



PACE

PHILANTHROPY FOR
ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Strategic Plan

2026-2030

Introduction

PACE embarked on this strategic planning journey early in 2025, during a period of rapid change. In addition to navigating seismic political shifts at the federal and state level, PACE managed its first CEO transition in 10 years. Fortunately, we entered this chapter from a position of strength.

Over the past two decades, PACE has earned a reputation for bringing together funders from diverse geographies and viewpoints; offering a space for candid, forward-looking dialogue; and nurturing deep relationships that drive collaboration. Our work, such as the widely cited [Civic Language Perceptions Project](#), demonstrates our ability to generate insights that elevate the field, while our practical resources, such as the [Democracy Primer](#), equip funders to translate ideas into action. These attributes have made PACE a dynamic home for philanthropic exploration and innovation.

However, we cannot rest on our laurels. The profound challenges facing American democracy demand that *all* funders lead with unprecedented creativity, courage, and collaboration. PACE is rising to meet this moment, serving its members and the broader sector by:



Activating our community to make bold, coordinated investments that reinvigorate Americans' commitment to one another and to a shared democratic future;



Mobilizing a broad, diverse coalition of funders to revitalize our communities—and our nation—through sustained civic engagement; and



Forging partnerships among national, regional, and place-based funders to reinvent governance systems and practices so they deliver for all Americans.

PACE is looking forward to **locking arms with funders from all corners of the country and backgrounds** to advance this strategic plan's vision of a citizen-led renewal of democracy and civic life in the United States.

CORE IDENTITY

Who We Are and Why We Exist

CORE PURPOSE

PACE is a community of funders working together to strengthen American democracy through active civic participation.

MISSION

To equip and mobilize funders to strengthen American democracy by fostering vibrant civic participation. PACE members pursue this mission by learning with purpose, collaborating across differences, and experimenting boldly to advance freedom, fairness, and belonging for all.

VISION

PACE funders believe democracy flourishes when people are empowered, engaged, and united in pursuit of the common good. We strive for a future where all Americans feel connected, take responsibility for protecting and regenerating democracy, and contribute to the health of our country and the vitality of our communities.

VALUES

As we work together, the PACE network is guided by these values:

- ✓ **Learning with Purpose:** We approach learning with open minds and curiosity, aiming to discover insights that enhance funders' work and help communities and democracy thrive.
- ✓ **Collaborating across Differences:** We create space for diverse viewpoints and proactively seek partnerships with those who see the world differently. In doing so, we practice pluralism—the cornerstone of a healthy democracy and civic culture.
- ✓ **Experimenting Boldly:** We embrace thoughtful experimentation and innovation in overlooked areas of civic participation and democracy. Knowing that not every problem has a ready-made solution, we meet uncertainty with creativity and a willingness to take smart risks.
- ✓ **Creating Community:** We nurture relationships and care for one another, knowing that time together strengthens our resolve, renews our spirit, and sustains us for the hard work of defending our freedoms and shaping a better future.
- ✓ **Leading with Courage:** We act with integrity and take principled stands for fairness, liberty, and equality. We show courage not only in what we say, but in how we listen, share power, and make decisions with the communities we serve.

Strategic Shifts: Background, Challenges, and Opportunities



The Evolution of PACE

Since 2005, PACE has led efforts to promote philanthropic investment in civic engagement and American democracy. What began as a small affinity group for funders curious about citizen participation and service has grown into a trusted, nationwide platform for philanthropic learning and collaboration.

In 2020, PACE took a major leap forward, transforming into a philanthropic laboratory¹ that embraced experimentation and prioritized learning that is both participatory and actionable. During this phase, PACE generated practical tools, hosted conversations that built bridges across differences, and produced new knowledge through projects like the [Civic Language Perceptions Project](#). This spirit of experimentation grew the network fourfold and strengthened PACE's role as a connector between ideas and action.

Our commitment to learning with purpose is as relevant today as it was in 2020. However, in the intervening years, the fragmentation of our civic culture and strain on our democratic system have become far more acute. In this next strategic period, PACE will equip and activate funders to reverse these trends, igniting a new era of civic participation and opportunity.

The Evolution of PACE (2005-Now)



AFFINITY GROUP

A community exploring complex questions about philanthropy's role in civic engagement, deliberation, and service



LEARNING COMMUNITY

A membership network dedicated to understanding civic engagement and increasing philanthropic investment in it



FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE

An institution advancing funder experimentation, modeling civic space, and learning out loud with the field



PHILANTHROPIC LABORATORY

A community of learning and practice, striving to embed civic engagement as a core element of a strong democracy and civil society



The Challenge

Across the country, trust in democracy and public institutions is eroding. Nearly two out of three Americans are dissatisfied with how democracy is working.² Confidence in government, the media, science, education, and even one another has reached historic lows.³ Americans across the ideological spectrum, especially young people, believe the system is broken or that their voices don't matter.⁴

As a result, many Americans are calling for sweeping change—or, in some cases, expressing openness to autocratic models of governance.⁵ Political violence is rising at an alarming rate⁶, as people lose faith in the political system's ability to resolve their grievances.⁷ Others are disengaging altogether. In every corner of civic life today, participation is receding. Involvement in associations, volunteerism, and community engagement are all down—this is especially true for people without college degrees.⁸ Meanwhile, the country is facing an epidemic of loneliness, political polarization, and despair, with Americans feeling increasingly disconnected from one another and powerless to turn the situation around.

Political entrepreneurs are exploiting this discontent and division. A “politics of mutual scorn”⁹ has taken root, as politicians at all levels of government cast the other party as the enemy to justify breaking democratic norms, violating constitutionally guaranteed rights, and rewriting the rules of the game to gain permanent political advantage. The result is a breakdown in our civic culture, the rule of law, and the system of checks and balances that have sustained American democracy for 250 years.



The Opportunity

Moments of disruption can also be turning points for renewal. Throughout its history, the United States has experienced periods in which the gap between our founding ideals and reality provoked systemic change. Each time, it was ordinary citizens—acting together through movements and civic institutions—that powered progress and got us closer to “a more perfect union.”¹⁰

It is now our generation's turn to rise to the challenge. Over the next 15 years, we will celebrate the 250th anniversaries of American Independence (2026), the ratification of the Constitution (2038), and the Bill of Rights (2041). These seminal moments are not just a chance to mark our shared history—they are a call to action to write the next chapter of American democracy.

As we transition from the old democratic order to something uncharted and uncertain, philanthropy has a dual responsibility: to preserve those parts of the system that are worth saving and protect those harmed by its collapse, while seeding new paradigms, ideas, and visions for what could be.

Fortunately, there is substantial momentum to build on.¹¹ Across the nation, communities are rebuilding trust, young people are finding new ways to participate, and local leaders are reinventing institutions from the ground up. Philanthropy has a crucial role to play, providing flexible support and fostering the conditions that enable these actors to drive meaningful change.

The Goal and Future that Inspire Us

Our Theory of Impact

Over the next five years, PACE aims to contribute to a civic renaissance by activating funders across all sectors and geographies to recognize the renewal of democracy as a shared responsibility and invest in civil society as the driver of change. This includes efforts to protect constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, boost public participation, and shape a democratic future that delivers freedom, fairness, and belonging for all Americans.

Our theory of impact is rooted in the conviction that civic health is not handed down from above; it is generated and sustained by informed, engaged citizens acting through local institutions, voluntary organizations, and professional networks. To address the crisis facing U.S. democracy today, Americans from all walks of life must reclaim the system of self-government and embrace the responsibilities, practices, and values that democratic citizenship requires.

Yet civic engagement does not occur in a vacuum. Citizens need to believe their contributions matter, are valued, and can make a difference. This sense of empowerment—or “civic agency”—is strengthened when government officials and citizens have dignified interactions and solve real problems together. Stories of these successes, in turn, inspire further civic engagement—creating a virtuous cycle in which belonging, collaboration, and renewed faith in democracy reinforce one another.

PACE will fuel this virtuous cycle by providing funders with spaces to learn, experiment, and act boldly together. With insights and support from the PACE community, philanthropy will be better equipped to make strategic, enduring investments that revitalize and safeguard democracy for generations to come.



Our Theory of Impact

A virtuous cycle that powers a healthy civic culture and democracy



ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

An informed, engaged citizenry works with government officials at all levels to solve problems impacting the common good, and holds them accountable for delivering results



RESPONSIVE, EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

Government bodies at all levels enact reforms that create better feedback loops between public officials and citizens and improve their ability to deliver results



UNIFYING CIVIC NARRATIVES

Stories of government and citizens collaborating boost commitment to democratic norms and confidence that change is possible, spurring Americans to get engaged in public life

Ambitious 5 Year Goal

By 2030, PACE will be the indispensable home for funders who embrace fearless experimentation and boundary-crossing collaboration to renew American democracy and civic life. Our goal is for every PACE member to experience transformational connections, with 100% deeply engaged in learning and at least 25% joining forces through action coalitions by the end of this strategic plan.

Through these efforts, PACE will empower philanthropy to become a more agile, imaginative, and courageous force—one that invests in citizen engagement as the foundation of a resilient democracy where all Americans belong and thrive.



The Future We Are Building

It is 2030, and the PACE community is flourishing. Every member is engaged in shared learning, and at least one quarter of members are expanding democracy and civic engagement through action coalitions.

The PACE network is alive with energy. Funders from across the country, with widely divergent viewpoints and strategies, come together with curiosity and respect. They are learning side by side, building trust, and collaborating across differences. When challenges arise in our democracy and civic culture, PACE members do not retreat into silos; they respond together, with courage and creativity.

Because of PACE's leadership, philanthropy as a whole is making smart, sustainable investments in civic renewal. Funding flows reliably and strategically to the issues, people, and organizations demonstrating the greatest potential—rooted in clear theories of change, realistic time horizons, and sound evidence. Funders are anticipating emerging challenges, acting decisively, and taking informed risks to test new ideas and accelerate impact.

U.S. democracy is more vibrant than ever. Communities across the country are finding new ways to participate—voting, serving, deliberating, and enacting local solutions. Government institutions are responding to these demand signals, adopting new strategies to engage the public and share decision-making power. Civil society has the space to operate independently, and is expanding its reach through powerful storytelling and outreach. Americans may disagree on policy, but they share confidence that their voices matter and that democracy can deliver.

This is the future PACE is helping to bring about: a broad-based philanthropic movement whose collective learning, courageous action, and commitment to citizen engagement ensure that “we the people” remain at the heart of the American experiment.

How We Will Get There and What We Will Do Next

Strategic Priorities

1

INCREASE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Provide transformational experiences for all community members while growing with intention. PACE will strategically support each member; create spaces for immersive learning; nurture collaborations between national, regional, and local members; and offer opportunities for collective action—ensuring that every member is meaningfully involved in network activities. At the same time, PACE will engage underserved, place-based, and civic-adjacent funders that want to contribute to the country's democratic renewal and are looking for a welcoming space for peer learning and experimentation.

2

BUILD COALITIONS FOR ACTION

Catalyze and scale action coalitions that unite funders across ideological, geographic, generational, and sectoral differences. PACE will help funders move through chaos and confusion towards clear, decisive, and disciplined action and leadership. We will do so by providing a platform for funders to collaborate on near-, medium-, and long-term efforts to bolster the key pillars of constitutional governance, increase civic participation, and reimagine the future of democracy.

3

STRENGTHEN THE CIVIC FIELD

Serve as a trusted thought leader and convener in civic philanthropy. PACE will generate evidence and data, leverage insights from experts and researchers, offer practical tools, and track developments in the democracy ecosystem and political environment. In doing so, we will equip funders to navigate complexity, respond to crises and opportunities, and invest strategically in America's democratic future.

4

SHAPE A UNIFYING CIVIC NARRATIVE

Amplify an overarching civic story to rekindle Americans' patriotism and dedication to democratic norms. With our strategic communication and social change partners, PACE will invest in developing, testing, and sharing narrative resources that deepen Americans' connection to the freedoms and values essential to a thriving republic and healthy civic culture. PACE will also update and expand its civic language research, refreshing our guidance on how to communicate effectively across differences.

1 Year Goals

2026

INCREASE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Goal: By December 2026, ensure that 60% of PACE members participate in at least one shared learning opportunity (webinar, peer “work it out” session, or member meeting)

Goal: By December 2026, establish a peer learning lab that brings members together for active, purposeful exploration of civic engagement

Goal: By December 2026, recruit 15 new members, prioritizing ideological, geographic, generational, and sectoral diversity

Goal: By December 2026, help broker at least three collaborations between national, regional, and place-based members.

BUILD COALITIONS FOR ACTION

Goal: By March 2026, establish the Civic Philanthropy Incubator as an enduring action coalition with a committed core of 5–8 funders

Goal: By December 2026, support democracy funders to take three joint public actions (e.g., establish a pooled fund, make a public statement, or stand up a rapid response mechanism)

Goal: By September 2026, launch the Future Fellows initiative with the first 10 Fellows placed in state organizations or networks

Goal: By December 2026, convene 10 funders in the Horizon 3 Funder Learning Lab, meeting quarterly to test and share future-oriented democracy strategies

STRENGTHEN THE CIVIC FIELD

Goal: By November 2026, publish and disseminate at least one major field-shaping research product (e.g., updated CLPP report)

Goal: By December 2026, host two cross-network convenings with peer PSOs/funder networks (e.g., DFN, FCCP, PSFG) to model collaboration and accelerate knowledge generation

Goal: By December 2026, produce at least two practical tools or guides (e.g., narrative playbook application guide, futures toolkit) for use by funders within and beyond the PACE network

SHAPE A UNIFYING CIVIC NARRATIVE

Goal: By March 2026, administer and publish an additional round of Civic Language Perceptions Project (CLPP) data with a new research partner

Goal: By December 2026, pilot a dissemination pipeline for the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, reaching at least 100 funders and civic partners, and conduct 3–5 tailored briefings for cross-sector groups (e.g., business, faith, health, and place-based funders)



Ways to Engage With Pace

Individual and Small-Group Learning

Quick, supportive connections to help funders find peers, refine strategies, and act with confidence



Private Member Consultation with PACE Staff

- *What it is:* One-on-one conversation with PACE staff
- *Who it's for:* Members looking for tailored guidance, introductions, or strategic thought partnership
- *Purpose:* Help orient funders, answer their pressing questions, and connect them to relevant peers and resource

Peer “Work-It-Out” Sessions

- *What it is:* Small, facilitated spaces where members bring challenges and brainstorm together
- *Who it's for:* Members at any stage seeking peer feedback and real-time problem solving
- *Purpose:* Normalize shared learning, strengthen member relationships, and surface emerging ideas

Webinars

- *What it is:* Accessible learning sessions, sometimes organized by members themselves, to share research, spotlight issues, or amplify insights
- *Who it's for:* Anyone in the broader PACE network seeking exposure to new ideas or expertise
- *Purpose:* Spread knowledge, platform member learning, and connect funders to topical conversations



Network Gatherings and Creative Exploration

Spaces for discovering together, building perspectives, and shifting mindsets

Member Meetings

- *What it is:* Regular convenings of the PACE membership, virtually or in-person
- *Who it's for:* All members, especially those seeking to stay connected to the community
- *Purpose:* Strengthen network ties, reflect on field-wide priorities, and surface collaboration opportunities

Imagination Sprints

- *What it is:* Time-bound, creative workshops designed to quickly surface fresh ideas and prototype solutions
- *Who it's for:* Funders curious about experimenting with new possibilities in a low-stakes environment
- *Purpose:* Generate energy, test bold “what if” questions, and plant seeds for future collaboration

Applied Practice and Collaboration

Cohorts and collaborations for funders ready to test new models and take action

Peer Learning Labs

- *What it is:* Structured cohorts for testing and refining philanthropic practices in real-time
- *Who it's for:* Funders seeking to experiment and learn alongside peers
- *Purpose:* Translate ideas into practice, generate models, and share learning and grantmaking activities across the network

Action Coalitions

- *What it is:* Collective platforms where funders pool resources and align strategies around democracy and civic engagement challenges
 - Incubator: Responding with urgency and unity to defend the core pillars of constitutional democracy from immediate threats
 - Future Fellows: Embedding future-thinking civic leaders in all 50 states to prompt imagination and coalescing around long-term structural reforms
- *Who it's for:* Funders with capacity and appetite for collective action
- *Purpose:* Achieve more than any one funder could alone by reaching tipping points in the field



Field Leadership

Opportunities for funders to co-create data, evidence, and strategies that advance the field of civic philanthropy

Research and Evidence Initiatives

- *What it is:* Collective efforts to build a shared body of data, evaluation, and insights
- *Who it's for:* Funders who value evidence-based practice and want to contribute to field knowledge and evolution
- *Purpose:* Validate effective approaches, spread learning across the sector, and advance the field



Conclusion

As PACE looks ahead to 2030, our strategy centers on four interconnected priorities: increasing member engagement, building coalitions for action, strengthening the civic field, and shaping a unifying civic narrative. Together, these efforts aim to activate citizens, equip funders, and empower civil society to safeguard fundamental rights and revitalize democracy for generations to come.

We enter this next chapter at a pivotal moment, when trust in institutions is fragile but the desire for renewal runs deep. By fostering connection, experimentation, and collective courage, PACE and its members can turn uncertainty into opportunity and help forge a democratic future grounded in freedom, fairness, and belonging for all Americans.



Endnotes

1 PACE Medium: [What is a philanthropic laboratory?](#)

2 Gallup: [Satisfaction With U.S. Democracy Edges Up From Record Low](#)

3 Pew: [Americans' Deepening Mistrust of Institutions](#)

4 Pew: [Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics](#); [Next100: Young Adults Think America's Political System Isn't Working](#)

5 Surveys have consistently found that when people perceive their governments as ineffective or unresponsive, many begin to prefer a "strong leader" who can bypass parliaments and elections.

6 YouGov: [What Americans really think about political violence](#)

7 Research into political assassinations indicates that the cycle of political violence will continue (or escalate) unless aggrieved people's faith in the political system can be restored: [Explaining Support for Political Violence: Grievance and Perceived Opportunity](#)

8 [American Volunteer Rates Are on the Decline](#); [Poll Finds That Americans Care Less About 'Community Engagement'](#); [Government Is Largely to Blame](#); [Disconnected: The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life](#)

9 American Academy of Arts & Sciences: [Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture](#)

10 Historically, grassroots organizations, religious institutions and congregations, labor unions and professional associations, and student groups have been at the forefront of expanding enfranchisement and propelling democratic progress.

11 American Academy of Arts & Sciences: [Habits of Heart and Mind: Building Communities of Practice: Case Studies](#)



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