Thinking Outside the Ballot Box:  
A New Political Engagement Strategy for Funders to Consider  

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In recent years, there has been a chorus of voices decrying the demise of civic engagement among Americans, particularly their lack of interest in voting and other political processes. Among the most popular strategies employed to stem the apathy are voter registration, voter mobilization and get-out-the-vote efforts. Such strategies make sense since voting is the cornerstone of American democracy. It is a concrete action that citizens take to be civically engaged and it is measurable. These strategies are also particularly effective during presidential election years, when people are more likely to tune in to campaigns and turn out to vote. They are appropriate and necessary activities for civic organizations to undertake and for funders and donors to support.

But what happens after elections? There is no evidence that Americans’ slightly elevated interest in the 2004 election cycle will continue in the coming years. Yes, data show that once people vote they are more likely to vote again, but if they do so reluctantly or continue to be cynical about politics or government in general, are they really civically engaged? Moreover, is voting really civic engagement when all that is required is that people show up at the polls, vote every few years, and perhaps stay informed in between these times? Are these same voters engaged in their communities, involved in what Harry Boyte calls “public work” or community problem solving?

These issues are worth exploration since data indicate that young people may not be bound by the same sense of duty as their elders in matters of voting and participation in political processes. Nor is it necessarily fair to assume that young people should be interested in politics or the political process. Young Americans have not been part of hard-fought battles to win the right to vote; moreover, they have grown up during a time when their parents and other adults in their lives have become disenchanted with traditional politics.

Today, Americans see the political system as deeply flawed, dominated by big-money interests and political consultants. They see campaigns rife with spin and hypocrisy rather than substance and nuance. They see government as a bloated bureaucracy that, compared to the private sector, fails to get meaningful results. As a New York Times editorial notes, “Many of the voters who go to the polls may ask themselves why they bothered to show up.”

Some dismiss these views as merely a reflection of Americans’ historical contempt for politics, which they tend to see as “corrupt” or unresponsive. But evidence suggests that there are trends, both within our political system and our environment in general, that are inhibiting, rather than encouraging, political participation of citizens.
These include:

- **The extent to which money controls the system.** Whether candidates are able to run and win depends on how much money they raise. The average U.S. Senate race in 2004 cost approximately $2.5 million and the average House seat race cost $530,000.3 Incumbents enjoy an enormous advantage; in 2002, 98% of House incumbents and 85% of Senate incumbent were re-elected.4 As a result, office holders, tired of begging for dollars, are retiring and would-be officeholders are intimidated by the cost of running.

- **The television industry's dependence on campaign ad revenue.** During the 2002 election cycle nearly $1 billion was spent on political ads—four times what was spent in 1982 (adjusting for inflation). Studies show that stations increased the price of these ads by an average of 53% in the two months before the 2002 election, despite a thirty-year-old federal law enacted to prevent such pre-election profiteering.5 Candidates have to raise more money for ads that cost more during the time they need to air them, all of which contributes to the high cost of winning (or running for) an election.

- **Skewed media coverage of candidates and campaigns.** Media coverage of elections and candidates has become little more than sound bites, with scant focus on substantive issues or an analysis of candidate positions. Young people, who are the most media-savvy generation in history, have turned away from mainstream media and prefer to get their political news from programs such as Jon Stewart’s “The Daily Show,”6 which acknowledges viewers’ perceptions of politics as accurate while educating them about its potential.

- **Lack of substantive debate or discussions about issues.** Increasingly, what passes for political debate are merely highly-choreographed opportunities for candidates to practice their sound bites. Questions are provided in advance. “Celebrity” journalists are given responsibility for posing the questions and then rarely have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. Young people, who might be good at challenging candidates, are rarely given the chance to ask questions and even when they are, their questions are screened and the process is tightly controlled.

- **The growth in power and influence of political consultants.** During the past two decades there has been an increase in the influence and prevalence of political consultants who rely on thirty-second attack ads that vilify opponents and compromise the quality of debate and discourse by encouraging clients to “market” their appeals to their “base” rather than to potential supporters or the public at large.

- **Lack of competition in elections due to redistricting practices.** “What sets democracies apart is offering real choices in elections,” says the New York Times, “something that is increasingly rare in the United States.”7 During 2002, 81 incumbents ran unopposed by a major party candidate.8 The 2004 elections were even less competitive. Nearly 19 out of 20 races for the US House of Representatives were won by margins of more than 10%. Incumbents have won more than 98% of House races for 5 straight elections.9 This is largely due to antiquated redistricting processes that allow parties in power to redraw district voting lines so as to assure them the most votes. This practice has been used by both parties to their advantage, but it has become more pernicious with the advent of technology that allows districts to be created with “surgical precision, taking into account not just party registration but also voting history.”10 As Jeffrey Toobin notes, “The voters no longer select the members of the House of Representatives; the state legislators who design the districts do.”11
• **Prohibitive ballot access laws and disdain for alternative candidates.** The lack of competition in races is also due to state laws that make it difficult for third-party candidates to run for office. The United States has some of the most stringent ballot access requirements of any democracy in the world. Third-party candidates often have to get an enormous number of voter signatures in order to be listed on the ballot. Democratic and Republican candidates are often exempt from these requirements. This situation is exacerbated by party leaders who ignore third-party candidates or brand them as “spoilers,” rather than as legitimate players in a fundamental democratic process.

**ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION & FINDING THE RIGHT ANSWERS**

Given these trends, it may be fair to ask whether continuing to encourage people to ignore them and participate anyway will lead to long-term changes in a system that is seemingly discouraging such participation. Perhaps it is time to consider a different strategy: identifying what the incentives are to be politically engaged and finding ways to change the system so that it provides those incentives. Taking this one step further, perhaps citizens themselves could be mobilized to encourage those changes in the system, thereby meeting two goals: 1) getting more people to be civically engaged and 2) implementing systemic changes that would sustain such engagement.

Adopting a strategy to encourage political engagement that uses public dissatisfaction with the system to incite real reform challenges citizens to get involved—but not in the processes they think are flawed. It also takes the burden of reforming a complex system now on the shoulders of a few “good government” organizations and makes it the responsibility of all citizens. In short, the message about political engagement changes from: “You don’t like the system? Too bad, vote anyway,” to “You don’t like the system? Change it!”

This strategy is admittedly more difficult because it raises thorny questions about the nature of our democracy, which many believe is sacrosanct. Others argue, however, that the very essence of a participatory democracy is its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and its responsiveness to the public it represents. That public is increasingly dissatisfied with this system—a dissatisfaction that some dismiss as “cynicism” but that others believe reflects a sincere dismay at a democracy gone awry. It may, therefore, be useful to ask who the real cynics are: those who ask what kind of system we could have to engage our citizenry more fully or those who, as William Rubenstein writes, “argue [only] about what our structure of government will permit”?12

Why is this a good time for such a strategy? There is momentum for civic engagement as evidenced by the elevated turnout during the 2004 election, especially among young people. Approximately 48-52% of eligible 18- to 29-year-olds voted in the 2004 presidential election, compared with 42-43% in 2000. 13

Young people are, in fact, making a difference in their communities through community service and volunteering. As E. J. Dionne has noted, young people’s civic-mindedness and commitment to direct service may better equip them to sort out “the conundrums of democracy” than their immediate predecessors. 14

But young people are not the only cohort ripe for mobilization and in particular on political and systemic reform issues. There are millions of Americans—35% of the general electorate (50% of young people)—who see themselves as independents. They “balk at the idea of being categorized,” writes Jacqueline Salit. These independent-minded citizens “seek solutions to policy questions that are free of labels,” and are eager to participate in political reform efforts.15 Simply calling these
individuals “swing voters” ignores their conscious rejection of “partyism” and the constraints that come with it.

On the issue of broader systemic reform that will ultimately expand opportunities and reduce barriers for citizen engagement, the nation’s philanthropic institutions and the civic organizations they help to support such as Independent Sector, the League of Women Voters, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Common Cause, the National Civic League and others are well positioned to promote a broader agenda. Representing thousands of organizations across the country working to enhance civil society, these and other organizations have influence, power and a voice that can help achieve fundamental reform.

As Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland argue, these kinds of organizations could and should be the infrastructure of a civic renewal movement. They serve as “important nodes linking a broad range of other important movement activities and networks.” Sirianni and Friedland also assert that such organizations are the foundation of a healthy democracy so long as they are perceived as nonpartisan. According to them, a large civic renewal effort depends on this range of civic groups engaging in public work that rises above partisan politics. This does not mean that civic renewal or political reform cannot be linked to partisan politics at some point. But the link should either be indirect or made after there are stronger bonds among a wide array of groups working together and producing value for the larger community. Once the groups have demonstrated their ability to generate value, such a civic renewal network would have the credibility, influence, and track record needed to establish stronger relationships with political groups, parties, or constituencies.

SPECIFIC WAYS FOR FUNDERS TO SUPPORT CIVIC PARTICIPATION & POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

What would a political reform agenda—with the goal of encouraging civic engagement—look like? And what can funders do to support it? They can:

Support projects advocating for campaign finance reform. Encourage grantees to speak out about the need for campaign finance reform and publicly funded elections in states and communities. In Arizona and Maine, for example, campaign financing is derived largely from funds raised through contributions made by individuals on their tax returns, and voter turnout has increased as a result. Funders supporting membership nonprofits can encourage those nonprofits to promote publicly funded elections among their constituencies because this encourages more people to run in elections and, therefore, gives voters more choices.

Support efforts to explore and educate Americans about new electoral processes. Become aware of and support efforts to explore and understand alternative electoral systems and processes, such as instant runoff voting, whereby people vote for their favorite candidate but also can indicate subsequent choices by ranking their preferences. Proportional or full representation are other alternatives to winner-take-all elections, and enable like-minded voters to win legislative seats in proportion to their share of the vote.

Encourage exploration of less stringent ballot access laws. Support efforts that are advocating for inclusion of third-party and/or independents on state and local ballots. Such candidates help to re-energize interest in the political process and provide would-be voters with more options and incentives to participate.

Support efforts to hold more engaging and lively debates. Improve the quality of political discourse by supporting organizations and projects that know how to manage a meaningful community or
political debate. Provide resources to nonprofits to sponsor nonpartisan debates among candidates. A variety of media venues need to be involved in this process—beyond the national networks—and different approaches should be used to attract a broader audience, particularly young people and those turned off by what now passes for political debate.

**Support projects that encourage people to run for office.** Provide resources to nonprofits working to attract new faces and voices to the political process through nonpartisan trainings, education and assistance in fundraising and communications.

**Support efforts to advocate for changes in redistricting procedures.** Help nonprofit organizations promote changes in redistricting processes that have limited electoral competition and turned off voters. Support the formation of independent commissions to examine these issues and provide nonpartisan solutions.

**Support projects that encourage more substance in media coverage of issues and candidacies.** Around the country, there are communities organizing for more choice in media programming and advocating that local networks offer free airtime to candidates and issues during the election period. Funders could support this work and provide venues for connecting those involved at the local, state, and national levels.

**Encourage and promote community organizing around local issues.** Political engagement is not just about voting in elections; it is also about communities coming together to advocate for things they care about, and working to improve or change them. In many cases such organizing leads to more political involvement. A group of neighbors cleaning up their park, for example, may be inspired to contact local elected officials to make sure the park stays clean, testify before the city council about the parks in their neighborhood and pursue longer-term efforts to ensure quality of life in their community. Funders and nonprofits need to understand the connection between electoral politics and community activism and why and how both forms of engagement are important and the functions they serve. Young people particularly are engaged in community service, which can be used as a springboard for deeper civic involvement. This energy needs to be directed and cultivated through programs and projects that allow young people to move from service to civics.

**Encourage and promote better school-based civic learning.** Schools have access to our next generation of citizens and need to be partners in larger civic engagement efforts. School-based civic learning is reemerging as an important issue and one that several organizations are tackling at the district, state and national levels. These new programs link classroom-based instruction with experiential learning, encourage students to discuss policy issues in the classroom and provide time for reflection and analysis—practices that research shows help cultivate civic and political behavior, attitudes, and skills among young people. Funders have an opportunity to join ranks with these efforts; link nonprofits with schools; and help advocate for better and more comprehensive approaches to civic education in standards, testing, and curricula.

**Sponsor public discussions about the kinds of systems we do want and that we think could be more effective.** Although many public discussions center on civic engagement, few of them attempt to look at a broader reform agenda—or at least tie the pieces together into a whole. Funders could sponsor community and public dialogues asking important questions: “What would make participation worthwhile?” “Which kind of redistricting system do we want?” “What values would they reflect (for example, competitiveness, racial equality, and so on)?” “What are the pros and cons of instant runoff voting?” “What kind of local organizing needs to happen to lead political reform?” These discussions must involve people representing the full political spectrum and promote local experimentation, which civic organizations can showcase and support.
Support local and national civic organizations working to encourage citizen participation around systemic reform. As noted, civic organizations are important nodes linking a broad range of important movement networks but are still largely disconnected from one another. Support efforts that generate collaborative strategies that will incite a broader movement for civic renewal; support strategies that go beyond “get-out-the-vote” efforts to those that work with citizens to champion reforms that will encourage more civic and political participation.

THE CHARGE TO FUNDERS

Because they are some of the powerful institutions dedicated to the support and promotion of civil society, funders have a role to play linking the civic infrastructure they represent with a broader agenda to encourage nonpartisan systemic reform that will increase civic engagement in the political processes fundamental to American democracy.

The most important thing that funders and nonprofit leaders can do is to stop talking about the importance of democracy and civic engagement and instead invest in activities that will address the systems and processes that may be prohibiting both.

What is needed is leadership willing to step up to the plate and deliver some admittedly complex but powerful messages to a wide and diverse audience hungry for new ideas, frankness, and energy. It is a challenge, to be sure, but one that if left unaddressed may portend even deeper disillusionment and disengagement with the democratic processes and institutions on which the United States was built.

ORGANIZATIONS & PROJECTS WORKING ON A BROADER POLITICAL REFORM AGENDA

Alliance for Better Campaigns (www.bettercampaigns.org)
Washington, D.C.

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (www.civicyouth.org)
University of Maryland
College Park, MD

Center for Nonprofits and Voting
c/o MassVOTE (www.massvote.net)
Boston, MA

Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org)
Washington, D.C.

Center for Voting and Democracy (www.fairvote.org)
Washington, D.C.

 Democracy 21 (www.democracy21.org)
Washington, D.C.

Demos (www.demos-usa.org)
New York, NY
This essay is one of a set of eight essays that **PACE** commissioned in 2005 for our first national gathering, titled *The Condition of Democracy in America and What Philanthropy Can Do About It*. **PACE** - Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement ([www.pacefunders.org](http://www.pacefunders.org)) is an emerging community of donors and grantmakers committed to strengthening democracy by supporting pathways for individual participation in civic and community life. We hope this and the other essays in the series will stimulate productive conversations across different groups and different philosophies about how to unleash the power of individual participation in solving the problems of our communities and nation.

I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

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ENDNOTES


http://opensecrets.org/overview/stats.asp?cycle=2004&type=A&display=A

http://opensecrets.org/overview/incumbs.asp?cycle=2004


http://civicyouth.org/quick/youth_voting.htm


