



**DEMOCRACY FUTURES**



# **Reflections on the Democracy Futures Project**

July 2024 - December 2025

# The Story

At PACE, we often talk about how what we do matters, but how we do it and with whom matters just as much. In summer 2024, we announced the launch of the Democracy Futures Project, and we shared the learnings from each workshop in real time.

Over sixty people engaged in the workshops and over 100 more joined the virtual reflection sessions. Now, as the project is reaching its planned conclusion, we offer overall reflections on the journey we took together and what we learned along the way.

The Democracy Futures Project's key insights offer some valuable, high-level lessons:



Democracy must evolve to remain relevant. Institutions designed for a pre-digital era are ill-equipped for fast-moving, unpredictable 21st-century challenges.



Imagination is infrastructure. Visioning processes are essential for building public legitimacy and energy for reform.



Philanthropy is anchored in the present. The vast majority of resources fund short-term reactive work, leaving experimentation and long-term planning underfunded.



Ecosystems matter. Connecting innovations and learning across disciplines and borders is more powerful than isolated initiatives.



Funders can act as futurist change agents by seeding bold experiments, supporting local legitimacy, and creating conditions for communities to define their own futures.

Some of these insights confirmed what we already knew or assumed when launching the project. While validation is helpful, it also warrants deeper scrutiny. What did we learn about the facts or realities that underpin those insights? And what does this invite us to consider about how we fund democracy?

# Engagement and Participation at a Glance



**63** participants  
representing  
49 institutions



**30** participants  
attended 3 or more  
workshops



**11** Committee  
Members:

4 Steering Committee  
7 Advisory Committee



**20**  
Guest  
speakers



**100+** registrants  
for virtual sessions

**5** requests  
for briefings



**2**  
other funder networks  
planning to replicate  
the project

Before we dive into further reflection, it is worth revisiting the premises that guided the project:

**1. The future is not something that simply “happens to us.”** We have agency to shape it, both in positive ways that can make the future brighter for all, and in ways that might help mitigate some of the most potentially negative consequences. To do so requires us to be forward-looking, clear-eyed, pragmatic, and intellectually honest. The project set a goal to build and expand the capacities of funders to engage with futures and foresight tools. It was not intended to advance preferred outcomes, but rather to consider a multiplicity of factors and viewpoints, and to embrace realism and pragmatism related to the opportunities and challenges the future presents.

**2. The default posture of the democracy field has been reactive** to short-term threats, and the dominant focus has been on elections and electoral reform. This is important and necessary work, but it needs to be coupled with aspirational, long-term, proactive visioning and planning. The field needs to be able to articulate what it’s working toward, not just what it’s fighting against; and, we need to resist the temptation to focus on “silver bullet” solutions and “simple” answers. We set a goal to imagine shared visions for democracy and identify the ideas and innovations that could get us there. We set a time-horizon of 2050; close enough to feel real, but far enough away to recognize things will be different in ways we can’t yet understand.

Taken together, the seven takeaways from the Democracy Futures Project illuminate the imperative to show democracy can work—without idealizing what is or demonizing what was—and that doing so remains both the central challenge and the essential opportunity of our time.

# Major Takeaways

**1** We cannot defend our way out of a crisis of imagination.

**2** “Saving democracy” as we know it should not be the goal.

**3** Instead of choosing sides, we should choose possibility.

**4** “Change” and “innovation” do not necessarily lead to more liberal democratic outcomes.

**5** Brainstorming is not the same as imagining. Futuring is not the same as knowing.

**6** We hoped for “shared positive vision(s)” but didn’t get them.

**7** Success is not about what we do in the project, it’s about what participants do later.

# The bottom line up front

## 1 We cannot defend our way out of a crisis of imagination.

**The provocation:** Across the pro-democracy field, enormous energy is invested in organizing, mobilizing, and protecting core institutions, and far less in expanding the imaginative bandwidth required to see genuinely different democratic futures. We continue to treat democracy as a set of structures and processes to be defended, repaired, or optimized, rather than a set of ideas whose legitimacy depends on whether people experience something meaningfully better than the status quo.

This creates a strategic trap: when institutions feel brittle and unresponsive, we double down on process reforms, legal guardrails, and defensive infrastructure—all of which matter deeply, but none of which expand our sense of what democracy could be. Our responses remain anchored in the present, while anti-democratic forces shape the future.

Our cognitive habits reinforce these limits. We overvalue what feels probable and undervalue what is possible. We treat disruptions that (in hindsight) should have been patently obvious as unforeseeable surprises, instead of a reminder that the future rarely conforms to precedent. And we ignore dangers we can plainly see—because acknowledging them would mean confronting tradeoffs we are not prepared to make.

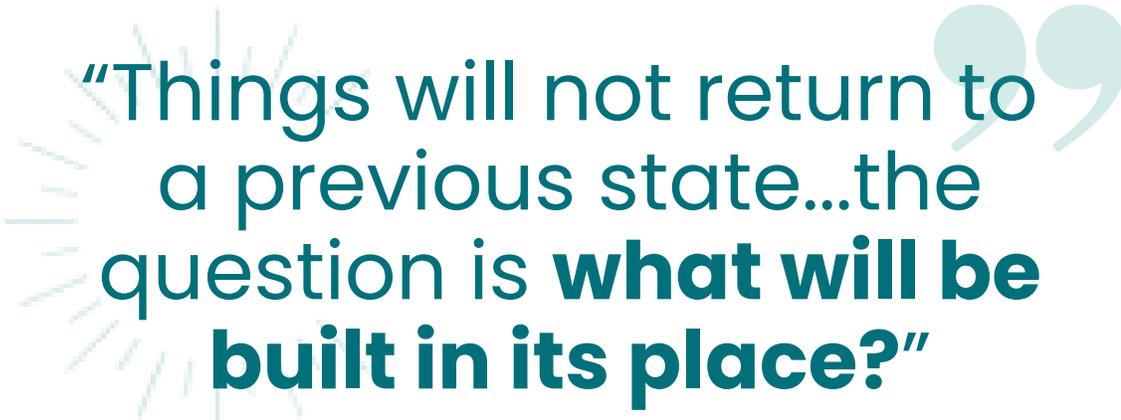
To be fair, imagining different futures is objectively difficult. It requires us to deploy systems thinking, recognizing the interconnected relationships and feedback loops between different parts of the system—not merely cherry picking the aspects we favor. However, in a moment when democratic pessimism is rising, especially among younger generations, incremental imagination is a choice we cannot afford. It narrows our field of vision at precisely the moment we need to expand it.

The result is a democracy field poised to react to threats but less practiced at generating alternatives. In a crisis of imagination, the greatest risk is not authoritarianism alone; it is the unexamined assumption that the only futures available to us are small tweaks of the present.

**The implication:** Foresight is not a luxury—it is an essential competency. If democracy is to remain legitimate, it must not only defend itself but also meaningfully evolve. That requires expanding our imaginative capacity, not just our technical capacity. Futures and foresight work provides a disciplined way to do this: to surface weak signals, test assumptions, and explore possibilities that fall outside the gravitational pull of the current system.

The pro-democracy field needs to take imagination as seriously as it takes infrastructure. We need protected spaces for deeper reflection; methodologies that help us distinguish between what is merely familiar and what is genuinely necessary; and strategies that invite the public to articulate what kind of democracy they actually want, not only what they fear losing.

Ultimately, democracy will endure not because we guard its existing forms, but because we cultivate the possibility that something better can emerge. Imagination is not escapism—it is a public good, a strategic asset, and a precondition for any future in which democracy can deliver on its promise.



“Things will not return to a previous state...the question is **what will be built in its place?**”

- Guest Speaker, Workshop 2

# What we learned about the task of envisioning democracy in 2050

Throughout this project, a repeated realization was that the dominant set of solutions currently in use are insufficient to meet the challenges American democracy faces. The frameworks, policies, and institutional defenses were built for a world that simply no longer exists.

This isn't a groundbreaking realization—it has been obvious to many for a long time that America has been using 19th century governance systems and technologies to address 21st century challenges; they are insufficient for today, much less to prepare for the 22nd century. If they aren't working now, what does that invite us to consider about the future of American democracy?



## 2 “Saving democracy” as we know it should not be the goal.

**The provocation:** During this period of democratic backsliding, actors in the pro-democracy space often frame our work as “saving democracy.” If the alternative is authoritarianism, saving it is a worthy, principled, and moral goal; however, it may lack some important precision and nuance. It risks defending a flawed system, rather than imagining ways to improve it or build a new one. We may not want to “save” systems and structures that aren’t working (or were never designed to work) for a lot of people.

When we talk about democracy, often the higher-order principles we’re reaching for are 1) protection of individual rights and civil liberties; 2) balanced and constrained political power; and 3) the ability of people to have a say in decisions that affect them. Taken together, these principles represent the philosophy of liberalism.

These principles can be expressed through different institutional arrangements (independent judiciary, legislature, etc.), processes (elections), and rules (due process, civilian control of the military). The design and configuration of governance structures matters less than whether the principles of liberalism are consistently present, practiced, and respected—in law, systems, and culture.

**The implication:** A more fitting long-term goal may be to ensure the principles animating liberal democracy are pulled into the future, while being more open to different institutional arrangements. American democracy is fundamentally an idea—an ongoing, evolving experiment. Focusing on saving ideas rather than the system as we know it may allow for America’s founding principles to be more effectively realized in modern governance structures, and better able to respond to ever-evolving cultural and social norms (such as expanding civil rights and legal protections not present for all at our country’s founding).

# 3 Instead of choosing sides, we should choose possibility.

**The provocation:** When considering what American democracy should look like in the future, the field often struggles with a tension about whether to “protect” or “reinvent” systems and institutions—whether the priority is “stability” or “transformation.” This is particularly true when we think change is happening so quickly or so profoundly that we aren’t equipped to handle it.

This tension is often oversimplified in the binary of conservation and progress—a conservative impulse toward restoration and durability can collide with a progressive impulse toward transformation. But we would be short-sighted to think about this in ideological terms.

Most things, people, and ideas cannot be reduced to a left/right binary or categorization on a political spectrum. History shows us political alignments shift every few decades, and new research suggests there are at least 17 axes of political polarization, not two.

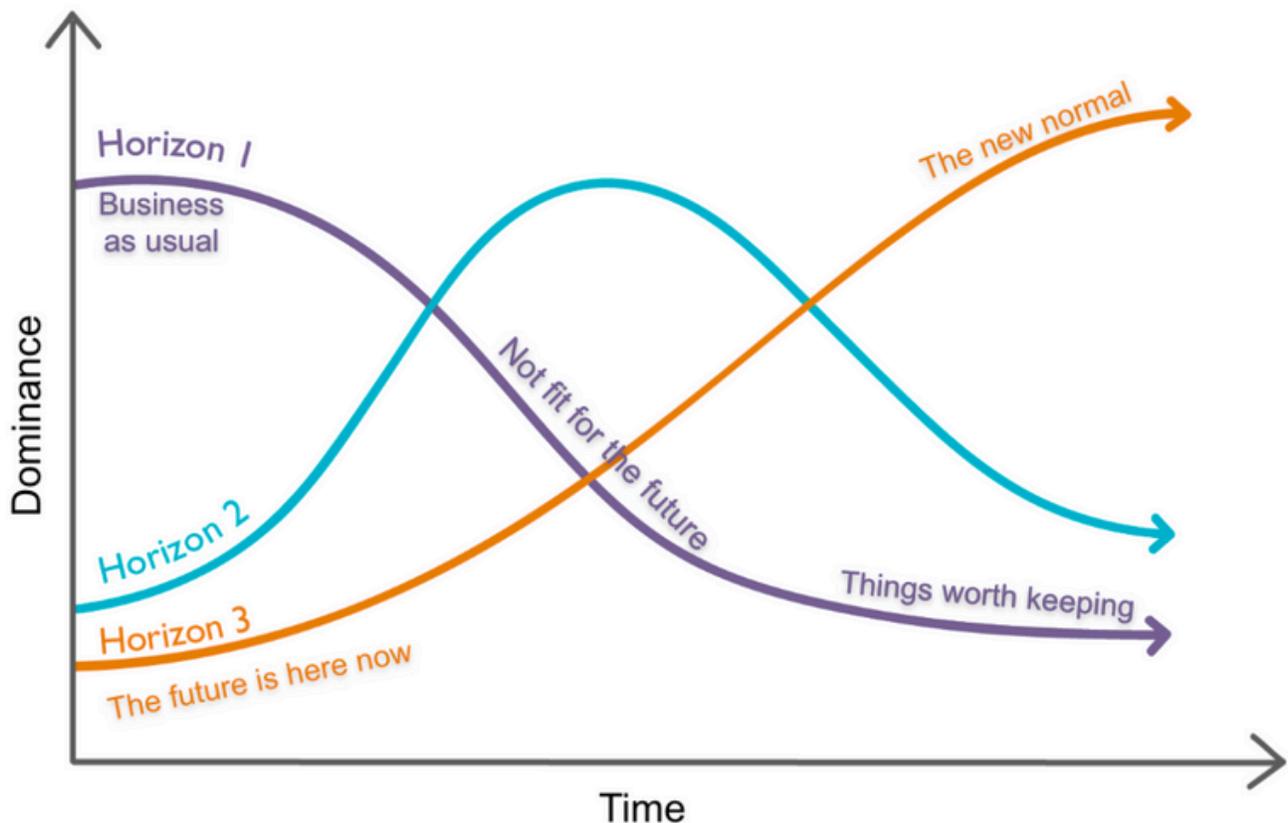
The reality is that the future will arrive regardless of our comfort with (or aversion to) change. The more we think about democracy in a political frame that sorts us into “sides” with “winners and losers,” the bleaker the future will look and the more toxic polarization and inequality will increase. Because the current way we practice politics trains us to pick sides, not possibilities.

Choosing democracy over politics and possibility over despair is ideologically radical work because it rejects the scarcity implicit in binary thinking often used in political structures that prioritize power and control. Futures and foresight provide tools for possibility.

**The implication:** Protecting democratic institutions and reimagining them are not inherently at odds—but motives and objectives matter. We need better mechanisms to more honestly and accurately discern whether actions are driven by principle or power—and whether both can be held at once. Futures thinking offers a constructive alternative to binary politics—not to pick a preferred future, but to expand our shared capacity to see multiple possibilities. Scenario planning and the “three horizons” framework invite us to think about both “protection” and “transformation” at the same time (as well as what the liminal space between them requires). It asks “what is fit for the future?” and worth carrying forward, and what needs to be “hospiced” so something new can emerge for the betterment of all.

The work ahead is not simply to protect or replace our institutions, but to clarify the values-based through-lines that connect efforts to reform, protect, and transform democracy.

## Three Horizons Framework



# 4 “Change” and “innovation” do not necessarily lead to more liberal democratic outcomes.

**The provocation:** When we have concerns that something about democracy is not working (or is anti-democratic), it can be tempting to think that changing or reforming it will be inherently better, simply by virtue of it being different. In our field, process reforms are often treated as proxies for democratic renewal and strengthening, largely because they are new and contain elements of innovation. They are often worthwhile and can lead to more liberal democratic behaviors and outcomes. But if not carefully considered and thoroughly tested, even well-intended changes can result in increased bureaucracy, perpetuate the problems they are seeking to solve (such as entrenching power or increasing partisanship), or inhibit individual liberties (such as restricting speech or freedom of religion).

Another temptation can be that when people want change, they may be willing to break rules or bend democratic norms to achieve it—or support leaders who will subvert democratic processes because they believe change will happen more quickly.

**It is worth remembering that “new” does not automatically mean “better,” nor does it inherently translate to better outcomes for liberal democracy.** Sometimes it might be innovative to keep something old and make sure it is operating at its best purpose and highest principle. What matters is not whether a reform is new or familiar, but whether it contributes to a healthier democratic ecosystem. This may require continuous revisiting of assumptions about what constitutes the “right” or “wrong” approach, depending on the context.

**The implication:** The work of strengthening liberal democracy requires more disciplined experimentation, including developing shared indicators of what “more democratic” looks like in practice: whether a reform expands participation, enhances legitimacy, increases responsiveness, reduces distortionary incentives, or strengthens individual rights and pluralism. Without such markers, it becomes difficult to distinguish principled innovation from procedural change that benefits only certain actors. For funders, this means we may need to more intentionally support both the “research and development” and “measurement and evaluation” phases behind new ideas, and double-down on what is proven to work (and support the research and evidence that supports such claims).

Further, **adopting an ecosystem perspective allows the field to consider reform, protection, adaptation, and preservation as interdependent components rather than competing impulses.** Such a systems-level approach encourages iterative testing, feedback loops, and humility about what we believe will work. Ultimately, democracy strengthens not through perpetual novelty or rigid tradition, but through intentional experimentation, guided by clear principles and evidence of what truly supports a resilient, pluralistic future.



# What we learned about the process of futures and foresight in philanthropy

Our learning process spanned four workshops and was deliberately multi-method in its approach. We combined expert provocations, scenario planning, real-life examples, and structured reflection. We looked both outside-in (at the external forces and trends that would impact democracy) and inside-out (at the micro-signals in our work and what they might lead to at a macro-level). This juxtaposition was important in order to challenge preconceptions and expand ways of thinking.



# 5 Brainstorming is not the same as imagining. Futuring is not the same as knowing.

Foresight work necessitates a significant “mental gear shift”—both in how we think and what we think the purpose of thinking is.

- **For most people, our brains are wired for incrementalism**—to tweak around the edges of what we already know, believe, or can understand—not to think in paradigm-shifting, non-linear ways. This project forced us to confront the limits of our collective imagination—to recognize how easily human cognition defaults to what feels probable or familiar.
- **Futures and foresight work is not about knowing what *will* happen, but considering what *might* happen;** it’s not about making predictions with certainty, but it’s also not saying “well, anything is possible!” It is a constant balance between “stretching” imaginations and ensuring “relevance” in reality. It can help organizations make decisions now—but it is more likely to provide stronger analysis for informing decisions later. You can’t have definitive answers for things that are inherently speculative.

The exercise of foresight reminded us that “black swans” (events that seem obvious in hindsight but were unimaginable before they occurred) and “gray rhinos” (visible threats we choose to ignore) are not just metaphors; they describe the cognitive traps that constrain strategic thinking. Futures and foresight work are less about prediction and more about disciplined curiosity—developing the analytical and emotional range to interpret signals and question our defaults.

This paper from the Democracy Fund urges funders to understand the “chaos factors” which may ready the pro-democracy field for the future.

# 6

## We hoped for “shared positive vision(s)” but didn’t get them.

One of our aspirations in undertaking this project was to surface shared, positive visions for the future of American democracy and to identify the innovations that might help us achieve them. Despite meaningful engagement, this proved elusive. The group we convened was intentionally diverse and pluralistic, and while that greatly enriched the dialogue, it also revealed a lack of coherence about what “success” and “positivity” in a democratic future might entail. In many ways, this is not surprising. A healthy democracy is a “package deal”; for any individual it will likely involve trade-offs between desirable and less desirable features. This makes it difficult—but not impossible—for a group to imagine what future success looks like.

The willingness and desire to imagine together was present, but the deeper trust and relational grounding required for true collective visioning could not be built within the time constraints of a workshop. As a result, members of the group were able to identify specific ideas or preferences aligned with their objectives, but not the kind of shared long-term vision we hoped to co-create. Additionally, visioning exercises often benefit from a “limiting factor” to help constrain them in scope (such as a country or a city). It is helpful because it provides a shared frame of experience and guiding parameters for participants. The task of visioning for an idea makes the relational grounding that much more necessary. Were we to take on a project like this again, we would account for that in the design.

We designed scenarios with intentional bright spots and constructive futures, but many participants did not experience them as genuinely positive or realistic (for very valid reasons). In the current political climate, “positive” futures often read as aspirational to the point of implausibility, or as partisan fantasies rather than credible shared destinations. This made it difficult for participants to hold a sense of possibility without feeling untethered from political and social realities.

Finally, practical constraints played a significant role. The time, space, and cognitive openness required for rigorous futures thinking are difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances, and nearly impossible amid the pressures of an ongoing political crisis and increasing demands on funders’ attention. The very conditions that make long-term thinking most necessary also make it hardest to practice.

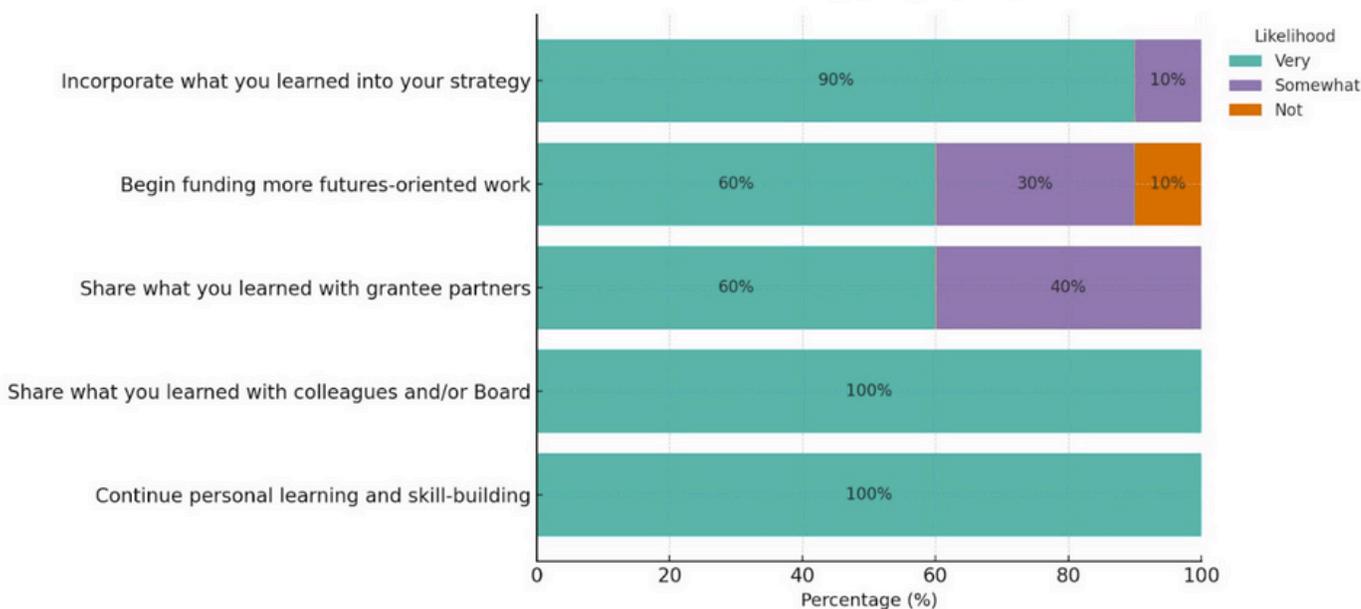
# 7

## Success is not about what we do in the project, it's about what participants do later.

While we may not have achieved the goal of a “shared vision,” that was always a lofty aspiration. The primary purpose was to help funders adapt and apply the learnings and the experience to their own strategies and funding portfolios. And that, we accomplished. In our evaluations, 90% percent of participants told us they are “very likely” to incorporate what they learned into their strategy; 60% said they are “very likely” to begin funding futures-oriented work.

This process also underscored that foresight is itself a form of capacity building. It demands time, space, and distance from daily operations—which feels like a luxury amidst current, urgent demands, but is crucial for deeper reflection. The outputs were not definitive answers but sharper questions and clearer mental models. In the end, the value lay not in forecasting outcomes but in strengthening our ability to perceive, imagine, and act with greater strategic coherence in the face of uncertainty. Imagination work is not a singular perspective or process; it is a culture of provocative thinking. It carries real gifts and limitations, and can be unsatisfying for anyone who hopes the task will be completed or a clear answer or plan will emerge.

As a result of your participation in the Democracy Futures Project, how likely are you to...



# Conclusion

The Democracy Futures Project affirmed that while the future of American democracy is uncertain, it is shaped by the decisions we make today. Our ability to meet the moment will depend on whether we can pair clear-eyed realism with a renewed commitment to imagination, experimentation, and principled curiosity. The workshops revealed just how challenging this is—our habits, our institutions, and even our field’s funding structures are oriented toward the present rather than the future. And yet, participants demonstrated that when we create the time and space to think differently, new possibilities emerge: not as finished blueprints, but as capacities, questions, and commitments to take back into our institutions, portfolios, and communities.

The work ahead is neither simple nor guaranteed. But it is hopeful—hope, in this context, is not optimism; it is agency. It is the recognition that democracy evolves because people choose to evolve it, and that funders have a distinctive role to play in stewarding that evolution with integrity and imagination. If the project taught us anything, it is that we cannot wait for perfect consensus or perfect confidence to begin shaping the future. We must build as we learn, test as we question, and imagine even when the path forward is unclear.

In that sense, the most meaningful outcome of this project is not what we produced together, but what participants will carry forward: a deeper comfort with uncertainty, a stronger commitment to principled experimentation, and a shared understanding that the future can be influenced—if we choose to engage it with humility, courage, and a willingness to see beyond the limits of the present. Democracy’s promise has always been its capacity to adapt. Our task now is to ensure that its future is shaped not by fear or inertia, but by purpose, possibility, and the collective imagination required to make it real.



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# PACE

PHILANTHROPY FOR  
ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

## DEMOCRACY FUTURES



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[PACEfunders.org/futures](https://pacefunders.org/futures)