employment and entrepreneurship, producing the goods and services that benefit others; and government policies creates a safe and stable environment within which we can succeed. These institutions are the foundation of an inclusive society. They help people adjust and adapt in times of rapid change.

If people are falling behind, it is because the institutions they are relying on are failing them. The evidence of this is extensive.

In education, the one-size-fits-all model that describes most public and private schools means that only 26 percent of students graduate from high school ready to go to college.¹⁴ And by twelfth grade, only a third of students report feeling engaged.¹⁵ Communities no longer act as effective support systems for those who fall on hard times—only one in four people report that they have someone in whom they can confide.¹⁶ And in the poorest communities, basic safety is a real concern.¹⁷

Business also falls short. While we spend most of our waking hours on the job, only a third of us report being engaged by our work.¹⁸ And when it comes to government, over 60 percent of people say that neither political party represents them.¹⁹ Nine out of ten Americans are frustrated with a political system they say caters to special interests more often than serving the public interest.²⁰

Rather than empowering people to succeed, these institutions are holding millions back. Instead of helping people succeed, they are actively erecting barriers that exclude people from our society. Those already struggling are disproportionately affected.

Is it any wonder Americans are also losing faith in our democracy? If we want a healthy democracy, we must first work to build a healthy society.

Fortunately, philanthropy is uniquely situated to help shore up a stronger foundation upon which to build a more vibrant democratic system.

Doing so requires that we take a comprehensive approach to help bring about a more inclusive society. This means investing across all of these institutions, helping to transform them so they empower people to succeed. Neglecting any one of them will cause the effort to improve our democracy to fall short.

A Case Study in the Comprehensive Approach

The criminal justice system is a prime example of how these institutions have worked to exclude rather than empower people. The confluence of failures within education, business, communities, and government policy has made the United States a place that incarcerates more people than any other country—literally locking out over two million people from the chance to contribute and participate in society, and creating barriers for many more who were previously incarcerated.²¹

American justice took a serious turn for the worse in the 1970s and 1980s. Policy makers at both state and federal levels dramatically increased the number of criminal laws and the use of prison time for lesser offenses, which contributed to a massive spike in the prison population.²²

There was a 220 percent jump in state prison population between 1980 and 2010, and with only 5 percent of the world's population, our country now accounts for 20 percent of the world's prison population.²³ Incarcerated individuals are also spending much longer time behind bars, thanks in large part to mandatory minimum sentences. More than half of those incarcerated in federal prisons—about 90,000 people—are serving such sentences.²⁴

The effect, if not the intent, of this system is the partial or wholesale exclusion of huge numbers of people from our society. One in three American adults has a criminal record, and there are at least 44,000 legal restrictions (in such areas as housing and employment, for example) on what formerly incarcerated individuals can do.²⁵ This helps explain why more than half still lack employment one year after leaving prison. Those who do find jobs have an average annual income of just \$10,090.²⁶

Is it any wonder that over 80 percent of those who leave state prisons will be arrested again?²⁷ By creating so many barriers that prevent them from rejoining society, we've created a new cycle of crime and poverty.

Fortunately, many leading philanthropies are committed to doing something about it. In the 1990s and 2000s, some of the biggest foundations and most generous individuals in the country took up the cause. Among others, this included Arnold Ventures, the MacArthur Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Stand Together, the philanthropic community founded by Charles Koch that I lead.

Critically, their efforts focused on changes in all the key institutions of society, not just the government policy that constitutes our formal criminal justice system. Different philanthropies worked on different areas—and they still do. Their combined efforts are helping transform how our society thinks about, talks about, and tackles criminal justice.

Some philanthropies have supported improvements in education in places where kids are otherwise prone to get off track. Others have invested in remarkable programs like those run by Hudson Link in New York's Sing Sing prison to help people earn a degree while incarcerated.²⁸ (The recidivism rate for Hudson Link graduates is under 4 percent, compared with a state-wide average

of around 40 percent.)²⁹ Other philanthropies supported university-based research initiatives to identify best practices that more states can adopt.³⁰

Recognizing that getting and keeping a job is the best way to stay out of prison, some philanthropies have focused on urging businesses to “ban the box,” removing the check box on job applications that asks job candidates whether they have a criminal record. This gives people a better chance of making it through a job interview and ultimately getting and keeping a job. Another philanthropic project in partnership with the Society for Human Resource Management works with HR professionals to help develop guides for businesses interested in hiring the formerly incarcerated.³¹

Still others support community-based reentry programs such as the Prison Entrepreneurship Program, which has a recidivism rate of just 7.5 percent.³² Groups like these can be the difference between a person coming home to a warm bed and supportive family or being released from prison with a bus ticket, a twenty-dollar bill, and a head full of doubt.

For years, philanthropy toiled away while others dismissed efforts to reform the system as politically impossible. Ever since the infamous Willy Horton political ad helped George H. W. Bush peg Michael Dukakis as “soft on crime,” conventional wisdom had it that politics would prevent any meaningful changes to the criminal justice system.

But by taking a comprehensive approach that tackled the issue through each institution in society, and by building bridges with unlikely allies, these philanthropic efforts began to bear fruit. As a result, public policies have started to better reflect these deeper societal efforts.

From the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, thirty-five states passed criminal justice reforms, from slashing long sentences to expanding judicial discretion to increasing the use of prerelease programs that help incarcerated individuals prepare for life on the outside.³³ And in 2018, after years of failed attempts, Congress overwhelmingly passed the First Step Act, the most significant criminal justice reform in decades.

It was an achievement that many thought impossible, right up until the moment it happened. Today the movement responsible for this success is charging forward toward additional reforms—including changes to the formal rules that govern our democracy, such as the restoration of voting rights to those who have served their time.

At every stage, philanthropy played a critical role. It helped transform the way the institutions of society enable those caught up in the criminal justice system to realize their potential—working to empower people who have long been excluded.

Taking Risks

Building an inclusive society is no easy task. Just as with mass incarceration, the exclusion ethos is a primary contributor to many of the other problems in our society. Philanthropy's role in criminal justice reform provides insights for how we might tackle other issues that hold people back and, in doing so, help to shore up our democracy for another 250 years.

In addition to taking a comprehensive approach, this will require taking more risks and bringing together people with different perspectives.

The comprehensive approach is distinct from a narrower focus on fixing the formal systems that make up our democracy. There's no shortage of proposals and plans that call for changes to how we vote, the rules that govern legislatures and elections, and how government should function at every level.

The details differ, but the common assumption is that if we get the system design right, we'll be back on track. While these improvements are important, we should be wary of proposals that promise progress without giving due attention to the institutional environment within which our democracy operates.

As my former colleague economist Peter Boettke, puts it, "constitutions aren't can openers." While a can opener will work as intended in any environment, the same cannot be said for a constitution. The performance of formal governance systems depends on the underlying institutions that shape the ways in which individuals behave and interact with one another. Just look to the numerous countries that have adopted constitutions and legal codes that closely resemble ours, *de jure*. Their *de facto* governance varies wildly.

As Tocqueville noted, what distinguished American democracy from the start was not only its formal systems, but the spirit of community and cooperation that formed the bedrock upon which those systems were built, one characterized by mutual obligation and mutual benefit.³⁴ While getting the system design right has merit, if our underlying institutions are lacking, we will be building on a faulty foundation.

Embracing this comprehensive approach can be daunting. And, to be sure, it will require more than just philanthropy. Government policy and business investment play crucial roles. But philanthropy is uniquely situated to take risks that push the frontiers of progress in ways that other players do not.

Government actors face strong incentives to play it safe. They own the blame for bad decisions but are rarely rewarded for good ones. As for business, incentives are typically focused on meeting short-term goals. With rare exceptions, businesses tend not to make the kind of bets against seemingly impossible odds like those that helped seed the ground for criminal justice reform. That is where philanthropy excels.

We would also do well to risk working outside of our comfort zone, helping to unify groups that

are otherwise divided, as the movement for criminal justice reform has.

One of the biggest myths of our time is that Americans don't agree on anything. But there are plenty of areas of broad agreement; they are just getting drowned out by the political and ideological extremes. The Hidden Tribes project crunched the numbers and found that only 14 percent of Americans can be described as "progressive activists" or "devoted conservatives."³⁵ Between these two camps is the "exhausted majority," people who are motivated to do the right thing on the issues that matter most.

Philanthropies can help move past the divisiveness and polarization that prevent so many good things from happening—modeling good behavior and encouraging others to come along. Experience shows that those who look for common ground usually find it.

Working with unlikely allies can also help to spread the risk and stiffen the resolve of philanthropies that are willing to push the frontier of what's possible. And for those who do, there is strength in numbers and the diversity of perspectives that come with them.

The problems in our democracy are real, but they are not insurmountable. Building a more inclusive society that empowers everyone is the most important thing we can do to invigorate and energize our democracy for generations to come. This requires a renewed commitment to those core American ideals and a recognition that the way to address our country's weaknesses is to build on its strengths.

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Fear and Loathing in American Politics

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he American public's response to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates vividly the phenomenon of extreme party polarization: simple preventative measures recommended by public health experts to reduce the spread of the virus have become political statements. Republicans are significantly less likely to wear facial coverings and to practice social distancing than Democrats, a difference attributable to the mixed messages emanating from Donald Trump's administration. Unlike other major national crises, Covid-19 has not instilled in people a sense of common purpose or unity. The failure to implement an overarching national response has resulted in, at the time of this writing, nearly two hundred thousand deaths and incalculable economic loss.

Defining Polarization

Political scientists have typically treated polarization as a matter of ideology, proposing the ideological distance between party platforms as the appropriate yardstick for measuring our differences. By this standard, it is clear that elected officials representing the two major American parties have indeed become polarized over the past half century.¹ It remains unclear, however, whether rank-and-file party members have followed suit along the same ideological lines.²

Taking extreme positions on political issues is one way of defining partisan polarization. An alternative definition considers polarization as the extent to which partisans view each other as a stigmatized out-group. In the US two-party system, partisanship is about identifying with the Democrat group or the Republican group.³ Psychologists have demonstrated that any form of group identity, even one based on the most trivial of shared characteristics, triggers both positive feelings for the in-group and negative evaluations of the out-group.⁴ In the case of political identity, animus toward the out-group is especially virulent.

Affective Polarization: The Evidence

A large body of evidence is now documenting that partisans on each side treat one another as disliked out-groups. Researchers have tracked Americans' feelings toward the opposite party since the 1970s. Over time, but especially after 1990, people who identified with one of the two major parties have increasingly expressed hostility toward their opponents. Since 2000, the share of partisans expressing intense negativity for the out-party has climbed to nearly 25 percent.

Out-groups defined on the basis of religious or racial identity are treated with far more respect. Intense dislike for the out-group is most apparent in the domain of politics.

Another metric for assessing group polarization is social distance, the extent to which individuals feel comfortable interacting with out-group members in a variety of settings. In recent years, the country has witnessed several high-profile instances of political “shunning.” As Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz, a prominent supporter of President Trump, complained to the *New York Times*, “My liberal friends have stopped inviting me for dinner.” More generally, the argument is that partisans have become averse to entering into close interpersonal relationships with their political opponents. The most vivid evidence of increased social distance across the party divide concerns dating and marriage. In a longitudinal analysis spanning the past five decades, scholars found that spousal agreement on partisanship among recently married couples increased from just over 50 percent to 75 percent.⁵ Moreover, researchers concluded, this level of agreement among newlyweds reflects the deliberate selection of mates based on political identity.

Dating and marriage both entail long-term and intimate relationships. Does political partisanship also impede the initiation of more casual friendships? Surveys by the Pew Research Center suggest it does. About 64 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of Republicans say they have “just a few” or “no” close friends who are from the other political party.⁶ Similarly, a recent study demonstrates that discordant partisanship decreases the likelihood that people will establish friendships with others even when they are not seeking a romantic relationship.⁷ This research suggests that most Americans are embedded in homogeneous social networks.

In summary, the scholarly evidence is overwhelming: Americans are deeply divided on the basis of their politics and are more polarized today than at any other period since the advent of modern survey research. How did this happen?

Contributing Factors

The period over which mass polarization has intensified (1980–today) coincides with multiple changes in American society and politics, including greater differentiation between Democrats and Republicans, increased network homogeneity, and a fundamentally altered media environment. Each of these factors has the tendency to reinforce the others, further contributing to the rise of affective polarization.

Looking first at the differences between Democrats and Republicans, in the last fifty years the percentage of “sorted” partisans—those who identify with the party most closely reflecting their ideology—has steadily increased.⁸ When most Democrats are also liberals and most Republicans conservatives, individuals in each group are less likely to encounter conflicting political ideas

and identities and more likely to see non-identifiers as socially distant.⁹ As political party and ideological identities have converged, other salient social identities, including race and religion, have also come into alignment with partisan identities. Today, Democrats are the party of women, nonwhites, professionals, and residents of urban areas, while Republicans represent older white men, evangelical Christians, and residents of rural areas. In essence, the reinforcement of political and social divides makes it much easier for partisans to make generalized inferences about the opposing side.

A second potential cause of hyper-polarization is network homogeneity. When family members identify with the same party, as noted above, they also express more extreme positions on political issues and harbor hostile views toward their opponents. In a 2015 national survey of married couples, respondents evaluated the presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on a 100-point “feeling” thermometer. Among spouses who agreed on their party identification, the average difference between the in- and out-party candidate thermometer score was 59 points. Among the few couples with divergent loyalties (Democrat-Republican pairings), this margin of difference fell by more than 30 degrees. Clearly, partisan agreement within the family strengthens polarization.¹⁰

A third potential contributor to affective polarization is the technological progress that has brought us into a fundamentally altered media environment. The revolution in information technology has empowered consumers to encounter news on their own terms. The availability of twenty-four-hour cable news channels provided partisans with their first real opportunity to get their news from like-minded sources—first, Fox News for Republicans, and later, MSNBC for Democrats. The development of the internet provided a much wider range of media choices, which greatly facilitated partisans’ ability to obtain ideologically slanted political information. A growing number of outlets, motivated in part by the commercial success of the Fox News network, offered “news” reporting tinged in varying degrees with partisan commentary. Many of these online outlets depict the opposing party in harsh terms, focusing disproportionately on out-party scandals, real or imagined.¹¹ The creation of vast online social networks permitted extensive recirculation of news reports, even to those not particularly interested in seeking out news.

While there are good reasons to believe that “new media” have contributed to the growth in partisan animus, it is possible that enhanced consumer choice also sets in motion processes that weaken polarization. As media platforms have multiplied, consumers gain access not only to more news providers, but also to more entertainment providers. The availability of entertainment programming on demand enables some to drop out of the political arena entirely.¹² Thus, the net impact of the vastly increased availability of choice on consumers is unclear.

In fact, despite myriad changes in the media environment, the evidence, to date, demonstrating that news consumption exacerbates polarization is certainly open to question. While small-scale experimental studies of browsing behavior confirm the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences, more generalizable real-world studies find only slight traces of audience

segregation.¹³ In their pioneering analysis of Americans' web browsing behavior, conducted in 2008, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro found that online audiences were only slightly more segregated than audiences for network or cable news.¹⁴ They concluded that "internet news consumers with homogeneous news diets are rare. These findings may mitigate concerns . . . that the internet will increase ideological polarization and threaten democracy."

More recent large-scale tracking of online browsing behavior suggests that the segregation of news audiences is increasing. A 2013 study showed that although most people relied on ideologically diverse online sources, audience segregation increased among individuals who used search engines to locate news stories and when social media users encountered links in their news feeds.¹⁵ Both these pathways to news exposure feature personalized algorithms, making it more likely that individuals encounter information consistent with their political loyalties. In the case of Facebook, now a major source of news, most individuals find themselves in politically homogeneous networks, increasing the likelihood of exposure to polarizing messages.¹⁶

To the extent partisans do gravitate to like-minded news providers, has the diffusion of high-speed internet facilitated this behavior? Here, too, the evidence is mixed. In those parts of the country where broadband is more available, traffic on partisan news sites is greater and broadband diffusion has strengthened partisan animus.¹⁷ On the other hand, affective polarization has increased the most among those least likely to use social media and the internet.¹⁸ Given these inconsistent results, it is too early to conclude that internet usage plays a causal role in the growth of affective polarization.

Conclusion

The willingness of Democrats and Republicans to treat each other with disdain has far-reaching consequences for the body politic. For one thing, it creates incentives for politicians to use inflammatory rhetoric and demonize their opponents. The chair of the House Budget Committee, Democrat John Yarmuth, for instance, recently invited a psychologist to address the committee on the state of President Trump's mental health. The most frequent and enthusiastic chant at 2016 Trump rallies was "lock her up." Yet another example is the president's use of the terms "rapists and drug dealers" to describe illegal immigrants. And, earlier, during the debate over the passage of the Affordable Care Act, some Republicans likened the mandatory insurance requirement in the law to the forced deportation of Jews by the Nazis. In response, liberal commentator Keith Olbermann declared that Republicans' opposition to the law was tantamount to racism.

At the level of electoral politics, heightened polarization has made it almost impossible for partisans to abandon their party's candidates, no matter their liabilities. The release of the Access

Hollywood tape—in which Trump is heard making crude references to his willingness and ability to grope women—would surely have ended the candidacy of a presidential candidate in any election cycle from the 1980s or 1990s. Yet the impact on Trump's poll numbers was miniscule. And in Alabama, in the 2017 Senate election, evidence of Republican candidate Roy Moore's inappropriate relations with women and girls hardly raised eyebrows among Republican voters, a mere seven percent of whom defected.

Partisans have become so committed to their parties that scholars have had to update the standard finding of public opinion research—that voters are utterly ignorant of current events. Today, partisans are not merely uninformed, but also misinformed and deliberately misled.¹⁹ Partisan voters have become such reliable team players that politicians now enjoy considerable leeway in their efforts to influence public opinion. Well before he became a presidential candidate, Trump was the principal sponsor of the conspiracy-oriented “birther” theory concerning former president Barack Obama's place of birth and citizenship. Since taking office, Trump has continued to show little respect for facts and evidence. He claimed that extensive voter fraud caused his deficit in the popular vote and that charges of possible collusion between his 2016 campaign and the Russian government amounted to a “hoax.” Trump's rhetoric has proved persuasive for Republicans, many of whom believe Trump's false claims.²⁰

What, if anything, can be done to ameliorate polarization? Some suggest that it is a matter of reestablishing partisanship as a civic role to be played out within a broader democratic framework. To the extent we think of ourselves more as Americans and less as partisans, political animus is likely to recede. Another possibility is to foster bipartisanship and compromise among elites in Washington with the hope that voters will take the cue. A key difficulty with both of these ideas, of course, is that few politicians today perceive that moderation of positions and civility will be rewarded.

All told, intensified affective polarization portends serious repercussions, especially during times of political turmoil. There are multiple parallels between Watergate and the current era, yet polarization has fundamentally altered the political dynamics of scandal. Investigative news reports that brought to light the cover-up in the Richard Nixon White House became widely accepted as credible evidence of official wrongdoing. The media spotlight resulted in a significant erosion of Nixon's approval among both Democrats and Republicans. By way of contrast, the multiple investigations swirling around the Trump administration have, to date, done little to undermine his standing among Republicans. Partisans' willingness to ignore information that challenges their sense of political identity is disturbing and undermines the ability of the press to act as the “fourth branch of government.” Even more troubling is the possibility that hyper-partisanship may erode fundamental democratic norms. In the aftermath of a closely contested election, the losing candidate may choose to question the validity of the vote count rather than concede defeat, a practice that would call into question the very foundations of representative democracy.

President Trump famously claimed that he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody at no cost to his electoral support. We can only hope that he is mistaken.

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Notes

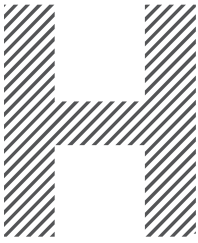
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Fortifying Our Democracy in an Alienated Age

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How should we understand what now ails American democracy? The sheer scope of the symptoms is daunting enough. From partisan polarization to institutional sclerosis, culture-war animosities, mistrust, corruption, and cynicism, our political culture seems beset by endless troubles. Some—such as the challenge of balancing legitimate representation with effective government—are rooted in enduring challenges in our free society. But some are far more distinct to our time and more distressing and disorienting.

The scourges we face today involve, especially, a loss of trust, confidence, belonging, and solidarity. They sometimes express themselves in political terms as intense partisan divisions and a paralysis of governance. And they sometimes show up in more personal ways as loneliness, isolation, and even despair that leads to rising suicide rates and an epidemic of opioid abuse. These troubles have roots that run deeper than policy debates and electoral coalitions. They all reflect an underlying estrangement—a sense that this country is working for others, but “not for me.” They keep too many Americans from readily saying “us” and “ours” when speaking about the life of this society. At their core is a corrosive sentiment that might best be described as alienation and that poses a profound threat to American democracy in our time.

“Alienation” is a term we might, at first, be inclined to associate with some streams of Marxism insofar as they describe a process by which workers lose a sense of control over their own lives by losing control over the conditions and fruits of their work.¹ But the term has deeper foundations, particularly in Christian thought, as a way of conveying a sense of distance or disconnection driven by exclusion from grace—a feeling of observing the world as an outsider rather than participating in it and belonging to it.² This, in turn, suggests the sociological connotation of the concept, which illuminates its political meaning, as well. The great twentieth-century sociologist Robert Nisbet defined alienation as “the state of mind that can find a social order remote, incomprehensible, or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility.”³ This is how the social order of the United States appears to a growing number of our fellow citizens today.

But the alienation that pervades this period runs even deeper. It isn’t just a matter of feeling excluded or unrepresented or a matter of fraying social links and civic connections. It isn’t just about populism or resentment, either. In fact, for too many Americans, the very idea that this is all that contemporary alienation entails is itself a way of treating the problem as something wrong with “them” and not with “us.” But alienation shows itself in the attitudes of American elites and the public at large on the left no less than on the right. In fact, it might be fair to say that its most familiar populist political forms are actually the result of a set of less familiar but no less dangerous manifestations.

Four such deep-rooted forms of contemporary alienation deserve particular attention from anyone eager to preserve and reinforce American democracy in our time. Each amounts to something like a failure of responsibility: a failure of insiders to acknowledge obligations, a failure of partisans to acknowledge culpability, a failure to take ownership of our common past, and a

failure to think constructively about the future.

Together, these four forms of alienation amount to a grave and growing threat to American democracy. But properly understood, they could also point toward some ways forward for each of us, for our institutions, and for American philanthropy.

Four Faces of Alienation

The first face of our peculiar alienation might be best understood as “outsiderism.” It is the tendency of people with power inside many of our core institutions to think of and portray themselves as outsiders—even as victims of those very institutions—and to resist taking responsibility for the institutional positions they occupy.

This problem is particularly evident in our politics today. It is what we see, for instance, when, as president, Donald Trump tweets: “Department of Justice should have urged the Supreme Court to at least hear the Drivers License case on illegal immigrants in Arizona. I agree with @LouDobbs. Should have sought review.”⁴ To whom was the president speaking? And on whose behalf? He was behaving as an observer or an outside commentator on the work of the executive branch, rather than the ultimate insider exclusively charged with the enormous constitutional and legal powers of our government’s chief executive. Many members of Congress approach their institution the same way—not as the locus of legislative power in our government, which they ardently sought to share and are now responsible for exercising, but as a noxious and abhorrent force oppressing our society and leaving us all with frustrations and complaints they would like to channel. They often can’t wait to get off the floor of the House or Senate, find a camera, and start complaining about Congress.

But the same pattern is evident well beyond the political arena. People occupying key positions inside institutions (from journalism to the academy, religion, culture, and civil society) see those institutions as platforms from which to perform, frequently as stars in a morality play about their own marginalization. Too often, as a result, no one claims ownership of the institutions of our society, and so no one accepts responsibility for them.⁵

Everyone wants to be a rebel against the establishment. The advantage that rebels enjoy is that they are not constrained by obligations, but the disadvantage they normally suffer is that they have no real power. Many of today’s faux rebels, however, actually do have power. They just pretend they don’t to avoid being constrained by responsibility even as they deploy that power.

And if everyone is a rebel, there is no solid establishment against which to rebel. That is roughly our situation now, but our politics and culture take that as further evidence of the corruption of our establishments and thus as further cause for more intense rebellion rather than a reason to

reassert some sense of responsibility. The one thing we all agree on is that insiders are the problem, and so we are all in some sense left feeling like outsiders—excluded, marginalized, disaffected, and disconnected. This obviously contributes to a broadly shared sense of estrangement.

The second form of our alienation is related to the first but also to the intense partisanship of this moment. It involves what we might call “polarized catastrophism,” the idea that, generally, American life is on the verge of utter destruction and, specifically, that the blame lies with the other political camp. Many of us now implicitly approach politics with a sense that the country’s biggest problem is the party we disagree with. More urgent than economic challenges, cultural breakdown, public health crises, environmental degradation, foreign threats, or domestic needs—or rather, underlying those practical problems—is the conviction that the other party will use political power to harm the country’s future prospects. Even when we think of polarization itself, and recognize how it contributes to the dysfunction of our politics, we blame the other party for it and view our own political camp as merely responding to reckless provocations.

This, too, constitutes a failure to see ourselves as part of the country’s story—to imagine that we stand outside it or that it is happening *to* us rather than *through* us. We all conceive of ourselves as the victims of powerful forces and rarely acknowledge our own part in the drama. And because each party sees the other as the country’s foremost problem, the notion of progress through compromise seems absurd. The problem to be solved is the opposition, and so refusing to give ground becomes more important than gaining ground. As a result, each party is left with little to give in negotiations over policy particulars and little to gain.

This helps explain why there has been so little of such negotiation over policy particulars in recent years and why our elections are so rarely about substantive policy disputes. They are more frequently about struggles to dominate the narrative of catastrophism and to persuade the country that the next election matters because it is the last chance to stop the other side.

The tendency to put ourselves outside of the story we tell about our nation leads directly to the third mode of our distinctive contemporary alienation. This problem, which we can call “ahistoricity,” involves an alienation from our history as a society—an inclination to treat historical wrongs as if they have nothing to do with us and to treat historical achievements as if they aren’t ours to celebrate.

On the surface, these two sides of the coin of ahistoricity seem to be at war with one another. Elements of the cultural left suggest, for instance, that the United States was founded in racial injustice and is therefore not only thoroughly but permanently stained and irredeemable. They insist that white supremacy is the essence of the American story and systemically ignore and obscure the struggle *against* white supremacy and racial injustice—a story as old as our society and one that affords us enormous resources that could prove very valuable in the present. Their aim is to advance the cause of justice, but in practice they deny us the ability to do that together as a people by grossly distorting our common history.

Elements of the cultural right respond to such claims by insisting we can leave the American

history of racial injustice behind us, celebrate the progress we have made against it, and simply look past race altogether. Their aim is also to advance a just ideal, but theirs is no less a distortion of the role that history ought to play in the life of a society. A nation's existence spans the generations—it is one whole across time. This means we must be willing to accept our society's misdeeds and injustices as our own and to understand that they inevitably and unavoidably influence our present. If we want to celebrate the elevated and inspiring in our inheritance, which we should, then we must also lament the degraded and disgraceful. And we have to recognize that the sins of past generations extend into the present. Racial injustice is still with us today, not only as a shadow cast by our history, but as a present reality in the lives of too many Americans.

That reality, however, should send us reaching for the best in our own traditions, not denying and ignoring our past, but embracing it and finding in it the resources to redeem and revitalize our society. That would mean seeing that our past—all of it—is ours. Indeed, it is us. We fight over whether our past is irredeemably evil or unimpeachably good rather than acknowledging its complexity and drawing upon the good to struggle against the bad. The unwillingness to do that alienates us from our past.

And it also leaves us incapable of imagining our future together. This is the fourth form of the alienation that bedevils our society. We might call it “future-blindness.” Our common life at this point is shockingly devoid of serious consideration of the future. This is easy to miss as our politics and culture seem always to be wracked by intense partisan struggles. But few if any of these struggles are about how to build our future or about what the United States will require to be a stronger, better, healthier society in, say, twenty years.

This is partly generational, to be sure. Our political culture remains dominated by the oldest of the baby boomers (and even those a little older than they) to an unusual degree. At the time of this writing, we are approaching an election in which a seventy-seven-year-old challenger will take on a seventy-four-year-old incumbent. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is eighty years old. The majority leader of the Senate is seventy-eight. We should wish them all many more years of good health. Still, it should hardly surprise us that the political system they dominate seems mired in ancient feuds and has trouble thinking of the future as its own.

But there is more to the absence of the future in our politics. That peculiar void is a kind of sum of the other forms of contemporary alienation. Our outsiderism leaves us feeling as though we are mere observers of our own society's life, thus making the future feel as though it is someone else's responsibility. Our polarized catastrophism shortens our time horizons: If the next election will determine whether our nation lives or dies, who can think beyond it? Our ahistoricity means we tend not to see ourselves as links in a long chain that reaches both backward and forward. We assume some sharp break must come between our present and our future.

Restoring the First-Person Plural

Seeing the challenges facing our democracy through this lens can help us understand a little more plainly just what alienation entails and why it's worrisome. Simply put, our contemporary sociopolitical alienation amounts to a failure to think and speak of our society in the first-person plural—in terms of “us” and “we” and “ours.”

In one arena of American life after another, we find fellow citizens who do not think of themselves as insiders in our society, but as observers from the outside. In some cases they yearn to be insiders but feel rejected or excluded. In other cases they revel in the role of the outsider and ignore the responsibilities they have. Either way, it is destructive of the civic spirit necessary to sustain and revitalize American democracy.

In this sense, our alienation in its various forms is among the most serious threats our democracy confronts at this time. It is a deep, complicated, and multifarious danger. But to see that it amounts to a failure to think in the first-person plural is also to see our way toward addressing the problem and improving our democracy. We should make it a priority to force ourselves into the mode of the first-person plural and make it easier for others in our society to adopt that mode as well. This means resisting the lure of outsiderism in all its forms and seeking out, instead, opportunities to be an insider: a member, a citizen, a part of the whole.

We can do this in small ways in our own lives, to begin with. We can speak in the first-person plural about both ourselves and others. We can look for opportunities to play a formal role in a joint effort, to take ownership of a common problem, to act locally to answer some unmet need rather than standing around with our arms folded wondering when someone else will meet it.

But we will also need to look for more comprehensive ways to respond to this problem. In some political, cultural, academic, and professional institutions, this will require structural reforms aimed at changing the incentives that confront American elites and creating greater pressure for insiders to think institutionally and assume responsibility. In Congress, for instance, such change will require reforms of the budget process, the committee system, and the boundaries of transparency within the institution to encourage members to think of themselves as legislators rather than performers and to channel their ambitions into the institution rather than around it. Similar thinking will be required at the state and local levels and in universities, companies, and civic organizations.

Taking on these peculiar forms of alienation will also require a new language of civic engagement that emphasizes the first-person plural, reorients our expectations accordingly, and helps build a political culture focused on our common fate, common challenges, common strengths, and common history. In particular, we will need to understand the problems our society faces as problems for us all, not as roadblocks some of our fellow citizens create to stand in the way of others' aspirations.

For the most part, this does not amount to a traditional policy agenda. It requires a cultural change, almost a spiritual change. But for that reason, it does offer some real opportunities for philanthropy to help promote positive transformation. The standard of the first-person plural can serve as a kind of criterion for philanthropic giving: Is this project directed to helping Americans think of their country as belonging to all of its people? Is it geared toward solidarity? Is it likely to encourage the people it touches to see themselves as insiders in our society, responsible for some portion of its fate—good or ill? If it succeeds, will it help to combat our peculiar twenty-first-century alienation?

Questions such as these may not come naturally to the philanthropic sector in the United States. But they are the essential measures of civic engagement, social responsibility, and political renewal for the coming years. They speak to one of the thorniest and most profound threats to American democracy. And they suggest how we might mitigate the danger and rebuild our country's promise and potential—together.

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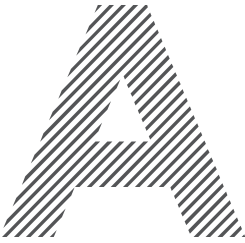
Notes

1. See, for instance, George Novack and Ernest Mandel, *The Marxist Theory of Alienation* (Atlanta: Pathfinder, 1973).
2. See, for instance, Kenneth D. Eberhard, *The Alienated Christian: A Theology of Alienation* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971).
3. Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), ix.
4. President Donald Trump tweeted this on March 21, 2018, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/976411208717950976>.
5. This pattern of institutional deformation was the subject of my book *A Time to Build* (New York: Basic, 2020).

Building Civic Bridges through a Lens of Racial Justice

MARTHA MCCOY

Everyday Democracy



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/>.

What Philanthropies Should—and Shouldn't—Do to Save Democracy

YASCHA MOUNK

Protect Democracy



ver the past five years, democracies have been deeply imperiled by the rise of populism. From Brazil to Hungary, and from India to the United States, aspiring authoritarians have fundamentally transformed their countries. The twenties may thus turn out to be as decisive a decade for democracy in this century as they were in the last.

To ensure that, this time around, the outcome turns out to be a happier one requires an understanding of the nature of populism and the best levers to fight back against it. What unites populists across their many geographical and ideological differences is the claim that they, and they alone, truly represent the people. This is also what makes them dangerous: Precisely because they are incapable of tolerating the idea that democracies thrive on legitimate—even institutionalized—dissent, they seek to undermine the rule of law and the separation of powers.

Philanthropic supporters of democracy who recognize this danger can invest in three basic areas to shore up their countries' political defenses against authoritarian populism: the fight against the root causes of the populist rise; the defense of democratic norms and institutions currently under fire from populists; and the development of ideas and movements that might help defenders of democracy to beat back populists at the ballot box.

Let me briefly speak to the promises and pitfalls of each.

Three Important Things Philanthropies Can Do

People around the world did not just awaken one morning in a fit of madness and decide, for no reason, to vote for terrible people. Rather, their willingness to blow up politics as usual is rooted in a deep frustration with long-standing political realities.

The precise list of reasons why citizens of so many democracies have, over time, become less committed to their political institutions continues to be the subject of heated debate. In *The People versus Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is In Danger and How to Save It*, I argue that three structural transformations are especially important: the stagnation of living standards for ordinary people; the fear, widespread among some historically dominant groups, that demographic change and greater equality are imperiling their social status; and the rise of the internet and social media. Other authors have tried to elevate one of these reasons above the others, or to add additional considerations to the mix, from the increasingly technocratic nature of our political institutions to the increasingly elitist nature of our cultural institutions.

For any successful philanthropic effort that hopes to counteract the structural causes of populism, the correct identification of its most important drivers is of course a necessary

prerequisite. But even if they succeed in this difficult task, they have only solved the first of the momentous obstacles facing them. For, virtually by definition, all the structural drivers I enumerated are so deep and vast that it is hard to see how even the best-endowed foundations can make a meaningful contribution toward turning their tide.

This brings us to the second possible area on which to focus. Once populists are in power, they intensify their assault on the basic rules and norms of liberal democracy. For our institutions to survive, and our compatriots to have a chance to change their mind about the populists in free and fair elections, these attacks need to be beaten back.

Over the past years, a number of inspiring organizations have shown that it is possible to do so. Protect Democracy, where I serve as a senior advisor, for example, has used a range of effective tools to defend American democracy from the attacks it currently suffers: its lawsuits have defended the independence of key institutions; public letters have called the country's attention to particularly flagrant abuses of power; and its invitation for public servants to retake their pledge of office has helped to remind key players of their constitutional obligations.

But for all the impact that such initiatives have already had, it is important to be realistic about their limitations. The legal strategy, for example, only works so long as courts remain reasonably independent. In countries like Poland or Hungary, this is barely the case anymore; it is not unimaginable that the United States could soon follow suit. Similarly, public petitions that are signed by hundreds or thousands of prominent dissenters can be powerful when a significant part of the public still believes in the existence of nonpartisan arbiters, like civil servants. But populists are very effective at creating an atmosphere in which even the people who once enjoyed the greatest cross-partisan respect are instantly dismissed as self-serving political actors when they dare to dissent.

The strategies that fall into this bucket therefore play an important but limited role: They can help to delay the capture of key institutions by months or years. In doing so, they can make the difference between elections that remain sufficiently free and fair to oust populists who are already in power and elections that are so compromised that their outcomes are a foregone conclusion. But the longer populists are in power, and the more they manage to corrupt the institutions, the more futile these efforts become.

This brings us to the third area on which to focus. Once populists win reelection, they often manage to capture the political system to such an extent that democracy is on its way to the morgue. And even if, as in Poland or Hungary, they do lose power, they can return to power—triumphant and even more dangerous—at a later point in time. All of this speaks to the need for ensuring that populists lose at the ballot box.

Some of the more obvious ways to assist democratic politicians in their mission to defeat populists, like campaign contributions, fall outside the realm in which organizations with 401(c)3 status can engage. But other, likely more important methods are very appropriate fields for philanthropies to engage. For example, the experience of countries around the world

demonstrates that opposition parties often go wrong in focusing solely on the failings of populist governments, doing too little to put forward a substantive and unifying vision for their country's future.

Developing such a vision—and the policy program that goes with it—is not a task to be solved on the fly by a few campaign consultants. Rather, it needs to be based in a body of serious ideas that are, all too often, lacking at the moment. To remedy the dangerous intellectual weaknesses of the opponents of populism, and pave the way for a fresh vision that can speak to a clear majority of citizens, philanthropies need to invest much more heavily than they do now in idea generation and the public defense of philosophically liberal ideas.

Winning (re)converts to the cause of liberal democracy is a matter of winning the public debate. Many activities that may seem abstract, and whose impact cannot be easily quantified—from serious intellectual magazines to summer schools for the next generation of democratic leaders—are necessary for this. But this is of course slow and laborious work. In the short run, it seems to accomplish little; in the long run, it is crucial.

One Big Thing Philanthropies Shouldn't Do

I am painfully aware that my advice is of limited use. The threat to democracy and the rise of populism are very deep problems. There are impactful things philanthropies can do to safeguard some of our most basic values. For anybody who cares about our basic values—about individual freedom and collective self-determination, about free inquiry and social equity—it is crucial that they do what they can. But there is no panacea.

If my positive advice is disappointingly equivocal, though, I would like to take my leave with a more strident, and perhaps controversial, piece of negative advice. One of the deep and widely underappreciated problems now facing society in the United States, and many other developed democracies in the world, is a growing secession of elites. Dismayed by the (voting) behavior of their fellow citizens, many progressive and highly educated people have essentially written a large percentage of the population off as irremediable bigots. The only responsible task, they assume implicitly or argue explicitly, is to think about what the country should do once a sufficiently great number of these recalcitrant reactionaries is six feet under.

Over the past years, I have seen many well-meaning philanthropists fund charitable enterprises that inadvertently fall into this trap. Rather than serving to construct a vision for or a reality in this country that helps to unify us around a truly inclusive vision of our shared future, these projects primarily serve to spread the disdain for half the country that is so common among people who write in or read publications such as this.

A few years after Bertolt Brecht had to undergo the hostile questioning of Senator Joseph McCarthy for his communist sympathies, he watched with dismay as the leaders of the East German regime beat down an uprising by the country's workers. In the famous poem "The Solution," written to commemorate the occasion, Brecht mused:

After the uprising of the 17th of June
The Secretary of the Writers' Union
Had leaflets distributed on the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could only win it back
By increased work quotas. Would it not in that case be simpler
for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

Today a very different ruling class is, under very different circumstances, tempted, if not to dissolve its people, then to pretend that it resembles the one it would choose to elect. But that is as futile an exercise as it was in the East Germany of Brecht's final days.

We are stuck with people—sometimes rash or prejudiced, but often more wise and insightful than elites recognize—as they actually are. Any long-term solution to the weakening of democracy must do the hard work of respecting and persuading people, rather than deepening the dangerous tendency to belittle or berate them for their choices.

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What Big Philanthropy Can Learn from Big Tech

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n July 29, 2020, I sat glued to my television watching four of the most powerful men in Big Tech testify before the House Judiciary Committee during antitrust hearings. The hearing was an important forum for confronting threats to democracy that stem from monopoly control by technology companies. A few days later, I had the honor of engaging in an online fireside chat at the RightsCon conference with Federal Trade

Commissioner Rohit Chopra about how the commission is invoking the “unfairness doctrine” to take on the outsize power the tech sector holds in determining all manner of outcomes affecting the lives of people who should be protected by federal antidiscrimination law and consumer protection regulations.

The Judiciary Committee hearings showed us that it’s difficult for Big Tech to acknowledge its role in antidemocratic and antisocial activities—from the facilitation, exacerbation, and amplification of hate speech and calls for genocide or violence against ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities to its monetization and profiteering from discriminatory and monopolistic business practices. The statements by tech company CEOs from Google, Amazon, Apple, and Facebook show us that believing oneself to be a good person with good intentions cannot mitigate the damage that is being done by the global impact of the company one leads.

The harms caused by digital products used in lending practices, predictive algorithms, and targeted advertising that discriminate in housing and employment have been increasingly made visible by scholars and journalists over the past decade. After many years of superficial coverage and laudatory profiles in popular media, the tech firms are finally facing more critical coverage from scholars and journalists about their content moderation practices, too. By using newer evidence-based research techniques, such as computational data analysis and data visualization, alongside good old-fashioned investigative journalism, beat reporters and long-form journalists have unequivocally shown the many heretofore unaccounted for downsides in the way the tech industry has shifted the way we live—and not without great cost. Indeed, many of these changes that journalists, often working in concert with university researchers, have demonstrated are profoundly antidemocratic, if not authoritarian, and even dystopian in some cases. In late 2020, US policy makers are finally taking notice.

What can be learned from the hearings and from this renewed national conversation about the role of concentrated power and wealth in the handful of companies that are radically reshaping our fragile experiment in democracy in the United States? What is the role of Big Philanthropy in these conversations, and how can it model a departure from the harmful status quo?

Big Philanthropy: Opportunity at a Crossroads

The major foundations and other giving organizations we term Big Philanthropy for ease of discussion, operate quite differently from the way individuals do when they make charitable contributions to a variety of issues and concerns they care about. Big Philanthropy operates on a vastly different scale. It is often not as visible to laypeople, nor are the deliverables or outputs as easy to understand as, say, a Kickstarter campaign to launch an innovative car seat for toddlers or a GoFundMe effort to raise money for families that have no money to bury their loved ones. When I talk about Big Philanthropy, I refer specifically to large private foundations that have millions of dollars of interest income to distribute on an annual basis. With their focused and coordinated giving, these organizations are capable of establishing new paradigms in society. Indeed, such societal change is often at the core of their mission.

Yet it can be hard for large and venerable organizations to move toward the very new paradigms they often seek to establish and shift. I argue, however, that it is at just such a place of novelty and perhaps even organizational discomfort where the greatest opportunities for profound societal change lie. This is the crossroads at which many philanthropic organizations find themselves as they attempt to find a role for them in unraveling and intervening in centuries of injustice.

While foundations and other giving organizations are trying to find their place in the face of calls for justice for Jacob Blake, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the countless lives harmed and ended by the violence of racial and economic injustice, we must remember that, despite the relative newness of some racial justice organizations on contemporary front lines, calls for racial justice actually began three centuries before today's clarion reminder that Black Lives Matter. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary opportunities for positive social change and impact in the struggle to strengthen democracy, evidenced by a society of structural and interpersonal care, is to align with the struggle for racial and economic justice. It is one of the most compassionate and appropriate uses of Big Philanthropy's concentrated wealth, and it can play a pivotal role in reparations to communities that have long been harmed by structural violence and oppression, as well as by institutional neglect. The philanthropic world itself is not untouched by the very legacies we now must seek to undo.

What those of us who study racial and economic injustice know is that the generational wealth that makes Big Philanthropy possible was built by the development of exploitive economic, social, and political systems in the United States and around the world. Big Philanthropy was often predicated upon and continues to thrive on extraction, even as its intentions are shifting. In this moment, it is crucial to rethink the role of philanthropy in national and global inequity—and it is crucial to deploy these resources in meaningful new ways.

Big Philanthropy's Future: Expanding APIs for the Protocols of Giving

In some ways, Big Philanthropy parallels Big Tech in that it creates an ecosystem of legitimacy and sets standards and protocols for smaller and less well-capitalized organizations. Not only does Big Philanthropy have the financial and cultural capital to make major positive social change happen, but it also has the gatekeeping power to set the terms of engagement for the scholars, practitioners, activists, artists, and institutions it funds. Large-scale philanthropy defines the scope of the problems to be solved by the groups and projects it supports. The industry of large-scale giving often creates an API—an application program interface—for engagement. Its protocols have to be used by grantees in order to participate meaningfully. Big Philanthropy's APIs function as key building blocks in shaping an entire ecosystem, even as it frames and responds to the most pressing social issues of the moment.

An API, in the simplest terms, is an interface that allows software programs to work with applications and websites. It enables one type of software to talk to another. APIs are often simple commands that can, for example, allow for accessing aggregated data that can be repurposed in another application. Rather than writing new code for every possible new app or web interface, APIs are shortcuts that allow programmers to access other application data easily.

I use this analogy to help illuminate the role philanthropy plays in making certain ideas viable, too. It can legitimate new research, ideas, and democratic and public-interest projects through the transfer of capital into new pathways. APIs have been built on early HTTP web architectures, not unlike philanthropy's origin stories, where remnants of past priorities and choices extend into the future, even if those older models prove to be limited over time.

Moreover, the assets of Big Philanthropy are often built from extractive relationships, even while giving is deployed to address many important problems. From this vantage point, Big Philanthropy can reconcile with those communities to whom it owes its existence, and it can build new infrastructures for the future. Architectures of giving have been in place for so long that it is often hard to innovate around them or leave reliable models behind in order to make a major change. APIs are a less visible and yet powerful force in making many modern digital engagements possible.

Some of the most powerful APIs help major companies extend their reach through smaller ones—through the integration of Google Maps into a small WordPress site, for example, or the use of an API integration platform to bundle many APIs. Everyone using a digital device is using an API, from weather tracking to login authentications on a favorite website. Indeed, the landscape of what we do with networked, internet-based technologies has often been determined from deeper in the stack through APIs, which construct the range of outcomes and possibilities.

Like the old HTTP architectures of the web upon which new APIs are built, the advancement of giving in support of social progress is often slow and incremental, with minimal investments in people and ideas that aren't already embedded in other legacy systems or that represent strong alignment with the status quo. Like venture capital, the largest funders often make resources available to the safest bets, to the known and similar players, and to the like-minded from the same networks. Big Philanthropy often lowers the bar for incumbent grantees, and imposes higher standards of proof for people of color, for activists, for people using frameworks of antiracism or feminism in their approaches—or for people who describe their work in ways that are less well understood or unknown to program officers and boards of directors. These analogies are important to think about as we face major challenges and opportunities that require departures from the status quo.

Big Philanthropy Facing Challenges to Democracy

The crises of 2020 have revealed that investments in democracy are more crucial than ever. We are living through a global pandemic and it is hitting the United States hard. While certain sectors of the economy lie in ruins and each day sees record unemployment, tech markets are flourishing. What does it mean for us that Big Tech is realizing record profits while sectors essential to the public—health, education, and investigative journalism—are struggling? What does it mean that Big Tech is replacing or eroding core functions of so many democratic institutions with so little sense of responsibility or accountability?

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have become our primary sources for news, displacing local newspapers, public radio, and television while abdicating responsibility for the wasteland of false stories and disinformation that pervade their platforms. It is in this moment, and in this context, that we see public wealth delivered to tech media giants through climbing stock prices that are, in part, due to our total dependence on them to get us through.

In the midst of global and national crises, we sit helpless and watch the greatest transfers of public wealth in the history of the United States take place. We watch the rollback of civil and voting rights and the rise of authoritarianism. Big Philanthropy, through its support of key organizations invested in strengthening peoples' movements, has a key role to play in using this moment to resist the collapse of democracy and to reenergize the public's belief that we have a say in the making of the world we live in, even though those beliefs have come at great cost. The greatest opportunities for change come in the face of these contradictions.

As major tech firms, in particular, reach record highs of revenue and market capitalization, they continue to pay record low taxes, when they pay at all. Every dollar diverted from the tax

base is a dollar divested from the public good. It is money taken from social safety nets, teacher and caretaker support, public health systems, and livable wages for workers. What is even more insidious than corporate bailouts or tax avoidance is the callous way we are supposed to acclimate ourselves to increasing social inequality, the decimation of affordable housing, the rising cost of higher education, and increased costs of food, water, gas, electricity, and basic goods. It is in this same context that the public good is threatened by a loss of trust in science, in the credible observations of history, and in the power of the arts to help us make sense of the times.

Meanwhile, philanthropy and charitable giving are tasked with picking up the bill.

Possibilities for the Future of Philanthropy

What can be learned from these failures, and what are the possibilities for philanthropy in redressing long-ingrained systemic economic and racial injustice by helping to build community and democratic institutions? What does repair look like in the face of the indifference we witnessed during the House Judiciary Committee's antitrust hearings?

Big Philanthropy can look to the last fifty years of the tech sector as a cautionary tale about how uncritical investment in projects and paradigms, with little accountability to the publics who will be affected, need to be slowed down and, in some cases, abolished. How much difference would multimillion-dollar philanthropic investments make if they were redirected toward restorative and reparative practices, such as flattening the curve of inequality? At a time when seemingly endless financial and other resources go to supporting extractive tech tools and platforms, funding initiatives that question and push back on the status quo would be an ideal place for philanthropic investment to make a major difference in shifting the unequal relationships that define our present social landscape.

The opportunity for Big Philanthropy and the lessons to be learned from this moment of Big Tech are that the restorative and reparative work will come from transfers of wealth and resources into the hands of those who are working to cultivate new paradigms of possibility and collective responsibility. I see this as a major upside for giving organizations, but it will mean not only expanding the scope of the kinds of projects and initiatives to be funded, but also diversifying the ranks of researchers, academics, artists, and culture makers who are funded. It is what expanding the Big Philanthropy API will look like in practice.

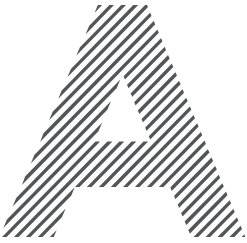
Now is the time for philanthropy to put its resources behind a future of progressive and inclusive democracy that isn't predicated on a permanently exploited underclass. We can't normalize the current state of affairs. We need just systems of repair and restoration. We need new models for giving and policy frameworks with democracy and the public good at their core.

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An Agenda for Economic Democracy

K. SABEEL RAHMAN

Demos



merican democracy is deep in the throes of an existential crisis that has cast into relief the ways in which “democracy” has been an aspirational illusion for so many Americans. From escalating inequality, a botched pandemic response, and rampant corruption at the highest levels to endemic violence, against Black and brown communities in particular, we have seen recurring failures of governmental accountability.

If democracy is meant to be a system of governance of, by, and for the people, our current reality falls far short of that ideal. There are many foundational roots of this crisis that must be addressed to create a more inclusive and effective democracy in the years ahead. One that needs urgent attention is the fact that our current economic structure is inimical to the ideal of an inclusive democracy.

Simply put, there can be no political democracy without economic democracy.

A Vicious Cycle

Consider a few examples of our current crisis of economic and racial inequity. Black and brown people are vastly more likely to be infected and die from Covid-19 than white people—a reflection of chronic, structural disparities in access to health care and clean air and water. In the economic collapse sparked by the pandemic, 40 percent of those losing jobs had incomes of \$40,000 or less—a working-class constituency disproportionately composed of Black and brown workers. And the reason these jobs were so easily shed stems from a modern system of labor that is premised on highly precarious working conditions in which workers are outsourced, stripped of benefits, and vulnerable to the vagaries of an unreliable market. All this is taking place in the context of an economy in which dominant corporations and vested interests, from Amazon to private equity firms, are gaining more and more dominance.

These economic conditions are closely related to political inequities. Recent waves of social science research have confirmed that public policy is highly responsive to the opinions of the wealthy—and indifferent at best to the views of middle-class and working-class Americans. Policies benefiting and supporting middle- and working-class communities are most likely to pass when they are supported by the wealthy or when the wealthy are indifferent to them.¹ These disparities in policy outcomes not only reflect the gravitational pull of wealthier (and whiter) donors, but are also a product of the disproportionate way in which big business interests have organized to exert influence on legislative and regulatory policy.² And this disparity is magnified by the fact that elected officials are increasingly drawn from wealthier occupational backgrounds, making them more likely to give greater credence to the voices of affluent constituencies than to those of the working class.³

These findings raise two critical implications for understanding and responding to our current crisis of democracy.

First, economic inequality is a product of political inequality, and vice versa. Economic and political inequality reinforce each other in a vicious cycle: disparities of political power favoring wealthier and whiter constituencies make it more likely that public policy will exacerbate rather than mitigate economic and racial inequities, which, in turn, further concentrates economic wealth and power in ways that deepen these political disparities.⁴ Crucially, these disparities are not simply confined to electoral politics, campaign financing, and voting rights. They exercise influence as well in day-to-day administrative governance and policymaking by regulatory agencies, state and local governments, and business firms. Indeed, how different would our public policies be if tenants had a greater say in housing policies governing the spread of gentrification and housing insecurity or if workers had a greater say in setting safety standards and wages or if moneyed investors had less influence over the profit models and market strategies of dominant firms?

Second, the vicious cycle linking economic and political inequity is driven by another process as well: attacks on democracy itself are a central strategy by which wealthy interests maintain their level of policy dominance. Indeed, major blame for the brittle state of American democracy today can be laid at the feet of powerful interests that have systematically deployed racialized politics, voter suppression, and attacks on effective government regulation and administration to sustain economic advantage.⁵ For the same reason, wealthy businesses have invested heavily in lobbying, litigation, and advocacy specifically directed toward dismantling the modern safety net and economic regulatory agencies such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the National Labor Relations Board. It is a strategy that provides a high return on investment: for a few million dollars, firms can secure deregulatory policies that increase their bottom lines at the expense of workers and consumers.⁶ Similarly, race-baiting political tactics have made up a key strategy for some elected officials to undermine democratic practices and to fracture support for the modern welfare state for the purpose of securing electoral advantage by stoking racial conflict.⁷

The upshot of this interrelationship between political and economic inequity is that there can be no political democracy without meaningful transformation of our economic system. Specifically, a stable, sustained, inclusive democracy requires an approach to economic policymaking that dismantles concentrations of economic power and wealth and embeds greater participation in and accountability to the most affected communities—and, in particular, to Black and brown communities. Without attending to the economic and racial inequities of our current economy, democracy is fundamentally unstable. Furthermore, for many communities, especially working-class and Black and brown communities, the persistent inability of democracy to directly remedy the deep economic and racial disparities we face is one of the key drivers of the deep distrust that communities have of government and democracy.

Economic Democracy: A Path Forward

What would it take to break the vicious cycle of economic and political inequity? Some of the answers lie in familiar and necessary fights for structural democracy reform, for example, breaking the influence of big money in politics and immunizing our democracy from gerrymandering, voter suppression, and the proliferation of disinformation campaigns. But these measures alone are not enough; we must remake our economic institutions as well to create more direct channels of democratic responsiveness and accountability and to dismantle the concentrations of economic wealth and power that help perpetuate our economic and racial hierarchy.

An agenda for economic democracy must address at least four issues.

First, we need to dismantle the concentrations of private power that dominate our economy and serve as de facto “governors” of economic life. Over a century ago, Progressive Era reformers organized around the problem of monopoly power, recognizing that in the industrializing economy it was not democratically elected legislatures who had the most sway over the economic fortunes of workers and business owners alike, but rather the private sovereigns of Gilded Age monopolies: J. P. Morgan (investment finance), Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads), Andrew Carnegie (steel), and Jay Gould (the telegraph). By virtue of their control over these essential services, these “robber barons” could arbitrarily end the economic vitality of whole towns, charging exorbitant prices and manipulating whole markets to ensure their dominance and wealth. This economic power, in turn, manifested itself in a high level of political influence on elected officials and policy makers.

Today we face a similar level of economic concentration, as modern monopolists from Amazon and Facebook to private equities and pharmaceutical producers exercise outsize control over commerce, information, and access to basic goods.⁸ There is also a robust, growing movement renewing attention on anti-monopoly issues.⁹ These scholars, policy makers, and activists point to the need to reboot policy levers such as antitrust laws, merger reviews, imposition of public utility regulations, and common carrier requirements to ensure fair and nondiscriminatory treatment. The practical consequences for an inclusive economy and a robust democracy are enormous. Dismantling concentrated economic power in finance and over essential retail and shipping infrastructures, for example, would help improve economic innovation and opportunity by unlocking a more competitive and dynamic flow of capital and commerce. Anti-monopoly policy responses are also critical to securing a democratic public sphere by addressing the deeply pervasive problems of disinformation and misinformation, which arise largely from online platforms.¹⁰

Second, we face a similar problem of de facto “private government” in the workplace.¹¹ Over the last few decades, more and more workers find themselves in workplaces where the combination of outsourcing, franchising, and platform-based gig work have stripped many of

them, particularly women and Black and brown workers, of benefits and protections, suppressed wages, and created conditions of deep vulnerability, precariousness, and exploitation.¹² The rise of modern tools of workplace surveillance has magnified these inequities, creating conditions in which workers are monitored down to the second, forced to keep working without rest, and with little recourse. Furthermore, successful employer attacks on labor unions have been a central driver of stagnant wages and can be traced directly to the decline of voting participation, which, in turn, has led to the rise of public policies that dismantled the modern safety net.¹³

In the face of these challenges, there is a new energy in worker organizing that must be a central part of any agenda for economic democracy moving forward. Labor lawyers and activists have made major strides in defining a reimagined vision for twenty-first-century labor law that addresses these inequities and fills historical gaps in New Deal-era labor rights.¹⁴ Labor groups, such as United for Respect, are increasingly experimenting with modes of “stakeholder democracy,” bringing workers onto corporate boards to make decision making more democratic.

Third, an agenda for economic democracy must include a dramatic recommitment to and reinvestment in the direct public provision of essential goods and services. One of the central features of an inclusive and equitable economy and democracy is the provision of a universal safety net, and the remedying of cumulative, historical disinvestments, particularly in communities of color. Indeed, key to the maintenance of economic inequity has been the defunding of public goods and the increase of barriers that prevent access to such critical safety net programs as welfare, food stamps, and health care.¹⁵ At various points in American history, beginning with the New Deal, the call for an expanded economic bill of rights has been a central demand to ensure democratic equity and equal dignity for all Americans.¹⁶ Today this challenge manifests itself in renewed efforts to secure universal health care and ensure clean air and water and in putting forward somewhat more obscure proposals for postal banking¹⁷ and public credit ratings¹⁸ as a means for creating more equitable access to financial services.

Finally, an agenda for economic democracy must also include a dramatic reimagining of economic policymaking institutions—from the Federal Reserve and the Department of Labor to local zoning boards and, in Flint, Michigan, the water utility—to ensure a more direct form of stakeholder and grassroots participation and accountability. This, too, has been a long-standing aspiration for democracy reformers more attuned to the systemic inequities of race and class. Consider, for example, the demands of the welfare rights movement and the “war on poverty” for more direct community control over urban planning and poverty reduction efforts.¹⁹ Today this vision of direct community control over economic governance suggests the need for restructuring economic policymaking bodies to include more direct and powerful forms of representation that will enable residents of local communities to have a voice in shaping policies as well as monitoring and enforcing standards.²⁰ Such direct economic democracy is critical to counteracting the kinds of elite influence that skews economic policy.²¹

Implications for Philanthropy and the Social Change Sector

These reforms point toward a radical remaking of our modern economy in ways meant to dismantle the durable power and wealth hoarding that skew our economy and render democratic aspirations meaningless for most working Americans.

These kinds of issues are normally regarded as policy matters that are “downstream” from democracy reform. The presumption for many is that if we “fix” democracy by addressing governance issues such as voting rights, money in politics, gerrymandering, and ethics in government, then “good” economic policies will naturally follow. These traditional means of democracy reform are no doubt essential. But they are not sufficient. Too much of our economy is governed not by the ballot box, but rather by the “private government” of financiers and corporations or by obscure technocratic administrative bodies that are too often favored by business interests and too easily captured by them. The reality is that a narrow focus on “good governance” and political democracy reform will simply not be enough to restore trust in government or to ensure that democratic government does in fact address the urgent needs of most working families. Political democracy requires economic democracy.

How then do we get there? It may be tempting to think that civil society—community organizations, charities, and self-help associations—can mitigate the worst excesses of our unequal economy. But ultimately, systemic inequities require more transformative structural change, and that, in turn, requires a more sustained investment in building up the independent power of working-class and minority communities in particular. Philanthropy can and must play a role here, but it will require a different approach to social change strategies, one that focuses more squarely on (1) building bottom-up power in the most affected communities, (2) advancing structural, transformative policy change, and (3) catalyzing broader shifts in ideas about how we as a country conceive of these issues of economic policy, equity, and inclusion.

First, philanthropy should turn its attention to supporting a more interconnected ecosystem of social change makers—linking together groups that focus on grassroots organizing and power-building with those that focus on policy, advocacy, and ideas. In our work at Demos, we have built solid partnerships with grassroots, base-building organizations that are working in Black and brown communities to drive structural democracy reforms, such as automatic voter registration and the restoration of voting rights for the formerly incarcerated. By working closely with partners such as the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, the Texas Organizing Project, or OLE in New Mexico, we can create more integrated strategies that combine grassroots people power with policy, research, and narrative strategies to push for transformative policy ideas. It is the fusion of these sectors that produces the combination of pressure and policy that yields structural change. These organizations require multiyear, general operating funds at the scale needed to support genuine creativity, innovation, and long-term impact.

Second, philanthropy should explore new ways of investing in the development of bold policy ideas by supporting the training, capacity-building, and socialization of the next generation of policy makers. Too much of our economic policy is hobbled by underfunded (and thus easily co-opted) governing institutions and by policy makers working with outdated ideas and outmoded systems. We need a top-to-bottom wave of change in our governing institution—not just in our elected officials but among staffers, bureaucrats, and cabinet officials as well—oriented toward these critical issues of economic inequality. Just as importantly, we need a new cohort of policy makers who are themselves more diverse and can be reflective of and responsive to marginalized communities.

Third, philanthropy should support coalitions and organizations to create game-changing “proof of concept” wins in cities and states and support mechanisms to enable the learning from those efforts to proliferate across the country as well as around the globe. Many of the best innovations in economic and political democracy, for example, originated in the global South, from participatory budgeting to novel forms of collective and community ownership of resources. Even in our own history, major shifts in our national social contract had their trial runs at the state and local level: cities and states experimented with the first wave of public ownership of infrastructure and of regulation of corporate power in the late nineteenth century. The creation of these important models and the rise of a cadre of experienced change makers made the New Deal possible in the 1930s. Similarly, battles for racial equity in the economy, such as those waged during the 1960s and 1970s war on poverty, have often originated at state and local levels—and have paved the way for today’s national debates.

These strategies are not a panacea. Building an economic democracy will require deep and sustained effort by the entire field of social change organizations, and this will require sustained investment and support from philanthropy. But, in a time when democracy is in crisis and so many millions of families are facing deep threats to their lives and livelihoods, it is imperative that the future of democracy reform take seriously these broader issues and novel strategies. This moment demands nothing less.

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The Enduring Insight of John Dewey

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fter decades of triumph,” the *Economist* recently concluded, “democracy is losing ground.” But not, apparently, in the West, whose “mature democracies . . . are not yet in serious danger.” In this view, reports of the death of American democracy have been greatly exaggerated. “Donald Trump may scorn liberal norms,” the reasoning goes, “but America’s checks

and balances are strong and will outlast him.” The truly endangered societies are those in which “institutions are weaker and democratic habits less ingrained.”¹

It has become a common refrain, even among those critical of Trump’s administration. “Our democracy is hard to kill,” Harvard political scientist Steven Levitsky said in an interview about his new book with Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*. “We do still have very strong democratic institutions. We’re not Turkey, we’re not Hungary, we’re not Venezuela. We can behave quite recklessly and irresponsibly and probably still muddle through that.”²

Is democracy in the United States really so robust? At the outset of World War II, American philosopher John Dewey cautioned against coming so lightly to this conclusion—and the simplistic picture of democratic society that it presumes. In *Freedom and Culture* (1939), he worried that democracy might succumb to the illusion of stability and endurance in the face of threats to liberty and norms of decency. According to Dewey, we must not believe:

Democratic conditions automatically maintain themselves or that they can be identified with fulfillment of prescriptions laid down in a constitution. Beliefs of this sort merely divert attention from what is going on, just as the patter of the prestidigitator enables him to do things that are not noticed by those whom he is engaged in fooling. For what is actually going on may be the formation of conditions that are hostile to any kind of democratic liberties.³

Dewey’s statement was a warning to be wary not just of bad governance but also of a more fundamental deformation of society. “This would be too trite to repeat,” he admits, “were it not that so many persons in the high places of business talk as if they believed or could get others to believe that the observance of formulae that have become ritualistic are effective safeguards of our democratic heritage.”⁴

At the time of this writing, against the backdrop of a US president who prefers the counsel of cronies over the advice of experts, who openly admires the governing style of dictators such as Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin, who insists that refugees have no claims to aid and that immigrants are not owed basic human decency, and who effortlessly finds kind words for both self-identified white supremacists and exposed wife-beaters, it is worth recalling Dewey’s enduring insight.

Dewey may seem an odd resource to recall in our current political climate. For if we stand in what Hannah Arendt once called “dark times,”⁵ Dewey’s optimistic faith in democracy—his unflinching belief in the reflective capacity of human beings to secure the good and avert the bad and in the progressive character of American democracy—may look ill-equipped to address our current crisis.

Yet this faith was always shaped by an important insight regarding democracy that many seem to have ignored. For Dewey, democracy’s survival depends on a set of habits and dispositions—in short, a culture—to sustain it.⁶ This informed his activism as well. He helped establish some of the most significant organizations of his time: the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, the League for Industrial Democracy, and the New York Teachers Union. When Dewey warns us that democratic conditions don’t automatically maintain themselves and that the mere existence of a constitution does not safeguard democracy, he is dispelling the illusion that the United States is immune to the darkness of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Dewey’s concern is as urgent today as it was in 1939. Those who believe that the strength of our institutions will win the day miss the slow but steady effort to undermine the social fabric that makes them possible—by habituating us to cruelty, by treating facts as fiction, and by suspending the idea that we each, regardless of our national affiliation, are worthy of respect. Underneath the policies of the Trump administration is a test of the moral culture of Americans—to see what they will stand for. When he refuses to disclose his taxes, he tests our desire for transparency. When he dismisses the media, he tests our commitment to truth. When he abets the gutting of institutions such as the Environmental Protection Agency, he tests our reliance on research and facts. Taken together, his bet is a direct challenge to Dewey. How closely are the American people paying attention to the actual processes threatening our institutions while distracted by the bread and circuses? How can we be so sure Trump’s transgressions will amount to a momentary blip along the arc of our future? Checks and balances do not have an agency of their own. In relying on the inertia of institutions, we forget that a democracy is only as strong as the men and women who inhabit it.

Dewey thus insisted that we not identify the rise of totalitarian states solely with force or fear. Beware, he says, of the “belief that [totalitarian] states rest only upon unmitigated coercion and intimidation.”⁷ What he wanted to guard against in his day, as we should in our own, was making a distinction between old and new democracies under the illusion that, because we are a “mature democracy,” it couldn’t happen here. US institutions may well outlast Trump, but not without carrying the traces of his moral and political stamp.

Dewey’s concerns as they apply to today’s political climate should not be confused with the ideas of those who worry that the norms that underwrite our political system are in crisis. Writing in *Dissent*, Jedediah Britton-Purdy is right to bemoan the recent slew of books that now define the “crisis-of-democracy” literature.⁸ Whether it is Yascha Mounk, David Frum, or William A. Galston, all are united in their belief that what is now under threat are the unwritten rules that keep

American democracy afloat.⁹ Rather than acknowledge that we are confronting a fundamental conflict over the soul of America, they seek to recover a presumed American commonality that Trump now appears to threaten. In this regard, they often sound like the post-World War II consensus historians who readily downplayed conflict and affirmed the unity and coherence of American values.

Dewey's emphasis on the culture of democracy, however, works on a different scale and is far more ambitious in its political vision. In focusing on culture, Dewey asks us not to leave the fate of our politics and policies wholly up to chance. He asks us to see that maintaining freedom, equal protection, and human dignity requires that we fight to have those values secured as part of the self-understanding of the citizenry. "The necessity for judgment and choice," he once explained, in 1930, "comes from the fact that one has to manage forces with no common denominator."¹⁰ And he asks us to test the moral reach of institutions and policies against the demand of those values. "If radicalism be defined as perception of need for radical change," he argued in 1935, "then today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed."¹¹ Placing the fate of democracy in the domain of culture requires, in our day, as it did in Dewey's, that we see our present moment as a fight about what kind of people we want to be and what kind of society we long to create. This way of thinking ran through Reconstruction, the ambition of the New Deal (even as Dewey argued that it could have been more radical), and the civil rights movement. Dewey made it the centerpiece of his thinking, and we must make it the cornerstone of our engagement today.

"The democratic road is the hard one to take," Dewey concluded in *Freedom and Culture*. "It is the road which places the greatest burden of responsibility on the greatest number of human beings."¹² Precisely for this reason, Dewey believed the culture of democracy—the habits and dispositions of the citizenry—to be in greater need of scrutiny than its constitution and procedures. For what are constitutions and procedures once you have deformed the ground upon which their proper functioning depends? Dewey was convinced that the moral and political life of the United States is neither given to us nor assured by God. It is made and remade by us. And by us, it will either grow and flourish or die.

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“Defactionalizing” Science

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n his first inaugural address, President Barack Obama boldly promised to “restore science to its rightful place,” thus implying that science had been subordinated to factional political ends. This promise brought wide praise from the scientific community and those generally on the political left, who expressed disdain for the allegedly antiscientific actions of the previous administration.

Implicit in this phrase is that the “rightful place” for science in public life is self-evident. This is incorrect—even more so now than when those words were spoken eleven years ago. Indeed, the role of scientific expertise produces one of the sharpest cleavages in American life today.

The phrase also invokes a verbal sleight of hand: “science” is a process for identifying truth, not something that exists on its own. So talk of “science” in public discourse typically means “practitioners of science,” both individually and through the institutions that support and advance scientific research and knowledge.

In a liberal democracy, scientists provide valuable input into public policy and civic life. But experts should be “on tap, not on top” as the old saw has it, the servants of liberal democracy, not vice versa. Anti-expert sentiment has been fueled by scientists who have claimed (or have been awarded, by political actors) the mantle of philosopher kings, answering not just the empirical questions that scientists are uniquely placed to answer, but also normative questions about which science is silent.¹ Daniel Sarewitz refers to this as the problem of “scientizing politics,” a more useful concept than “politicizing science.”²

This is an opportunity for the philanthropic sector to advance a more nuanced discussion about how preferences, beliefs, and values—including the value of individual liberty for its own sake—interact with science in a democratic polity. This is a departure from traditional philanthropic approaches to science, which focus primarily on support of pure and applied science or as an input in solutions to various social problems.

Philanthropic support, for instance, in developing new modes and institutions to mediate scientific expertise, democratic legitimacy, and liberal values, can help rescue scientists and experts from their positions in the culture war and indeed save the experts from themselves.

Science in a Democratic Polity

Scientific knowledge is indispensable to society. Specialized knowledge in medicine, engineering, economics, meteorology, supply chain management, agronomy, and hundreds of other fields is critical to virtually every aspect of our lives.

Much of this knowledge is also valuable in the formation of public policy. Yet scientific expertise

is just one of many factors that should inform decision making in a democratic polity. Civil engineering, for instance, can tell us how to build public works, but there is no scientific answer to the question of where these works should be built, how they should be paid for, or indeed whether they should be built at all.

“Restoring science to its rightful place” first requires articulating the role that scientific knowledge should play in our society, that is, defining the “rightful place.” That is the unproductive debate in which the United States is engaged at the moment.

To generalize, at the far ends of the political spectrum, one group treats scientific expertise (particularly when there’s a claimed consensus) as beyond doubt. In this view, experts are a modern clerisy whose tidings society ignores at its peril. The group on the opposite end of the spectrum is skeptical of many scientific claims and considers scientific expertise to be a tool of social control, advancing possibly sinister agendas that, at a minimum, lack democratic legitimacy. The former group is largely “of the left” and the latter group “of the right” though this oversimplifies things somewhat; scientifically dubious skepticism about vaccines and GMOs, for instance, comes largely from the political left.

None of this is new, of course; it has been more than fifty years since Richard Hofstadter argued that anti-intellectual sentiment was inherent in the American character since the nation’s founding.³ Debates have long raged between experts and a skeptical public over issues ranging from water fluoridation to mathematics pedagogy. In addition, neither of the political extremes can claim anything close to a majority of Americans who, as on many complex issues, end up somewhere in the middle.

However, the threat and challenge today to scientific knowledge and its institutions, processes, and methods are quantitatively and qualitatively different from what they were a generation ago. The task before us is to develop a thoughtful middle ground that takes seriously the legitimate claims of both extremes even as actors in other institutions seek to exploit that division for cynical short-term ends.

Do Americans Trust Scientists?

Americans are split on the role of scientists in civic life. Overall, 60 percent of Americans believe that “scientists should take an active role in policy debates around scientific issues.” This is pronounced among Democrats, at 73 percent; by way of contrast, a majority (56 percent) of Republicans “say scientists should focus on establishing sound scientific facts and stay out of such policy debates.”⁴ The “rightful place” of science is thus a matter of open debate.

Trust in expertise appears to be declining. This can be seen, for instance, in declining faith in

the institutions that advance, store, and transmit knowledge, a description that chiefly applies to universities although scientific expertise resides in other institutions as well.

Universities are rapidly losing the public's trust. According to Gallup data, between 2015 and 2018, confidence in colleges and universities fell from 57 to 48 percent.⁵ A Pew Research Center study found that a majority of Americans—including a majority in both parties—believe that higher education is heading in the wrong direction.⁶

The news media are traditionally a key mediating institution between scientists and the public; they provide the channel by which scientific complexities are broken down and made broadly available to the public. Again, trust in the media—low to begin with—has fallen dramatically. Taking 1995 as a baseline, confidence in newspapers has fallen from 30 to 23 percent and in television news from 33 to 18 percent.⁷

There are many other indicia that scientists are bound up in the culture war—the many yard signs appearing in my left-liberal community in suburban Washington, DC, after the 2016 election declaring that the residents “believe science is real” come to mind. However, it’s not just a matter of the veneration or repudiation of scientists by the public, but also the actions by experts and by politicians using the mantle of science to advance their policy preferences that have diminished public trust.

Explaining the Decline

What accounts for this decline in confidence in experts? I suggest three hypotheses.

First, expertise is limited by scientific domain, but experts routinely speak beyond their area of expertise. The most glaring example is on climate change, for which expertise about what is happening in the global climate (diagnosis) and how to effectively address these challenges (treatment) fall in separate spheres of knowledge. Too often, experts identify a problem or challenge in their domain of expertise and then move on to proffer remedies that rely on expertise they don’t possess. To question the proposed remedies risks one being branded as “anti-science.”

Experts are, of course, also citizens and therefore have a right to express opinions from both perspectives. Yet how can the public differentiate between these two roles? To take two examples, Paul Krugman and Niall Ferguson are inarguably experts in international economics and the history of the British Empire, respectively. Yet both also opine in leading newspapers and on television shows about current events far beyond their expertise.⁸ It often becomes impossible to differentiate experts’ true expertise from their more general opinions, the result being a diminution of the former.

Second, expertise is sometimes leveraged as a cudgel by those seeking to advance an agenda. When this happens, expertise is not used to help make better public decisions, but rather to

justify decisions that have already been made for political reasons. This is particularly egregious when policy makers claim the mantle of science to advance a policy that has no widespread democratic mandate.⁹

To take a trivial example, in April 2016, the Obama administration convened a summit to highlight companies that were breaking down “gender stereotypes in toys and media.”¹⁰ (The first words of the press release were “Research shows”; no citations were given.) Thus, they claimed the mantle of science for advancing a social policy preference.¹¹

Expertise is also used as a shield by experts themselves to defend their privileged perches in society, often in a way that expresses contempt for the public. In his 2017 article “How America Lost Faith in Expertise,” Tom Nichols begins with an anecdote about a poll showing that a significant percentage of Americans favored bombing Agrabah, a fictional setting for Disney’s *Aladdin*.¹² In recalling this, Nichols’s words drip with disdain, arguing not simply that Americans are ignorant about foreign affairs—rationally so¹³—but also that “Americans have reached a point where ignorance . . . is seen as an actual virtue.”¹⁴ Nichols’s superciliousness toward respondents, and to the American public more broadly, is palpable. Asking people a trick question and then mocking them for not knowing the “right” answer isn’t clever; it’s bullying.

As noted earlier, the reification of science in the phrase “let science decide” (a close cousin of the equally pernicious “history shows”) obscures the fact that science is not a thing that can speak. The phrase inevitably means “let scientists decide” or, more specifically, “let a particular scientist decide.” Invoking science this way serves to dismiss alternative arguments, including those that raise the issue of trade-offs and, moreover, attempts to impose a sterile, clinical gloss on decision making.

Finally, as Martin Gurri has argued, the “democratization of information” (including, crucially, information about experts’ personal lives) means that old modes of authority and hierarchy are being swept away.¹⁵ The rationalized, bureaucratized, hierarchized, systematized post–World War II social and industrial order has been superseded by a new order not yet fully formed. The previous system placed experts at the apogee of both influence and status. Universal access to information (and disinformation) has radically reshuffled the deck. Credentialism has taken a significant if not yet fatal blow, which itself changes the very nature of expertise.

This information democratization is part of a longer erosion in traditional forms of authority as in the secularization of most Western countries or the loss of faith in public institutions coming out of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Scientists had largely avoided this defenestration perhaps in part because of seemingly miraculous advances in medicine and technology. Their previous claim to knowledge unavailable to the uninitiated has been obviated; their aura of authority has disappeared.

A Role for Philanthropy

The current state of affairs in which a population distrusts science and experts disdain the general public is not sustainable. People are generally willing to tolerate losing in a democracy as long as the fight is fair. Simply finding that their preferences are not reflected in policy doesn't typically cause them to question the legitimacy of the system. But when science is invoked as a weapon or when the scientists involved show contempt for the public or change their beliefs and recommendations based on political winds or social pressures, the legitimacy of democracy is more easily called into question.

This is not irreversible. The philanthropic community can help build rapprochement between the extremes and help create new space for scientists in public life.

What follows are some suggestions for how philanthropic actors might think about addressing this question. These ideas are intended to spur conversation; they are not proffered as fully formed concepts.

Building New Mediating Institutions

Institutions such as the post-World War II news media that had previously mediated between experts, political actors, and the general public have changed beyond recognition in the last decade; there is likely no return to the status quo ante. It's therefore critical to build and support new mediating institutions to encourage nuanced public debate in which scientists play a key, but not dominant, role.

Ours is a time of great public anger, not just in the United States, but around the globe. Populism of both the right-wing and left-wing varieties agree on little other than that the existing system of authority should be rooted out and toppled. However, it is unclear what exactly is being suggested to replace it.¹⁶

It is clear, however, what the replacement *won't* look like: the hierarchical, top-down systems of old. As Arnold Kling notes, for the most part we choose what to believe by choosing whom to believe.¹⁷ The *ancien régime* provided simple guidelines for trustworthy sources: in brief, the faculty of Harvard University and the journalists of the *New York Times*. The many people (a number of them credentialed, others not) who present themselves as experts today are less likely to come from elite faculties or through the traditional media.

This is an opportunity for philanthropists to support experimentation in building new mediating institutions to help the public identify whom to believe and why. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, there will likely emerge a multiplicity of institutions taking different forms and operating at different levels.

These new institutions will develop spontaneously, so philanthropy should begin by identifying what’s working and help to nurture it. The previous order was a spontaneous one, and what replaces it must be as well if it’s to be robust.

To be successful, these institutions will have to possess two characteristics. First, they will have to create iterative processes for scientists and others in the policy debate to inform one another. Second, they will have to identify, credential, and, when necessary, rein in experts. These experiments in mediating institutions should focus not on “winning” but rather on improving the quality of debate and information at the margin.

For universities, this may be an opportunity to rebuild as institutions that advance public knowledge—a role most have essentially rejected. This will require embracing interdisciplinary work and heterodox viewpoints, both of which—the provosts’ protests notwithstanding—are the exception rather than the rule on campus. The coming enrollment crunch induced by Covid-19, declining public support (financial and attitudinal), and the weakening value of elite university marques may make this more attractive than it would have been just a few years ago.

Federally funded research and development centers could play a similar role. Congressional and executive actions in the 1980s required theretofore reticent federal scientists to prioritize technology transfer to the commercial sector and created incentives for them to do so. This proved tremendously beneficial economically.¹⁸ Similarly, government labs today could work with the philanthropic sector to take scientific knowledge beyond the lab into the public square.

In either case, the desired outcome is not more scientists imperiously lecturing the public. Rather the goal would be to promote meaningful debate and discussion between scientists and others in civil society, including, but not limited to, business executives, religious leaders, community activists, elected officials, philanthropists, and artists. This will require real differences of opinion; if it descends into chin-stroking and the shared recitation of shibboleths, nothing will be gained.

The overall quality of science reporting in the popular media is generally poor. Media are quick to trumpet headline-grabbing findings, no matter how preliminary or poorly reasoned, at the expense of reporting on the slow accretion of knowledge that characterizes science. Worse still, popular science reporting often serves as input into horserace journalism or to raise or lower the status of various politicians, interest groups, or political parties.

Two different approaches to scientific reporting could benefit from philanthropic support. The first would be new media outlets that make scientific findings accessible to an educated lay public in a way that neither filters for nor comments on what the social ramifications of any particular work might be. While falling short of being truly “value-free,” deliberately eschewing political and social context might help breed trust.

A second, and seemingly diametrically opposed, approach would be for sectarian and ideological publications to do more reporting on science from an explicitly ideological point of view. The challenge here would be to explain scientific research to those of a religious or ideological bent, rather than arranging scientific facts to support an ideological position. The best current

ideological science correspondents, such as *Reason*’s Ronald Bailey, confound or at least challenge their readers’ ideological priors rather than merely confirming them.

More generally, the news media could attempt to rely less on individual experts and instead seek out points of agreement and disagreement within expert communities. The Initiative on Global Markets (IGM) at the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business runs regular polls of a group of about fifty economists in which they are asked not only to agree or disagree with a statement on a five-point Likert scale, but also to rate the confidence of their answers.¹⁹ Data are then presented in raw form as well as weighted by confidence.

On many topics—especially those involving current events, such as the global pandemic—IGM Economic Experts Panel respondents express a great deal of uncertainty. This is a good thing since it inures to society’s detriment when experts are unable to say that they don’t know. Of course, experts expressing ambiguity or nuanced positions are less likely to be quoted in newspapers, booked on cable news, go viral on Twitter, or be asked to testify before or advise governmental bodies.

Knowing Both Sides

John Stuart Mill famously wrote, “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.”²⁰

In many aspects of public life today, factions know little about those they claim to oppose. A 2019 study highlighted the “perception gap” between what Republicans and Democrats each believe and what those in the other party think they believe.²¹ For instance, while 82 percent of Democrats agree with the statement “I am proud to be American, though I acknowledge my country’s flaws,” Republicans believe only 54 percent of Democrats feel this way. Conversely, 79 percent of Republicans believe “racism still exists in America,” yet Democrats believe only 51 percent of Republicans believe this. Notably, these are relatively strident, high-valence questions; they capture little nuance in different philosophies and viewpoints.

It seems plausible a similar gap in understanding exists when it comes to tensions about scientific expertise in public life. Philanthropy could help bridge this divide by hosting a high-profile series of “Ideological Turing Tests,” in which various leaders typically seen as being on opposite sides of the expertise debate compete for significant prizes, or just prestige, by attempting to effectively argue the side they are “against.”²² This could encompass leaders in the sciences, politics, the arts, and other fields.

While not a solution in itself, such a public contest would raise the profile of the problem, and prominent public figures attempting to faithfully describe rather than demonize positions they don’t hold could go a long way in bridging the perception gap around expertise and its conflict with other values.

Supporting Epistemic Humility

Finally, philanthropy can help by supporting research and journalism that exhibits epistemic humility and nuance over boldness and certainty. Especially in heated and passionate debates, such as those on policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a tendency for experts and pundits alike to set out maximalist positions that deny any possibility of disagreement. Those who dissent from the conventional wisdom, even sometimes simply in nuanced ways, are derided as anti-scientific or subjected to ad hominem attacks (including the infuriating label “denier,” which seeks to put scientific dissenters on a moral plane with those who minimize the Holocaust).

Philanthropic funders should seek to support scientific work and scientists, especially those who participate in public debates from their perch as experts, who qualify their beliefs, state their uncertainties—and even admit when they are wrong. Indeed, a fascinating question on a grant application could be, “Explain a finding or method in your field that you’ve changed your mind about.”

We also need new norms that allow for experts to change their beliefs in light of new evidence; this is, in fact, at the core of the scientific enterprise. Especially in a situation such as a pandemic, the media-driven “gotcha” narrative as science, advice, and policy evolve is destructive and even deadly. Philanthropically supporting humility both in scientific work and in public communication may help reestablish this norm.

Conclusion

What is the rightful place of science in a liberal democracy? This is not a simple question to answer. Democracy is a highly imperfect means of collective decision making and fostering peaceful conflict resolution, not a means of divining truth. It is backed by the threat of coercive use of force; those who disagree with democratic decisions have little choice but to comply.

Treating scientists as the main or even sole input to democratic decision making thus puts it, or more correctly its expositors, in the position of wielding force—the opposite of reason.

Equally dangerous, however, is for democratic debate (and civic life more broadly) to ignore scientific expertise altogether. That is an essentially nihilistic position, one likely to lead to a less liberal society.

It thus falls to us—and in particular to the philanthropic sector—to lead discussions, support programs, and make investments in new mediating institutions that can help advance a role for science in public life and democratic debate. This does not mean a restoration of the status quo ante, which at this point is out of reach.

This task requires new means of sorting, credentialing, and reining in experts. It

requires acknowledging that “depoliticizing” science in public debate is an oxymoron but that “defactionalizing” science is a worthy goal. It requires epistemic humility and cultural changes that allow experts to change their minds as new evidence comes in without the public treating them as discredited.

The challenge is significant, but so is the opportunity.

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Notes

The author is grateful to Walter Valdavia, Martin Gurri, and Arnold Kling for helpful suggestions, conversations, and edits; all errors are my own.

1. Ari N. Schulman catalogs and analyzes many of the ways in which scientific claims are used to advance normative positions in Ari N. Schulman, “Science Anxiety,” *Hedgehog Review* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2016), <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-cultural-contradictions-of-modern-science/articles/science-anxiety>.
2. Daniel Sarewitz, “How Science Makes Environmental Controversies Worse,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 7, no. 5 (October 2004): 385–403.
3. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).
4. Cary Funk, Meg Hefferon, Brian Kennedy, and Courtney Johnson, “Trust and Mistrust in Americans’ Views of Scientific Experts,” Pew Research Center (August 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/08/02/trust-and-mistrust-in-americans-views-of-scientific-experts/>.
5. Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in Higher Education Down Since 2015,” Gallup Blog, October 9, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/242441/confidence-higher-education-down-2015.aspx>.
6. Kim Parker, “The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education,” Pew Research Center, August 19, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education/>.
7. “Confidence in Institutions,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>. Percentages are those who report having a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in these institutions.
8. Krugman’s byline in the *New York Times* notes that he is a Nobel laureate in economics—true, yet irrelevant to many of his political columns.
9. Another manifestation of this is utilizing professional (that is, expert) organizations to advocate for policies not directly related to the profession, for instance, various scholarly humanities organizations weighing in on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
10. “Fact Sheet: Breaking down Gender Stereotypes in Media and Toys So That Our Children Can Explore, Learn, and Dream without Limits,” Obama White House Archives, April 6, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/06/factsheet-breaking-down-gender-stereotypes-media-and-toys-so-our>.
11. This is not to pick on the Obama administration. However, the desire to appropriate “research” as a shibboleth is asymmetric between the right and the left, for both political and epistemic reasons. Simply put, Republican politicians (and voters) have little desire to advance scientific justifications for their social policies, which they typically advance on normative, values-driven grounds. A possible counterpoint is dubious scientific claims made about fetal pain in debates

about abortion though these are secondary tactics and seldom if ever at the forefront of anti-abortion arguments. A cursory search of the George W. Bush and Obama White House web archives shows the former used the phrases “research shows” or “studies show” 266 times compared with 1,273 for the latter—an admittedly informal finding, but interesting, nonetheless. A similarly informal “control”—searching for the words “football” or “baseball”—revealed a more symmetrical 2,315 results (Bush) to 1,903 hits (Obama).

12. Tom Nichols, “How America Lost Faith in Expertise,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-02-13/how-america-lost-faith-expertise>.
13. This is not a trivial point. Individual citizens have little incentive to inform themselves about policy details; being wrong costs essentially nothing, and having an informed opinion has a significant opportunity cost. See Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
14. It’s worth noting that the firm that conducted this poll, Public Policy Polling, regularly asks prank questions. Recent examples include asking whether Ted Cruz is the Zodiac Killer (38 percent say he is or they are not sure) and polling “Giant meteor hitting the earth” against Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016 (the meteor received 13 percent support). Perhaps the real lesson here is to not take polling data too literally. Mike Pearl, “A Pollster Explains What He Learns from Asking Voters about Harambe and Deez Nuts,” *Vice*, August 31, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4w5xyp/public-policy-polling-harambe-deez-nuts-atlantic-wall.
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18. Bruce L. R. Smith, *American Science Policy since World War II* (Washington: Brookings Press, 1989): 108–58.
19. “IGM Economic Experts Panel,” IGM Forum, University of Chicago Booth School of Business, <http://www.igmchicago.org/igm-economic-experts-panel/>.
20. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Parker and Son, 1859), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm>.
21. Daniel Yudkin, Stephen Hawkins, and Tim Dixon, “The Perception Gap: How False Impressions Are Pulling Americans Apart,” More in Common and Hidden Tribes Project (June 2019), <https://perceptiongap.us/media/zaslaroc/perception-gap-report-1-0-3.pdf>.
22. The Ideological Turing Test was proposed in 2011 by economist Bryan Caplan. Bryan Caplan, “The Ideological Turing Test,” *EconLib* (June 2011), https://www.econlib.org/archives/2011/06/the_ideological.html.

Building Connective Democracy to Combat Polarization

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When thinking about the problems facing American democracy today, none strikes us as quite so potent, quite so insidious, or quite so devastating as affective polarization—the increasing animosity between social and political groups. It is characterized by the a priori distrust people feel when listening to someone with a different point of view. Affective polarization is not just a matter of seeing those with a different perspective as misguided.¹ It is also viewing their judgments as irrational, ascribing sinister motives to them, or even casting them as threats to democracy itself.

This group-based divisiveness permeates our lives. Other social groupings, such as religion and race, correlate with partisanship to form clusters of co-occurring social identities.² This means that discussions impinging on one aspect of identity can quickly implicate other elements of one's identity, triggering even sharper feelings of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. Everyday acts that scarcely registered as political in years past—the car you drive, the neighborhood you live in, the grocery store you frequent, and the music you choose to listen to—now provide reliable clues about your social and political group membership.³

The real-world consequences of affective polarization are legion. Among individuals, there is an unwillingness to engage with different perspectives, which results in less reasoned and nuanced opinions. Affective polarization also seeps into everyday behaviors, influencing whom you date and whether you get a job interview.⁴ Some people favor limiting the rights of those opposed to their views and, even more worrisome, endorse political violence against those with different perspectives.⁵ Affective polarization also encourages extremist views, leading people to find other viewpoints so abhorrent as to leave no room for compromise.⁶ For government institutions, affective polarization becomes a losing game for the governed under any circumstances. If power is divided between two equally balanced governing institutions, such as the two houses of Congress, the refusal to compromise yields gridlock. If one party dominates government, such as holding the presidency and majorities in Congress, it further exacerbates polarization when the party enacts its will without compromise.

It is important to distinguish between affective polarization and other forms of polarization. Ideological or issue-based polarization, for instance, involves substantive differences of opinion on matters of policy. For example, people may hold opposing views on the best way to provide health care. This strikes us as normatively acceptable and, dare we say, even healthy in a democracy. Societies are better off when citizens have diverse views. When ideas productively clash and we are willing to listen to people marshaling evidence for their claims, we can reach more logical conclusions. When we recognize that groups prioritize shared values differently, we can be more empathetic. It's hard to see similar upsides to affective polarization, whereby ideas from the opposition are dismissed before they're even heard.

The increasing acrimony between groups has many sources, all of which build on our basic human tendencies to form groups that foster camaraderie, in part by identifying and demonizing

out-groups. Technology has not done us any favors in addressing affective polarization. Digital forums for online discussion reward loud and extreme voices. Comments on the *New York Times* website using partisan and uncivil language, for instance, receive more “recommends” from other site visitors than comments without this language.⁷ When sites reward comments and posts garnering more responses with higher visibility, they inevitably reward polarizing content. This can be seen in comment sections that prominently display comments receiving more recommendations, on social media platforms that algorithmically elevate content in news feeds based on user engagement, and among news organizations eager to post stories they believe will earn the most clicks and viewers. The current technological system feeds on—and privileges—polarization.

Foreign and domestic groups bent on causing disruption seize upon these divides. They strategically use disinformation, easily spread by both humans and bots on social media,⁸ to fan the flames of affective polarization. They engage in rhetoric designed to inspire emotional rather than cognitive responses because powerful emotions, such as anger, inspire action,⁹ whether clicking to share an article or spewing outrage at an adversary.¹⁰

At the time of this writing, we are living in extreme uncertainty. What will happen to the economy? Will Covid-19 have an even deadlier second wave before a vaccine has been discovered and widely administered? When we're afraid for our lives and livelihoods, groups can be comforting. Identifying out-groups that can be blamed for the current situation can inspire confidence and further in-group loyalty. It gives us a sense of control to be able to point to someone, or something, as the source of our suffering. For conservatives, liberals are to blame for hyping the virus in order to oust President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, for infringing on individual liberties, and for creating economic hardship. For liberals, conservatives are to blame for de-emphasizing the dangers of the coronavirus, for prioritizing the economy above public health, and for causing cases to rise. Everyone has a known “other” to blame.

Signs of social breakdown caused by polarization are all around us. People “unfriend” acquaintances or even relatives on social media who disagree with them politically.¹¹ In some areas, people no longer operate under the same set of facts. People can easily find confirmation of their opinions online from sources proclaiming knowledge of the facts, whether or not these sources have any expertise in the subject. Institutions previously trusted to be arbiters of truth have buckled under the pressure of polarization. At one time, the national news media were a trusted source of information. No longer. Accusations of partisan bias emerging in the 1980s—though not always backed by evidence—have rendered the media less effective in cultivating shared knowledge.¹² Scientists, another group historically commanding respect, are often seen today as partisans on issues such as climate change. Institutions of higher learning, once regarded as the repositories of societal knowledge, are charged by some as liberalizing agents. Today there are conservative colleges that “provide an important counterbalance to the progressivism and liberalism that pervade so much of American higher education.”¹³ These charges of liberalism occur despite evidence that the college experience can, in some instances, further economically conservative views.¹⁴

There are several possible responses to this dire state of affairs. One is to throw up one's hands and conclude that these problems are too big to tackle. Although some certainly take this view happily, many others recognize that unless we make a serious investment in addressing affective polarization, all hope is certainly lost. Another response is to push against affective polarization by elevating rationality. But an over-emphasis on rationality can tamp down passionate debate that is valuable to democracy¹⁵ or silence marginalized voices.¹⁶

We advocate, instead, for the idea of connective democracy, or bolstering the ties that bind us. This means embarking on a coordinated effort to tackle a problem so massive that it cannot be addressed by any one person or organization. Coordination is challenging, given that different organizations have their own focus, their own means of determining priorities, and their own strategies for assessing effectiveness. Several recent efforts demonstrate that it can be done, however. For instance, several groups—the News Integrity Initiative, the Democracy Fund, the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation—joined forces in forming the Community Listening and Engagement Fund to help local newsrooms connect to their audiences through digital engagement. Similarly, Arnold Ventures, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the Democracy Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, Omidyar Network's Tech and Society Solutions Lab, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation joined together to fund Social Science One, an organization seeking to make social media data available to the academic community.

These examples demonstrate the wisdom of coordinated efforts in attacking a problem of such immensity. They also raise the question of whether organizations should come together around a single priority or whether they would be more effective by adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy in which different groups tackle different aspects of the issue. When it comes to philanthropy, the answer is probably the former. Dividing the problem into distinct subtopics can create problems for philanthropic organizations, which may then become dependent on fewer and less diverse funders, which, in turn, would make them more vulnerable to economic downturns or changes in funding priorities. It seems to us that coordination is essential. No single organization or philanthropist can hope to address this problem in isolation. Only by working together, identifying what is working and what isn't, and pivoting to more successful endeavors can we hope to make a difference.

More important than coordinating organizations and streams of funding for this work is to figure out what work should be undertaken to address the problem. We center our proposed solutions on the idea of connective democracy. Building connections among publics and between the public and government, the media, scientists, and other centers of expertise and representation are key to addressing affective polarization. These connections, in our modern era, are scalable thanks to media and technology. We believe that there are actions that individual citizens, organizations, and philanthropists, committed to the ideals and promise of democracy, can take. Three such actions are outlined below.

We must bolster and learn from institutions that maintain trust from diverse groups.

Despite high levels of affective polarization, there are institutions that earn high marks from the public. Local news media, for instance, are more trusted across divides than major national news organizations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has also earned favorable opinions from those on the right and the left, at least as of polling from the Pew Research Center in March 2020.¹⁷

Philanthropists interested in combating polarization should be concerned with maintaining organizations that engender trust across divides. Local news, in particular, has been facing increasing economic challenges as public consumption habits change from print or broadcast to digital news consumption. This yields fewer advertising dollars and puts local newsrooms at a disadvantage compared to national news players. There are further signs of trouble for local newsrooms as companies like Sinclair Broadcast Group are accused of tilting local news toward conservative views (although some research puts this contention in question).¹⁸ Turning to the CDC, the trust afforded to the organization is fragile at best. Its failings during the coronavirus pandemic have been widely chronicled,¹⁹ as has the fact that the agency's views and those of the president increasingly diverged in the summer of 2020.²⁰ These moments may dismantle the CDC's position as a trusted source.

We need to ask some questions about those organizations that maintain the public trust. First, what is it about local media that inspires trust across divides? When a rancher from Montana thinks about whether a journalist from a national news organization based in New York really understands her problems, or even knows anything about her, there's good reason to question it. But when the *Helena Independent Record* writes about an issue, a Montanan has more confidence that she has been seen and understood. Second, can this trust-inspiring tactic be replicated? One of the many lessons of this pandemic is that some professions don't require in-office time to get the job done. Journalism, we suspect, is one of these professions. Can national news organizations radically reconfigure to be truly *national* news organizations, with journalists embedded in cities and towns across the country and truly engaged with local communities, much as local journalists are? This may require that stringers and correspondents for national media make more effort to let the public know they are there and mimic some of the community-building focus of local journalists. Similar objectives may be possible via less radical means. Report for America, for example, places journalists in different communities around the country. The experience could prove to be eye-opening for the journalists involved, changing their perspective for the future.

For example, news organizations could be better at determining the needs of their audiences and making sure that those needs are being satisfied. In a Center for Media Engagement analysis, we found that coronavirus coverage by local media on Facebook was, in some cases, aligned with what their readers needed to know.²¹ In other instances, however, their audience expressed

desires for information that was not being widely provided.

There also are lessons to be learned from the CDC. The Vaccine Information Statements given to parents when their infants are born contain information from the CDC about vaccine safety. Physicians provide these statements again each time a patient gets a vaccine. At critical moments, the CDC is there when needed, providing information and expertise. Perhaps this, too, could be replicated.

Studying these success stories can help us figure out what brings diverse groups together and can provide hints for how to move forward.

We must combat the manipulation of emotions in our public life.

It goes without saying that affective polarization feeds on affect. When people respond to social and political stimuli with feelings of affinity for those sharing their views and hatred for the opposition, rational arguments can go out the window. Identifying ways of encouraging the public to check their emotional responses is, therefore, of the utmost importance.

Institutions and frameworks can be set up to help with this. Social media, for example, could deprioritize content that inflames these passions, rather than elevating it in our social feeds. Platforms should promptly and consistently remove content that violates their terms of service before it goes viral. News outlets could avoid clickbait content designed to outrage people; research from the Center for Media Engagement shows that this type of content can prompt perceptions of fake news and dampen audience engagement with the news.²²

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the powerful emotional responses people, particularly those in marginalized groups, may have to discourse they view as trying to harm them. It is easy to discount their pain as an outgrowth of affective polarization, but a better response is empathy and compassion for how one's lived experiences influence how one sees the world. No one should be expected to be dispassionate in the face of viewpoints that challenge their very existence.

We must find opportunities to break across lines of difference.

Scholars have repeatedly found that positive experiences with those who don't share our views can break down barriers.²³ We must find ways to encourage these interactions, whether in person or through the media. One component of movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too is the mass sharing of experiences that illuminate the dark depths of a societal problem. Police brutality isn't an isolated incident; it is pervasive in Black communities. Sexual harassment and assault aren't isolated incidents; they are a common problem for women. Hearing from those with diverse

experiences will deepen our empathy for people whose lives are different from ours and help us learn from them. These interactions ultimately can build bridges.

Bringing groups with differing views together can run the risk of turning into shouting matches that accomplish little. But it's a risk we must be willing to take. We must also guard against the tendency of those with more societal power to dictate the terms of such interactions. We must learn to listen to one another with the intention of hearing what others have to say. And we must be compassionate with ourselves, so we can have greater compassion for others.²⁴

These are but three of many possible strategies for combating affective polarization. As we look to the thorniest problems facing the United States, we propose that affective polarization is among the most challenging. If we do not tackle this issue head-on, it has the potential to unravel the delicate fabric of democracy. Research and practice focusing on ameliorating affective polarization should be a priority for funders, and strategies like those suggested above could be starting points for understanding how to best curb this societal epidemic.

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Notes

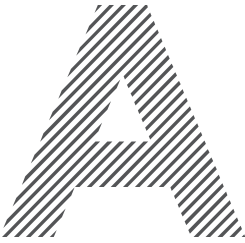
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Conformity Culture

JANET TRAN

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute



t a recent reception of foundation professionals, I found myself speaking to the third person that evening whose foundation's wealth was derived from student loan interest and whose mission expressly promoted increased equity. Emboldened by cocktails, I asked, "Do you ever wonder if you would do more good by just forgiving a lot of these student loans?" The executive readily laughed and admitted that, yes, it had certainly 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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² Differences in approach can lead to more effective solutions. Conservatives tend to center on processes, whereas progressives may lean toward programs.¹³ 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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