

Philanthropy's Role in Strengthening America's Democracy

PACE [hosted a panel](#) during a Council on Foundations pre-conference session, providing participants a forum for conversation about the state of American democratic practice, as well as the many ways philanthropy is working to restore, revive, and renew our democracy. We were thrilled to design this panel as part of the larger robust, thoughtful, and engaging discussion at the COF conference. We couldn't possibly capture all the details of this multifaceted discussion, but in an effort to continue the dialogue and reflect it to our full membership, we've captured highlights from the session below—framed as a list of big-picture challenges philanthropy faces, followed by opportunities to move through those challenges and strengthen our nation's fractured democracy. There was tremendous energy and enthusiasm in Dallas this week, and we look forward to hearing from you as you continue that momentum in your work.

Big-picture challenges

- **America is more polarized than it has ever been.** In fact, research shows that Democrats and Republicans are [more ideologically polarized](#) than late 19th century—for many reasons, including gerrymandering, and the rise of social media furthering ideological silos. As a result, politicians fear being accused of betrayal if they engage in compromise, and the fracturing deepens.
- **Erosion of our democratic institutions.** America is [no longer categorized](#) as a “full democracy,” having slipped to “flawed democracy”—independent of 2016's election results. There are many reasons—including gerrymandering, voter suppression laws, legislative gridlock in DC, and mounting distrust in our government, as well as systemic criminal justice, rule of law, and inequality issues—racism, immigrants, and mass incarceration along with the politicization of our judicial systems.
- **Newspapers are an important part of our democracy, but the industry is in crisis.** Local newspapers are collapsing across the country; their business model is broken, and readership is declining. If newspapers can't survive, major TV networks don't receive the information they provide, and constituents won't be informed of local issues and elections. While national newspaper [subscriptions are on the rise](#), that trend hasn't connected on the local level.
- **Failure of public leadership.** Across the country, constituents are expressing loudly and clearly: they don't feel they are being represented. Many members of underserved communities are disillusioned—they see an America that has broken its promises.

Reflections with implications *for philanthropy*

Leadership and education. There is an opportunity to build bridges across difference. That will mean investing in inspiration (lifting up the varied and diverse voices, including those of young people), education (providing the information people need to be active citizens), and invitation (reaching out to underserved communities and their constituents and making room at the table). Validating, engaging, and grooming leaders is essential. Actions that

- **Focus on schools.** Schools are an ideal venue to practice deliberation: research indicates they are politically heterogeneous, and represent a formative time with trained educators who have the potential to facilitate these discussions across difference.
- **Focus on cities, and see citizens as partners.** There may always be some divide, but in cities, no matter what—republican or democrat—you still have to fill up your potholes and pick up your trash. With that kind of immediate accountability to constituents, there’s no time for party politics. Mayors are motivated to learn from one another. This spirit of collaboration can bubble up and make a difference.

Make the moment count. Sometimes you can’t create moments—you have to seize them when they arise. This is a moment. It is the moment to connect the virtues and underpinnings of our American democracy, and to explain to people in an accessible way why they matter, and how they matter within it.

- **Lifting up truth in journalism.** As Hannah Arendt once said, “Democracy needs a place to sit down.” The loss of our newspapers means a crumbling of our public square. Philanthropy’s role will be key in reviving the field of journalism and supporting innovation as it evolves. The subjective reality of “truth” in journalism raises barriers, but information and dialogue are key ingredients.
- **Further cross-partisan initiatives.** Whether you’re reforming congress or facilitating conversations in local communities, peaceful and productive cross-partisan dialogue is possible. It is happening in communities across the country, and it is necessary to rebuild our democracy. Funders will need to be careful not to fall into partisan trenches, and risk deepening the divides we already face.

Leverage philanthropy’s power of convening—and start a conversation about what works. There is a disconnect between local actions and broader-scale visions. Moving forward, it will be important to meet people where they are, and to further the connection between actions that make sense in community, and actions that makes sense for our country. The connection between local actions bubbling up to have tangible, broader impact is a narrative that is missing for many community members, and our work as funders will be pivotal in making it real.

In short, so many of the problems we face as a nation today are problems that we face from within-- which means we have a powerful say in how we can fix them. The moment we face today is already inspiring new and existing civic engagement funders to be more thoughtful about their approaches to this work. To those of you who are new to this space, or perhaps know someone who is seeking to explore civic engagement philanthropy for the first time, we invite you to explore and share our Civic Engagement Primer, available at www.PACEfunders.org/primer. We don’t have all the answers, but we do look forward to supporting a vibrant community of civic engagement funders as we continue working alongside you.