



# Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization, and the Need for Responsible Pluralism

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1** Introduction and Overview
- 10** Part I: How Did We Get Here?
  - A. Pluralism and the American Political Tradition
  - B. Philanthropy in a Polarizing America
- 29** Part II: Where Do We Go From Here?
  - A. Harbingers of a Better Way Forward
  - B. Six Steps Toward Responsible Pluralism
- 42** Part III: Case Study of The Hewlett Foundation's  
U.S. Democracy Grantmaking, 2013-2022
- 58** Coda: Responsible Pluralism in a Populist Age
- 61** Acknowledgments

## Introduction and Overview

**PHILANTHROPY DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY in America is at its high-water mark and flowing with unprecedented urgency. In the presidential election year of 2020, foundation funding for democracy surged to \$2.5 billion, up from \$1 billion in 2012. In 2024, we can expect the funding total to rise even higher, buoyed by an influx of funding from wealthy individuals. More than 170 institutional and individual funders, for example, have signed the new All By April pledge. They are determined “to help ensure voters are informed, participation is diverse, and that the American people can be confident in the integrity of our election system.” The signatories have committed to making their grants to nonprofits advancing these lofty ambitions by April 2024 to ensure their funding will make a difference by November.<sup>1</sup>**

Notwithstanding this outpouring of philanthropy, democracy in America continues to falter. Indeed, it is fair to say that the latter trend is driving the former. Politicians in Washington remain mired in hyper-partisanship. We face mounting threats and instances of political violence fueled by online vitriol, conspiracy theories, and demagoguery. In 2016, Americans elected an unabashedly illiberal populist to the White House. Donald Trump’s bid to overturn his subsequent defeat in 2020 may have failed, but not before a mob he incited ransacked the Capitol. Nevertheless, he is once again his party’s nominee. Joe Biden’s promises of unity and a return to normalcy remain unfulfilled. Perhaps those aims now exceed the grasp of any leader or party. It is not yet clear how the attempted assassination of Trump and Biden passing the baton to Kamala Harris late in the race will impact the 2024 election. In any event, we are not heading out of the woods but going deeper into them.

Polarization pervades these developments. At the elite and mass levels, on the right and left of our politics, a growing number of Americans distrust, disdain, and fear their partisan opponents. Yet we also have reason to believe the polarization story oversimplifies and masks a pluralistic society characterized by many dimensions of difference. Most Americans — roughly two-thirds of the population — do not reside in the tribalistic, politically obsessed camps of the left and right. Instead, they comprise what the nonprofit More in Common has called an “Exhausted Majority” that falls in between them. Among this larger and less activated set of people, politics is not a constant focus, and more varied and pragmatic viewpoints prevail.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Retrospective foundation funding data was sourced in November 2022 from Candid’s “Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy” website, which has since been retired. See also the Democracy Fund report, “[Field in Focus: The State of Pro-Democracy Institutional Philanthropy](#),” January 22, 2024, and the [All By April](#) website.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hawkins, et al., “[Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape](#),” More in Common, 2018. Full disclosure: I serve as the chair of More in Common’s U.S. board.

One way philanthropy could help us resolve polarization — or at least better cope with it — would be to enable fuller expression of our built-in, multi-faceted diversity. Supporting a robust pluralism in civil society would help counter and constructively diffuse the Manichean, zero-sum worldviews unleashed by polarization. This is a venerable perspective, albeit one fallen from favor in this tribal era. This paper explores why we can and how we should revitalize it. Its central contention is that not only *can* we restore pluralism as the organizing principle for philanthropy and civil society, we *must* do so to salvage liberal democracy in America.

### **Philanthropy and the Tragedy of the Commons in Our Public Life**

The envisioned recovery will require shifts in the perspectives and practices of a critical mass of philanthropists, beginning with those seeking to strengthen democracy itself. We can safely assume, for example, that many of the funders participating in the All by April campaign intermingle their support for democracy with de facto partisan opposition to Trump’s GOP. They may observe the letter but not so much the spirit of the legal ban on electioneering by philanthropists and their grantees, worsening cynicism about democracy and philanthropy alike.<sup>3</sup>

Philanthropic funders freely and rationally pursue their own interests and agendas while collectively undermining the health of the polity whose institutions and policies they seek to influence.

Beyond the democracy field, there is a much broader group of philanthropic funders who will also need to shift their perspectives and practices. It includes those focused on underwriting policy and systems changes in the areas of climate change, criminal justice, education, immigration, political economy, racial equity, etc. Philanthropy flowing into these and other domains affects the health of democracy, too — and, increasingly, not for the better.

Across multiple issue areas, philanthropists on both ends of the ideological spectrum are contributing to a tragedy of the commons in our public life. They freely and rationally pursue their own interests and agendas while collectively undermining the health of the polity whose institutions and policies they seek to influence.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, they deplete the capacity of our political system to produce the

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<sup>3</sup> See Billy Wimsatt, Founder and Executive Director of the Movement Voter Fund, a 501(c)3 signatory of All by April: “[Sending Up the Bat Signal: What Philanthropy Must Do to Ensure Democracy Wins in 2024](#),” *Inside Philanthropy*, October 18, 2023; Solidaire Network press release, “[All by April Pledge for Free, Fair, and Representative Elections](#),” February 13, 2024; Alex Daniels, “[A Plea from Progressive Foundation CEOs: Make Election Grants Now](#),” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 1, 2024; Ross Douthat, “[What J.D. Vance Believes](#),” *New York Times*, June 13, 2024, Robert Kuttner, “[The Left’s Fragile Foundations](#),” *American Prospect*, July 30, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the concept, see Garrett Hardin, “[The Tragedy of the Commons](#),” *Science*, December 13, 1968, 1243-1248.

broad and enduring majorities needed to settle major policy questions in a republic of continental scale. The uncompromising, ideologically-driven advocates and activists underwritten by philanthropy keep the political parties tethered to the poles of our politics. Meanwhile, most voters' preferences remain clustered between the center-left and the center-right, falling into the yawning gaps between the policy agendas of our polarized parties.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of which side funders are on, the resulting political stalemate is self-defeating in three respects. First, the aggregate zeal of the grantees that philanthropists support makes it harder for the political party proximate to them to gain a sufficiently stable foothold from which it can govern. Philanthropists' policy preferences thus remain in limbo, backed by a less-than-compelling coalition.

Second, beyond these self-administered political setbacks lay more fundamental losses for the polity as a whole. Polarization continues to undermine the health and stability of democracy in America. A recent Pew survey found 85% of Americans say their elected officials do not care "what people like me" think.<sup>6</sup> That is not an indicator of a flourishing democracy.

Third, the more that prominent institutional and individual funders are seen as just another set of partisan actors, the more that the legitimacy of philanthropy itself will be questioned. Indeed, recent years have seen a groundswell of voices on the left and right calling for constraining or even revoking the degrees of freedom philanthropy now enjoys. Philanthropy is a field of endeavor that, at its best, supports democracy in America, yet always sits in some tension with it. To preserve the leeway that democracy has granted them, philanthropists must ensure that those tensions are on balance creative and constructive rather than dogmatic and destructive.

Multiple factors have contributed to political polarization and the ensuing crisis of democracy. Relentless policy advocacy and activism underwritten by philanthropy is but one such influence. That said, many funders so engaged will need to change course if we are to stop the tragedy of the commons in our public life and begin to reclaim what has been lost.

This paper is for potential members of this consequential cadre. They include open-minded foundation leaders, staff, trustees, individual and family donors, and philanthropic advisors willing to consider the need for and possibility of the shifts proposed in the following pages. This paper gives them a roadmap. It traces how philanthropy has gotten off-track in supporting democracy in America and how we can move forward to realize the promise of pluralism.

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<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Fowler, "[America's Silent Majority Is Alive and Well — And More Moderate Than Either Party](#)," *Newsweek*, October 14, 2022; and Fowler, et al. "[Moderates](#)," *American Political Science Review*, 2023, 643-660.

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research Center, "[Americans' Dismal View of the Nation's Politics](#)," September 19, 2023, 59.

## Pluralism and its Critics

Pluralism as used here describes both a set of facts and a set of values. The facts of pluralism are the presence of multiple and cross-cutting communities, groups, races, ethnicities, creeds, classes, regions, associations, and factions in society. These various elements reflect and reinforce different, competing, and often incommensurate beliefs, agendas, and interests. The values of pluralism are what enable diverse and quarrelsome societies to prosper or at least hang together in the face of these facts. They include toleration, forbearance, persuasion, reciprocity, and the appreciation, if not celebration, of difference.

For more than a decade now, I have engaged in multiple efforts in civil society that have sought to acknowledge the facts and uphold the values of pluralism. From 2013 to 2022, I served as the director of the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative and, subsequently, its U.S. Democracy Program. The team I led sought to counter polarization by supporting ideas and institutions to help enable pluralism to prosper in our democracy. I have also contributed as a funder, participant, and / or advisor in several philanthropic collaborations, pooled funds, and affinity groups working generally along these same lines.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I have sought to define and defend the premises of pluralism, and lift up innovative theorists and practitioners of it, through my blog, [The Art of Association](#).

I have learned all too well from these experiences that pluralism is a hotly contested concept. Reasonable people disagree on whether it presents a viable way forward. We will encounter and respond to their objections throughout the discussion that follows. However, in the spirit of fairness and transparency, we should acknowledge the most telling critiques at the outset and preview the responses that we have for them.

Pluralism is a hotly contested concept. Reasonable people disagree on whether it presents a viable way forward.

One group of critics, primarily on the liberal left, argues that polarization in the U.S. is asymmetric, a problem driven largely by the ideological outliers in the Republican Party. Unless and until the GOP suffers a string of electoral defeats, these critics contend, placing hope in pluralism is politically naive.<sup>8</sup> This is at heart a political critique. Given that philanthropists and grantees cannot engage in elec-

tioning, it is challenging for them to operationalize it in any straightforward way. This viewpoint also overlooks the extent to which those in the vanguard of the Democratic Party have themselves

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<sup>7</sup> They include Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, the Democracy Funders Network, the New Pluralists Collaborative, the Election Trust Initiative, and the Trust for Civic Life.

<sup>8</sup> For the classic statement of this critique, see Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It Is Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

become ideological outliers on many social, cultural, and economic issues — hence the steady migration of working-class voters to the GOP.

Further to the left, another set of critics see philanthropy as an inherently undemocratic and elitist activity. As a result, they regard philanthropically-sponsored pluralism as the unhealthy fruit of a plutocratic tree — or, increasingly, one poisoned by racialized capitalism and colonialism. From this vantage point, left to its own devices, philanthropy reinforces rather than resolves patterns of domination.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, many people working in philanthropy have come to espouse this worldview. The unremitting quest for justice that animates those holding it is better at rooting out heretics than it is at winning over converts. Their insistence on sorting a complex world into stark binaries — racism vs. antiracism, colonizers vs. colonized — makes it hard for them to collaborate, let alone build majorities, with those who attend to nuance.<sup>10</sup>

On the right, Trumpian populists also condemn pluralism. As political scientist Jan-Werner Muller has observed, “in addition to being antielitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people. ... The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always exclusively *moral*.”<sup>11</sup> National conservatives, the intellectuals and wonks of the MAGA movement, see pluralism as inextricably intertwined with a failed liberalism. Both have been supplanted by a stifling progressivism that now commands the cultural heights in higher education, mainstream media, the professions (including philanthropy), and the administrative state. The times call not for pluralism but an ideological counter-strike.<sup>12</sup>

Here too there is a paradox. The national conservatives’ unrelenting diagnosis of “American carnage” has shone a light on people and places in the country that elites have long ignored. But pushed to the extreme, as it usually is, this critique suggests there is not much about the nation today that is conservable or worth conserving. The alternative visions that many prominent national conservatives cast for the good society (e.g., Viktor Orban’s Hungary or a Catholic theocracy) will not suit most of their thoroughly pluralized fellow citizens. And after January 6, 2021, we have to ask: Can America ever be made great again if elections only count as free and fair when your side wins?

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<sup>9</sup> See Vu Le “[No, Not All Philanthropic Views Are Good, and Many Don’t Deserve Our Respect](#),” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 20, 2023; Edgar Villanueva, “[Debunking the Myth of Philanthropic Pluralism](#),” Letter to the Editor, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 26, 2023. See also Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2018, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> See Darren Walker, “[In Defense of Nuance](#),” Ford Foundation blog, September 19, 2021 and Dylan Rodriguez, “[‘Nuance’ as Carceral Worldmaking: A Response to Darren Walker](#),” *Abolition*, September 28, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Jan-Werner Muller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3, his emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> See Chris DeMuth, “[Why America Needs National Conservatism](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2021; Bill Schambra, “[Time for the Right to Rethink and Reconsider All Around](#),” *The Giving Review*, November 22, 2021. See also Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

These sharp critics aside, perhaps the most influential opponents of pluralism are those who are semi-sympathetic but ultimately regard it as a “meh” concept. They believe pluralism prioritizes civility, bipartisan bonhomie, and the mushy middle ground on policy matters, all the while passively tolerating the intolerable on moral issues. As one colleague recently shared with me,

“I fear that pluralism sounds a bit like what some called the ‘white peace’ following the Civil War — White Americans could knit themselves together in one country again by both agreeing to throw Blacks under the bus and ignoring Jim Crow, etc. I do not believe pluralism is that, but I think that is how it is seen.”

Having fielded similar lines of criticism over the years, I can attest this is indeed how pluralism is regarded by many people who, by dint of their values and beliefs, should be standing in its corner. This conventional wisdom highlights the need to re-establish the moral credibility of pluralism as a way for philanthropists to think about the work in which they are engaged.

### **Toward Responsible Pluralism**

One initial step we can take is revisiting the philosophical underpinnings of pluralism. Far from being an idealistic or naive disposition, it is well-suited for a diverse liberal democracy in dark times. Pluralism properly understood is profoundly realistic, grounded in a recognition of the fundamental differences in values and beliefs that inevitably separate people, not least American citizens, from each other. Pluralism flinches neither from the necessity nor the difficulty of reconciling these differences in ways that allow a disputatious people to live peaceably together and ward off tyranny. As Isaiah Berlin, the leading philosophical expounder of pluralism, has observed,

“The belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realised is demonstrably false. If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict — and of tragedy — can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition.”<sup>13</sup>

Rather than glossing over fundamental differences of principle, pluralism pushes us to choose between and among them where we can, balance them where we must, then take responsibility for our choices. There is nothing about pluralism that prevents us from taking moral stances. But we are also obliged to recognize that others in the political community can reasonably and invariably

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty*, Henry Hardy, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 214. See also Joshua L. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 189-96.



will assume different stances; ours will not necessarily trump theirs. The resulting impasse is where the hard work of politics in a liberal democracy begins.

One recent, noteworthy effort to uphold pluralism and philanthropy's role in supporting it affirmed the importance of funders backing different causes and defended their freedom to do so. In 2023, leaders of six ideologically diverse foundations and philanthropic associations published a manifesto in defense of what they called "philanthropic pluralism." It contended that,

"During these turbulent times, diversity in philanthropy can help shape and inform decisions about the most important issues of the day. It is through this diversity that philanthropy can proffer, study, and test a multiplicity of ideas and approaches to confront society's greatest challenges."

Pluralism properly understood is profoundly realistic, grounded in a recognition of the fundamental differences in values and beliefs that inevitably separate people, not least American citizens, from each other.

The co-authors rejected the growing expectation that philanthropists must "pledge allegiance to one or another narrow set of prescribed views" in our polarized society. They held instead that "philanthropy as a whole makes its greatest contribution to democracy when all foundations and donors engage in the unfettered pursuit of their own mission, interests, and prerogatives."<sup>14</sup>

The call for responsible pluralism in this paper adds a nuanced but nonetheless critical missing element to the idea of philanthropic pluralism. Responsible pluralism contends that philanthropists have a stake in the liberal democracy in which they operate — and that they bear no small responsibility for its legitimacy and sustainability. This responsibility cannot be discharged simply by funders pursuing their missions without restraint. Indeed, that so many philanthropists are already engaged in such an "unfettered pursuit" has led to the tragedy of the commons described above.

This paper argues that philanthropists are responsible for the health of the polity in two related but distinct meanings of the term. First, philanthropists must be responsible stewards. This means grantmakers should preserve and enhance the institutions and culture of democracy in America, even as they use them to advance their goals. Second, citizens, associations, jour-

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<sup>14</sup> Heather Templeton Dill, Kathleen Enright, Sam Gill, Brian Hooks, Darren Walker, and Elise Westhoff, "[We Disagree on Many Things, But We Speak With One Voice in Defense of Philanthropic Pluralism](#)," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 13, 2023.

As with Spider-Man, so too with philanthropy in a liberal democracy: With great power comes great responsibility.

nalists, and other actors in civil society can and should hold philanthropists responsible for the impact they are having on democracy and civic life. Practicing responsible pluralism is a way for philanthropists to meet their obligations and ensure their actions hold up under the appropriate democratic scrutiny. As with Spider-Man, so too with

philanthropy in a liberal democracy: With great power comes great responsibility.

### Plan for the Paper

The paper consists of three parts. Part I traces how we got to where we are today. It takes as its point of departure the origins and initial development of pluralism in the American political tradition. It then reviews how the longstanding and normative role that pluralism has played as an organizing principle for civil society and philanthropy has come unwound. From the Progressive Era to our own time, countervailing arguments about philanthropy's role in democracy as well as broader political developments have combined to loosen pluralism's sway. We will see how, since the mid-1960s, philanthropy has come to be implicated in the spread of polarization — in some cases inadvertently, in others quite intentionally.

Part II explores where we should go from here. It begins by surveying green shoots of more responsible pluralism that are already taking root. It then introduces six steps philanthropists can take to pursue responsible pluralism and do their part in repairing the tragedy of the commons in our public life. The first five steps involve philanthropists admitting there is a problem, practicing pluralism from the inside out, building expansive and varied coalitions, granting the initiative alongside funding, and thinking in decades, not years. Regardless of their issue areas, funders underwriting policy and systems changes need to take these steps to assume their fair share of responsibility for the health of the polity. But we also need an ample subset of these funders to take the additional sixth step: strengthening democracy and civic life.

Part III is a case study of how the Hewlett Foundation endeavored to take all six of these steps in its initial efforts to bolster U.S. democracy from 2013 to 2022. Having directed this work, I will narrate the case study in the first person. The goal is to bring the steps to life by surveying why and how we proceeded as we did, what we learned, and how we corrected our course along the way. The direction and way other funders might take these steps will no doubt vary based on their particular values, goals, capabilities, ways of working, resources, etc. If this account of our journey helps others considering similar or divergent paths make better choices, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Before proceeding, we should note that the paper will zero in on a subset of philanthropy. It focuses on larger-scale grantmaking (e.g., six- and seven-figure grants) by institutions (typical-

ly private foundations), families, and individuals funding advocacy and activism to bring about policy and systems changes. Smaller-scale, charitable, and religious contributions undertaken by many more Americans and community-based funders are critically important for the legitimacy of philanthropy and ultimately the preservation of pluralism. Such everyday giving, however, is not the focus of this paper.

Moreover, philanthropy — at least as defined here and as regulated by the tax code — does not include funding that supports or opposes candidates or parties in elections. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with politicians, parties, and the electoral campaigns they pursue. They are essential components of democracy. I have written elsewhere about how they can be improved.<sup>15</sup> The specific problem this paper grapples with arises when philanthropy leaves civil society and, intentionally or not, enters the realm of partisanship.

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<sup>15</sup> See [“A Time for Statesmanship,”](#) *National Affairs*, Summer 2021; [“A Madisonian Party System,”](#) *National Affairs*, Fall 2023; [“Finally, Moderate Republicans Will Have a Say,”](#) *Democracy*, Fall 2023; [“Leading to Govern,”](#) *Democracy*, Summer 2024.

## Part I: How Did We Get Here?

This part of the paper sets the stage for the subsequent recommendations for responsible pluralism. We begin by revisiting the first principles of pluralism — and the practices they still entail for democracy in America — as they were originally developed by James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville. We then consider a longstanding and resonant progressive critique of these principles and practices. This alternative line of thought has focused on the risks of philanthropy-driven plutocracy. We draw upon its logic to illuminate the emergence of a clear and present danger: philanthropy-driven polarization. We trace the emergence of this danger over the past six decades, during which American government and politics have steadily become more polarized. Philanthropy did not cause this polarization. Over time, however, grantmakers have become increasingly implicated in the intensifying political conflict through the advocacy and activism they support. With more philanthropists effectively enlisting as combatants on one side or the other of the partisan conflict, the legitimacy of their grantmaking — and of philanthropy generally — has suffered in the crossfire.

### A. Pluralism and the American Political Tradition

Pluralism as an ethos is woven deep into the American political tradition. Although the Founders and early theorists of the Republic did not use the term in their day, the concept of pluralism was central in their thinking. Indeed, pluralism was perhaps the biggest departure embodied in the U.S. Constitution and the regime it established. Before the Founding, political science held that large republics were an oxymoron. The conventional wisdom — and the crux of the Anti-Federalists' arguments against ratifying the Constitution — was that republics had to be small and homogenous to survive. Otherwise, it would be too difficult to have representatives who were sufficiently in touch with and reflected the will of citizens to achieve a serviceable consensus and take collective action.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Founders and early theorists of the Republic did not use the term in their day, the concept of pluralism was central in their thinking. Indeed, pluralism was perhaps the biggest departure embodied in the U.S. Constitution.

Necessity pushed the Founders to take a different approach. For the fledgling country to hang together despite myriad internal rivalries, all the while holding off its international rivals, the Founders had to constitute a republic on a continental scale. Making a virtue out of this necessity, the Constitution encompassed the different and divergent cultures, creeds, economies, and interests across the original 13 states.

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert J. Storing, *What The Anti-Federalists Were For: The Political Thought of the Opponents of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 15-23.

The Founders thus inverted prevailing arguments about how to structure republican governments so they would endure. Madison captured this new logic in Federalist #10:

“Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”<sup>17</sup>

Madison and the Founders did not see the resulting pluralism and the “clashing interests” that would accompany it in the new republic as good things in and of themselves. Rather, they regarded them as inevitable considering human nature and the requirements of a free society. Citizens would always disagree about how they should go about governing themselves. As Madison observed, “the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man.” They could not be removed without intolerable violations of freedom.

The only feasible solution for the “mischiefs of faction” was to control their effects. The Constitution did this by including the widest possible array of factions (and underlying interests, worldviews, and agendas), then setting them in motion to compete with and among each other. Only broad and enduring coalitions that spanned many such groups, and thus (presumably) more closely approximated the public interest, could and should influence what representatives in the federal government did. The Founders’ reliance on pluralism thus served as “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.”

Madison and the Constitution he helped shape and ratify are frequently criticized as being anti-majoritarian and thus undemocratic, setting the stage for gridlock, not governance. But such criticism misunderstands both the circumstances that prompted Madison, et al., to act and the dynamics of their constitutional design. The aim of the Constitutional Convention was to enable Americans to govern themselves as they simply could not under the Articles of Confederation, with its requirements for consensus decision-making.

Madison above all recognized that in a republican form of government, the majority would ultimately rule, one way or another. As Greg Weiner has remarked, “On Madison’s reasoning, debating whether the majority should rule made no more sense than debating the normative dimensions of the law of gravity.”<sup>18</sup> However — and this is key — the nature of the majorities was critical. In the ex-

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<sup>17</sup> James Madison, Federalist No. 10: “[The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection](#),” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 22 November 1787. Retrieved from the Avalon Project, Yale University. Subsequent quotations from the next two paragraphs come from this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Greg Weiner, *Madison’s Metronome: The Constitution, Majority Rule, and the Tempo of American Politics* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 9-38, quotation on 29

tended republic, with its diverse and competing elements, Madison believed majorities had to be broad and enduring. Making laws based on narrow and fleeting majorities was apt to endanger rather than serve the public interest.

Tocqueville went further than Madison and the Founders as he made sense of what he observed while traveling in the rapidly democratizing America of the early 1830s. Rather than making a virtue out of necessity when it came to pluralism, Tocqueville regarded it (at least in the American context) as a good thing. In his view, pluralism served as a foundational underpinning of democracy in America, reflecting and reinforcing the nature of the regime.

Everywhere the French aristocrat looked, he was struck by Americans' penchant for forming what he termed "civil associations." He was amazed by all the associating that he witnessed:

"Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups. ... Americans associate to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to erect churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes. This is how they create hospitals, prisons, and schools. If, finally, they wish to publicize a truth or foster a sentiment with the help of a great example, they associate."<sup>19</sup>

Americans' habit of and knack for associating resulted from the relative equality of conditions that served as the distinguishing feature of modern democracy. Amid that equality, forming civil associations was the only way to take the collective action required to solve problems that Americans faced together. Whereas in Tocqueville's native France the government could take the lead, and in England the aristocratic class could, in the expanse of America citizens were left to their own devices. They had to join forces and rely on strength in numbers among more or less equal citizens — i.e., associate — to get things done.

Two more indirect but critical benefits resulted from how Americans practiced "the art of association" in Tocqueville's estimation. First, association enabled Americans to solve problems together in their communities in ways suitably informed by local knowledge without having to turn to and rely on the central government to do so. "What political power could ever hope to equal the countless multitude of small ventures in which American citizens participate every day through their associations?" Tocqueville feared the rise of an overbearing state that would reduce the freedom and initiative that an equal citizenry and the democracy they comprised needed to thrive. "The morals and intelligence of a democratic people would be no less at risk than its business and industry if government were everywhere to take the place of associations."

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<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Chapter 5, "On the Use That Americans Make of Association in Civil Life," Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (New York: the Library of America, 2004). Subsequent quotations in the next two paragraphs come from this chapter.

Second, by tackling problems together through their associations, Americans learned how to be the citizens and leaders that a democratic society needs. Yes, these associations were often messy and worked at cross purposes. But by engaging individually and collectively in the trial and error, give and take, and leading and following that their associations entailed, Americans

By engaging individually and collectively in the trial and error, give and take, and leading and following that their associations entailed, Americans became more capable of sustaining their democracy.

became more capable of sustaining their democracy. Reflecting on this pattern, Tocqueville contended that “feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart expands, and the human spirit develops only through the reciprocal action of human beings on one another.”

Readers on the left might wonder about the relevance of our survey of the origins and initial development of pluralism in the American political tradition given the small “c” conservatism of Madison and Tocqueville. It is important to note, however, that many of the great movements that have brought about progressive and

democratizing changes in American history have embodied the logics they first laid out. These efforts include the abolition of slavery, the social and economic reforms of the Progressive and New Deal eras, and the Civil Rights Movement.

The initial impulses toward these ends had their origins in Tocquevillian forms of association in civil society, and they culminated in the enactments of broad and compelling Madisonian majorities in government. Thus, leaders like Frederick Douglass, Jane Addams, Frances Perkins, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have practiced and further elaborated the pluralism that Madison and Tocqueville initially theorized.

How has pluralism related to philanthropy over the course of American history? Leading historians have observed that, given the many forms American philanthropy has taken and the myriad causes supported by it, it has generally embodied and supported the ethos of pluralism. In his history of philanthropy in America, for example, Olivier Zunz notes it has rested not on pure altruism but on Tocqueville’s notion of enlightened self-interest. Not only wealthy elites but also the broad mass of people have conceived of and engaged in philanthropy along these lines. Their giving has thus more or less reflected the diversity of the people, groups, and causes intentionally encompassed by Madison’s extended republic.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Soskis, in surveying historical ideas about the philanthropic causes Americans should promote, underscores the longstanding prevalence (until recently, at least) of what he calls “charitable cause pluralism.”

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<sup>20</sup> Olivier Zunz, *Philanthropy in America: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 295-96.

This is “a belief that the wide diversity of causes supported by donors is itself a good that should be defended and preserved.”<sup>21</sup>

Rob Reich, an academic political theorist, contends that whether philanthropy supports pluralism largely determines its legitimacy in a democracy. He notes the challenge of reconciling essentially autonomous and wealthy philanthropists underwriting causes they prioritize with the ideals of equality, accountability, and shared self-governance central to democracy. Given this tension, Reich lays out two possible rationales under which large-scale philanthropy is defensible. First: Philanthropy supports a diverse and broadly representative pluralism in civil society, thereby decentralizing the production of social goods and serving as a bulwark of liberal democracy. Second: Philanthropists use their independence, and the diversity of thought it supports, to underwrite the discovery of ideas and solutions that society needs to solve big problems. If philanthropy is serving one or both of these purposes, we can view it as being consistent with and supportive of liberal democracy.<sup>22</sup>

A lot rides, then, on philanthropy’s *bona fides* in reflecting and reproducing pluralism. Here we must reckon with the longest-standing critique of pluralism as an organizing principle for philanthropy and civil society more broadly. This argument is part of the American political tradition, too. It was first articulated in the Progressive Era and continues to resonate today. Whatever philanthropy’s pretensions to support a pluralistic society, the critique holds, it practically serves as an instrument of plutocracy. This contention rests on two strands of assessment that have steadily intertwined.

One strand originates in criticism of the independent influence of the wealthy in a democratic society. It initially emerged as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller began granting out fortunes they had garnered during the Gilded Age. That such bare-knuckled corporate titans could also presume to be philanthropists dedicated to the good of humanity struck their critics as risible. This strand appears today in the widely held and vocal suspicion of the philanthropy of Bill Gates, Charles Koch, George Soros, and Mark Zuckerberg, etc.

The longest-standing critique of pluralism as an organizing principle for philanthropy and civil society holds that, whatever philanthropy’s pretensions to support a pluralistic society, it serves as an instrument of plutocracy.

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Soskis, “[Charitable Cause Pluralism and Prescription in Historical Perspective](#),” *Urban Institute* research report, October 2023, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Reich, *Just Giving: How Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 7-11, 128-133, 152-168.



The other strand of the critique stems from progressive opposition to Madisonian pluralism and the theory of politics that undergirds it as a framework for a just society. Critics contend that pluralism masks the power of an economic elite that is best positioned to prosper in a society organized along these lines. Charles Beard gave a powerful voice to this in the Progressive Era. The political scientist E.E. Schattschneider put this problem in a nutshell with his quip that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”<sup>23</sup>

These two strands — that philanthropy serves the interest of the wealthy, and that pluralism in civil society disguises their influence — feature prominently in recent books written for popular audiences. Some authors are openly ambivalent about the blend of social benefits that accompany “wealth, power, and philanthropy in a new Gilded Age.” Still, they hold out hope and offer reflections on “how philanthropy went wrong and how to fix it.”<sup>24</sup> Others write as polemicists who decry the naive, pretentious, and self-serving “elite charade of changing the world” and call for “decolonizing wealth.”<sup>25</sup>

Writing in a more scholarly vein, Reich shares the conclusion that philanthropy in America is in fact skewed to serve the interests of plutocracy, not those of pluralism. He argues persuasively that the bias is buttressed by and makes it hard to justify tax code provisions that disproportionately subsidize and grant autonomy to the philanthropy of wealthy Americans. Reich ultimately concludes that, considering these patterns, we need a new “framework for evaluating what the role of philanthropy should be in a liberal democratic society.”<sup>26</sup>

Another academic political theorist, Emma Saunders-Hastings, draws even more stringent conclusions. She argues it is impossible to resolve the tensions between philanthropy and democracy. Philanthropy may be a private virtue at the individual level, but it is a public vice at the societal level. First, it weakens collective and democratic self-governance by elevating the voices and influence of some citizens above others. Second, it leads to paternalism and subordination between and among equal citizens.<sup>27</sup>

Saunders-Hastings’ analysis creates room to indict the influence of large-scale philanthropy on democracy on counts that go beyond the traditional self-interested plutocracy critique. She contends “the problem is not (or not only) bad outcomes or selfishly motivated donors but rather the rich usurping

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<sup>23</sup> See Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913); E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1960), 35. See also Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> See David Callahan, *The Givers: Wealth, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017); Amy Schiller, *The Price of Humanity: How Philanthropy Went Wrong and How to Fix It* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> See Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York, Vintage Books, 2019); Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*.

<sup>26</sup> Reich, *Just Giving*, 200.

<sup>27</sup> Emma Saunders-Hastings, *Private Virtues, Public Vices: Philanthropy and Democratic Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

control over society's common life and matters of common concern." This dynamic in turn "threatens to erode political equality over time by shrinking the set of decisions which citizens are able to participate as

Without ignoring the risks of philanthropically-driven plutocracy, we need to pay more attention to the danger of philanthropically-driven polarization.

equals in influencing. The cumulative effect is a kind of informal privatization, or usurpation of policy authority by rich donors."<sup>28</sup>

Though Saunders-Hastings does not discuss it directly, the "informal privatization" she speaks of has clearly helped polarize our politics. Grantmakers funding ideological advocates and activists are compounding our political impasse and the strains it places on democracy. Without ignoring the risks of philanthropically-driven plutocracy, we need to pay more

attention to the danger of philanthropically-driven polarization. John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira have recently equipped us with a concept that illuminates these dynamics.<sup>29</sup>

In *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes*, Judis and Teixeira write as critical supporters of the Democratic Party. They lament the accelerating shift of working-class voters with more moderate and traditional viewpoints to the GOP — including people of color. Judis and Teixeira attribute much of the blame for this to what they call the shadow party on the left. Shadow parties consist of "the activist groups, think tanks, foundations, publications and websites, big donors, and prestigious intellectuals who are not part of the official party organizations, but who influence and are identified with one or the other of the parties."<sup>30</sup>

Who, specifically, are these entities? Judis and Teixeira provide an illustrative list of shadow party members they contend have led the Democratic Party astray. It includes Black Lives Matter, the Sunrise Movement, the ACLU, Planned Parenthood, the Center for American Progress, the New York Times, Vox, MSNBC, and the Open Society and Ford foundations. But the shadow party is not only a left-of-center phenomenon. The examples the authors give of their counterparts on the right include Turning Point USA, the Heritage Foundation, the Claremont Institute, the Center for Renewing America, Fox News, Breitbart, and the Koch Network. Judis and Teixeira observe that "these groups on the left and right subsist within their own closed universes of discourse, each shadow party using the extremes of the other to deflect criticism of their own radicalism."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 65, 78.

<sup>29</sup> The remainder of this section is drawn from Daniel Stid, "[Charitable Donors Operating in the Shadows Push Our Politics to the Extremes](#)," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 2, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> See John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes* (New York: Henry Hold, 2023), 8. For a similar analysis from a different vantage point in the Democratic Party, see Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, *The Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Party Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 213-16, 267-69.

<sup>31</sup> Judis and Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone*, 8-9.

The various elements that comprise the shadow parties on the left and right do not all share the same views, priorities, and styles. But their members all have some ability and a strong drive to influence the party proximate to them. They seek to establish and enforce ideological orthodoxies while remaining insulated from the pragmatism that tends to accompany proximity to electoral accountability. They care deeply who wins elections, but they are not on the ballot themselves.

Shadow partisans thus serve, to borrow a helpful phrase from political science, as “intense policy demanders.”<sup>32</sup> They view the parties instrumentally, as a means of realizing their particular demands, pushing them in the direction they believe is necessary to accomplish their ideological goals. Given the intensity with which policy demanders hold their goals, they are not inclined to allow the coalition of which they are a part to move toward the median voter.

Judis and Teixeira have made an important contribution in noting that many foundations and wealthy individual donors should be seen as active members of the shadow parties. If anything, the authors do not place enough emphasis on philanthropy’s influence within these political coalitions. Beyond more frequent expressions of their own intense policy demands, institutional and individual funders wield power by underwriting the activists, advocates, commentators, and think tankers that comprise the shadow parties. This dynamic is widespread and debilitating now, but it has not occurred overnight.

We turn now to review how political developments since the mid-1960s, and philanthropy’s response to and engagement in these changes, have brought us to where we are today.

## **B. Philanthropy in a Polarizing America**

We begin our historical survey in 1964 for two reasons. First, passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Fair Housing Act in 1968, marked the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement. Second, 1964 ushered in a 12-year period spanning the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford in which the roles and activity of the federal government expanded dramatically.<sup>33</sup> These two sea changes transformed not only politics and policy in the United States but also how philanthropy interacted with them.

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<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Bawn, et al., “[A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics](#),” Working Paper, March 23, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> This following discussion draws on the several accounts of the period: David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-2002*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), chapter 4; Paul Pierson and Theda Skocpol, eds., *The Transformation of American Politics: Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), chapters 1-4; and Michael Barone, *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), part four.

The landmark civil rights bills reversed federal policies that had held sway for nine decades. Since the end of Reconstruction, the federal government had effectively ignored and tolerated racial segregation, discrimination, and the violence that underpinned them in the southern states. Through an epic struggle, African Americans had finally won and could now take advantage of the rights and protections due to all citizens. Nearly 200 years after the Declaration of Independence, the United States had become a multi-racial democracy.

Also in 1964, Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty and articulated his vision for a Great Society. A sweeping series of bills followed. They pushed the federal government to play much more of an activist role in the quest to alleviate poverty and provide greater equality of opportunity if not result. The new programs included Medicare and Medicaid, Head Start, food stamps, support for K-12 and higher education, and urban renewal initiatives led by the new Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Subsequently, under presidents Nixon and Ford, the federal government greatly expanded its regulatory powers. Major laws enabled it to begin overseeing and intervening in the economy in new ways and arenas, including the environment, labor and working conditions, consumer products, and private pensions. To regulate these domains, Congress established the Environmental Protection Agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation.<sup>34</sup>

The new civil rights laws and the sweeping enhancements in the scope and activities of the federal government led to profound and polarizing political changes that would ripple through philanthropy. Prior to 1964, knowing only that a member of Congress was a liberal or a conservative would not have provided much useful information to place that member in one party or the other. Both the Democratic and Republican parties had prominent conservative and liberal wings. By the mid-1970s, however, the parties were rapidly sorting into more like-minded ideological camps. Liberals congregated in the Democratic Party and conservatives in the GOP.

Much of the shift stemmed from the political ramifications of civil rights legislation. Millions of newly enfranchised African Americans voted with the Democratic Party of the president who had helped grant them their rights and ensured they could vote. Meanwhile, spurred on by Nixon's Southern Strategy, ideologically conservative voters flocked into the Republican Party.<sup>35</sup> As these inflows and

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<sup>34</sup> The landmark regulatory bills in order of passage included the National Environmental Protection Act (1969), the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970), the Water Pollution Control Act (1972), the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1972), the Consumer Product Safety Act (1972), the Magnuson-Moss Act (1974), the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974), and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (1974). Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*, 85-87.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Pildes, "[Why the Center Does Not Hold: The Causes of Hyperpolarized Democracy in America](#)" *California Law Review*, 2011, 287-97.

outflows rendered the Democratic Party more liberal and the Republicans more conservative, it became harder to be a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican.

The more activist federal government also drove polarization. It mobilized left-leaning liberals and advocates to protect the new roles and programs the federal government had taken on — and to create more of them. Meanwhile, conservatives and libertarians felt a pressing need to defend both the free enterprise system and the idea of limited government more broadly.

Writing in 1971, future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, then a corporate lawyer and former head of the American Bar Association, warned the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that:

“No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack. ... The most disquieting voices joining the chorus of criticism, come from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians.”<sup>36</sup>

Powell proceeded to outline multiple steps that defenders of the American economic system in civil society would need to take in response. Several funders took action along the lines he suggested. In 1973, Joseph Coors underwrote the founding of the Heritage Foundation. In 1977, Charles Koch supported the creation of the Cato Institute. The Federalist Society, with early funding from the Olin and Scaife Foundations, got its start in 1982.

Progressives have long presumed that Powell’s memo prompted this mobilization. Ever since, they argue, left-of-center philanthropy and its grantees have been hard-pressed to catch up, given the right’s head start. In reality, however, it was Powell, and the conservative and libertarian philanthropists, advocates, and activists following his prescription who scrambled to catch up to their rivals on the left. The initial wave of citizens and public interest law groups supporting an activist federal government gave the left a head start. The Environmental Defense Fund launched in 1967 and the National Resources Defense Council in 1970. John Gardner started Common Cause in 1970, and Ralph Nader created Public Citizen in 1971.

In those same years, the Ford Foundation began building up the field of public interest law. It sought to take advantage of the “rights revolution” the activist federal government had set in motion to advance liberal causes the foundation supported. Ford started underwriting established public interest law organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Lawyers’ Committee on Civil Rights Under Law. Ford also funded the creation of several new public interest law groups for underrepresented populations. These included the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund in 1968 and the Native American Rights Fund in 1970. As Steve Teles observes, “It is highly unlikely

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis F. Powell, “[Confidential Memorandum: Attack on the Free Enterprise System](#),” August 23, 1971, 1-3.

that public interest law would have gotten off the ground were it not for the support of the Ford Foundation.”<sup>37</sup>

With parties becoming more sharply and ideologically sorted, the new groups were obliged and inclined to align with one side or the other—supporting or opposing the activist state. On both sides of the ideological spectrum, wealthy individual donors and foundations served as “policy patrons” supplying the resources these new nonprofits needed to launch and ramp up their work.

In his history of the conservative legal movement, Teles documents how philanthropists on the right, and the nonprofits they founded and supported, were scrambling to counter what Ford had initiated. The 1970s brought an explosion in citizens and public interest law groups as well as think tanks on the left and right alike. With the parties becoming more sharply and ideologically sorted, the new groups were obliged and inclined to align with one side or the other—supporting or opposing the activist state. On both sides of the ideological spectrum, wealthy individual donors and foundations served as “policy patrons” supplying the resources these new nonprofits needed to launch and ramp up their work.<sup>38</sup>

One might think that the explosion of civil society groups focused on national issues helped fuel the expansion of the federal government’s role. However, Theda Skocpol points out that it worked the other way around. The

formation and rapid growth of the ideological, policy-oriented nonprofits followed rather than prompted the federal government’s expansion in a given domain. That expansion created what Skocpol calls “a new political opportunity structure” in which:

“Government activism of broader scope and greater intensity spurred the formation and professionalization of voluntary groups...Tellingly, the same basic dynamic occurred across many specific policy areas, ranging from environmental policy to health care and expanded benefits and new services for older Americans. In each area, innovative federal measures tended to precede the bulk of the voluntary group proliferation.”<sup>39</sup>

It is important to note that these new elite advocacy groups did not typically embody the virtues

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<sup>37</sup> Steven M. Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 22-57, quotation from 51.

<sup>38</sup> Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement*; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner Take All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer – And Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010); Jack Walker, Jr., *Mobilizing Interest Groups in America: Patrons, Professions, and Social Movements* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Jeffrey M. Berry, *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizens Groups* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Theda Skocpol, “Government Activism and the Reorganization of American Civic Democracy,” in Pierson and Skocpol, eds., *Transformation of American Politics*, 47-48.

of Tocquevillian pluralism. Indeed, Skocpol's research documents a steady decline, starting in the 1960s, of the national, federated, cross-class, volunteer-driven, membership organizations that had long structured Americans' civic life and developed their leadership capacity. The waning groups included the Elks, American Legion, Farm Bureau, AFL-CIO, Boy Scouts, YMCA, PTA, Women's Clubs, and the American Bowling Congress.<sup>40</sup>

As these civic associations declined, a very different set arose in their stead, one composed of issue-based advocacy and activist groups led by professional staff in Washington. Examples over the years included groups like Common Cause, Green Peace, the National Abortion Rights League, the Heritage Action, and Human Rights Watch. In these associations, paid staff managed the work of the organization, including soliciting funds from "members" whose participation remained largely passive. Reflecting on the shift from membership to management in Americans' associational lives, Skocpol acknowledges that:

"Since the 1960s many good things have happened in America. New voices are heard, and there have been invaluable gains in equality and liberty. But vital links in the nations' associational life have frayed, and we need to find creative ways to repair those links if America is to avoid becoming a country of managers and manipulated spectators rather than a national community of fellow democratic citizens."<sup>41</sup>

As these changes in Americans' associational lives unfolded, philanthropists on the left and right sustained their ideological proxy war via the public interest lawyers, activists, and think tankers they funded. But they operated asymmetrically. On the right, funders shied away from building large grant-making staffs as the Ford Foundation and other institutions on the left had done. Instead, right-of-center funders tended to rely on the judgments of a few trustees, senior leaders, and experienced grant makers. This made it easier to keep the funding squarely aligned with the donor's intent. This had become a sharp priority for philanthropists on the right, especially after the Ford Foundation used their donor's fortune to critique the free enterprise system that had produced it. For the same reason, funders on the right were drawn to giving-while-living and spend-down plans like that pursued by the John M. Olin Foundation.

By the mid-1990s, sociologists and survey researchers at Smith College studying different groups of American elites concluded that, "the foundation elite is the most politically noncohesive and politically polarized of elite groups in the United States."

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<sup>40</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

The hardening of perspectives during this ongoing ideological contest left an indelible stamp on the philanthropic sector. By the mid-1990s, sociologists and survey researchers at Smith College studying different groups of American elites concluded that, “the foundation elite is the most politically noncohesive and politically polarized of elite groups in the United States.” Their foundation respondents were most polarized on “questions of collectivist liberalism” and to a considerable extent on “affirmative action, crime, and foreign policy.”<sup>42</sup> This research equips us with a revealing and prescient time capsule on philanthropy from three decades into the polarization of the country.

The researchers found that “most foundation spending for public policy projects tilts toward the left, despite all the talk among foundation professionals on the virtues of philanthropic pluralism.” In fact, “liberal grants outnumber conservative grants by roughly four to one.” The data presented a paradox, however, in that there were slightly more self-reported conservatives than liberals among their respondents. The researchers resolved the puzzle by noting that many of the conservatives in foundations were of the small “c” variety—theirs was “a conservatism of sentiment, not of belief.” They went on to observe that the smaller number of “programmatically conservative foundations, however, are a different breed altogether. They are on the ‘cutting edge’ of the right....they are explicitly promoting an ideological agenda like their liberal counterparts.”<sup>43</sup>

The accumulating effects of this polarized philanthropic rivalry had altered the political landscape in the judgment of the sociologists. “Social movements, think tanks, and intellectuals set the ideological tone. Foundations support them. As a result, the policy arena moves from mainstream to radical politics.” This, in turn, posed real risks for the legitimacy of the country’s democratic values and institutions. The researchers worried that Americans might become

“sufficiently dismayed to reject the political culture entirely and search for a new charismatic leader. The prospect of a majority disillusioned with the U.S. political culture poses grave risks to foundations. High risk endeavors combined with little openness and no short-run political accountability run the risk of a populist backlash among mass segments already disillusioned with U.S. politics.”<sup>44</sup>

That this assessment was published in 1994 rather than in 2024 makes it even more sobering. That same year, Newt Gingrich and the Republican Party gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in four decades. Congressional Republicans’ long march had been driven in part by their chafing under the tighter institutional control wielded by more consistently liberal Democratic

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<sup>42</sup> Althea K. Nagai, Robert Lerner, and Stanley Rothman, *Giving for Social Change: Foundations, Public Policy, and the American Political Agenda* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 155.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.



majorities. In their push for power, Gingrich and his caucus did away with longstanding norms of civility and reciprocity, taking polarization to new heights.<sup>45</sup>

Over the next three decades, the closely divided and increasingly polarized parties have struggled to gain power, winning and losing control of Congress and the presidency much more frequently. That the partisan contest remains balanced on a knife-edge has further reduced the incentives either party has to collaborate with their rivals. If everything rides on the next election, until then the parties are incentivized to make their rivals look as bad as possible.<sup>46</sup>

Two trends within philanthropy have contributed to it becoming more and more caught up in our polarized politics in recent decades. One is the growing number of high-net-worth individuals who are “giving while living,” donating to charitable and political causes alike. These donors often have well articulated views of the good society—e.g., one characterized, say, by social justice and racial equity, or by free markets and individual liberty.

Alongside their philanthropy, many such donors also donate considerable sums of money supporting political candidates, parties, and groups they favor (and thwarting those they oppose). Even as these donors observe the legal niceties of the tax code governing charitable contributions, they understandably tend to see their political and philanthropic endeavors as a piece. After all, both strands of giving support their vision of a good society. Who runs the government is critically important for realizing it. Given the recurring intensity of the electoral contests to settle this question, it’s no surprise that donors seek to align their charitable funding to serve their political aims. And if their political aims have to be pursued by supporting or opposing one or the other of our polarized parties, the charitable funding tends to become polarized also.

A different dynamic prevails within institutionalized private foundations. They are barred from making political contributions. Within them, professional staff drive most of the funding decisions, guided by the program strategies they have developed. Over time, more foundations have come to see supporting policy advocacy as a highly leveraged means of achieving the systems-level changes that are the primary objectives of their strategies. Toward this end, they recruit program staff from among dedicated policy experts and ideologically aligned advocates who then fund the activists remaining in the field. Foundations so inclined are also increasingly apt to engage in high-level institutional advocacy themselves (e.g., by issuing and signing onto public statements on pressing issues).

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<sup>45</sup> Nelson W. Polsby, *How Congress Evolves: Social Bases of Institutional Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 132-144.

<sup>46</sup> Frances Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

But the tax code prevents private foundations from proactively and directly engaging in legislative or grassroots lobbying or earmarking grants to support those activities. If foundations want to impact public policy, they must do so indirectly. Hence the tendency of foundation program staff to see themselves as the principals and grantees as their agents in advocacy and activism. Like most principals, to guard against shirking, they want to have relentless agents fighting on their behalf.

Consider the hypothetical appeals of two different advocates approaching a foundation program officer for funding:

- The first advocate acknowledges that the political landscape is shifting and uncertain. The policy proposal they are backing is compelling but spotty in places due to coalition dynamics. Success is not guaranteed. To get the key changes they want, they will likely need to compromise with their opponents, who have public opinion on their side on a few fronts. But it's better to try to get half a loaf now, then come back for more later.
- The second advocate has no such doubts. Their policy prescription, whose development was underwritten by the foundation's prior grants, is ironclad. The votes they need are within reach, provided they get the resources they ask for and do not give an inch when the opposition fights back with spurious arguments. Now is the time for seizing the moral high ground rather than compromising with the corrupt status quo.

Which advocate is more likely to be funded? Alas, in today's polarized climate, that question more or less answers itself.

Both individual and institutional philanthropists have thus plunged into the political crossfire as “shadow partisans.” The pattern only intensified with Donald Trump's emergence on the national political stage.

Both individual and institutional philanthropists have thus plunged into the political crossfire as “shadow partisans.” The pattern only intensified with Donald Trump's emergence on the national political stage, and with the zeal of the Resistance and the MAGA movement he inspires in equal measure. Amid this partisan and philanthropic combat, the broader field of philanthropy, and the freedoms long enjoyed by funders within it, stand exposed and vulnerable.

On the left, progressive critics routinely express outrage at what they see as the nakedly anti-democratic influence wielded by conservative and libertarian philanthropists. In ominously titled books, investigative journalists and scholars contend that these donors' long-term and strategic funding of advocates and think tanks has pulled American democracy unnaturally hard to the right. In doing so, these authors argue, right-wing funders have

stolen a march on the left and undone democracy.<sup>47</sup> The Koch brothers (Charles and his late brother David) and their affiliated network partners stand out as the primary bogeymen for critics on the left. They routinely find themselves on the receiving end of rhetorical broadsides and pointed oversight from progressive Democrats like senators Sheldon Whitehouse and Elizabeth Warren.<sup>48</sup>

Another development on the progressive left intended to challenge and constrain philanthropy is a marked shift away from the “cause pluralism” that had long prevailed as ethos among grant makers. Ben Soskis traces the turn toward what he terms “cause prescription” that has been embodied in “the campaign to promote racial equity in giving.” Soskis writes:

“The rise of equity as a primary consideration for many progressives in the philanthropic sector helped to erode the presumption toward cause agnosticism, in which a gift should be appreciated in isolation as the expression of a donor’s prerogatives. Equity instead required assessments of charitable gifts that took into consideration the context of charitable allocations more generally. ... It now dominates much of the discourse surrounding philanthropic responsibility, with various causes highlighting how little funding they receive relative to others, and with the implicit directive that if donors are not helping to address this disparity, they are not fulfilling their full philanthropic responsibility.”<sup>49</sup>

The conviction that, whatever other causes they might support, funders are obliged to underwrite racial equity often spills over into a sweeping critique of the legitimacy of philanthropy and the political economy that enables it. Consider the following passage from Vu Le, a leading social sector commentator determined to reject an affirmation of philanthropic and cause pluralism in which funders would not be so obliged. Writing in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Le insists that:

“Philanthropy’s roots are stained with inequity and injustice. Much of the wealth in this country was built on a legacy of slavery, stolen Indigenous land, worker exploitation, environmental degradation, and tax avoidance. It is a history of white people and white-led corporations creating the very injustices that they are then lauded for trying to solve by giving fractions of their hoarded wealth.

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<sup>47</sup> See Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2018); and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States – And the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., “[Senate Democrats Call on President, Cabinet to Reveal Koch Infiltration of Trump Administration](#),” press release, April 28, 2018, and “[Whitehouse, Hirono, Feinstein, Warren File Amicus Brief Calling Out Koch-Backed Effort to Concentrate Power in the Hands of Right Wing Justices](#),” press release, September 22, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Soskis, “[Charitable Cause Pluralism](#),” 14-16. Soskis also notes that a second turn toward cause prescription came with the advent of effective altruism, “a hyper-rationalist, data-driven approach to the question of how to do the ‘most good’ with the resources at a donor’s disposal.”

And yes, it is a history of using private capital to replace other approaches to investing in and supporting a prosperous and just society. It is a history of wealthy people refusing to pay their fair share of taxes and instead squirreling that money away into family foundations — and now donor-advised funds — to spend on their pet projects at their whims and leisure. ...

The lack of acknowledgement of the problematic history of philanthropy is amplified by the lack of acknowledgement of the racial dynamics at play. Philanthropy has always been the realm of wealthy white people. Most donors are white. Most foundation trustees are white. Most foundation CEOs and staff are white. How can philanthropy contribute to democracy when it is itself so undemocratic?”

Le put things in a nutshell with his parting shot: “We do not need philanthropy to be ‘alive, vital, and relevant.’ We want the world to be just, and philanthropy to be unnecessary.”<sup>50</sup> Taken to its logical limits, then, this argument ultimately sees no need or role for philanthropy in its conception of a just society.

This worldview is now much more common among left-of-center foundation staff, their grantees, and those involved in advising, evaluating, and “decolonizing” their work. They may not all articulate the perspective as fulsomely as Le does, but neither are they inclined to disagree with or moderate it when their more outspoken colleagues do. Whether one agrees with Le, it is difficult to see how philanthropic institutions can flourish if a preponderance of the people working in them come to share this perspective.

The conviction that, whatever other causes they might support, funders are obliged to underwrite racial equity often spills over into a sweeping critique of the legitimacy of philanthropy and the political economy that enables it.

For their part, philanthropic funders and observers on the right have historically been stalwart in their defense of philanthropic freedom, respect for donor’s intent, and the pluralism they support. Indeed, the Philanthropy Roundtable, a membership organization serving conservative and libertarian donors, was founded to defend these very principles. However, views of “cause pluralism” on the right are also shifting rapidly. National conservatives and politicians aligned with Trump now openly question philanthropic freedom and the imperative of honoring donors’ intent.

Consider this recent reflection from Bill Schambra, a veteran of the Bradley Foundation, conservative think-tanker, and commentator on civil society. His condemnation of the Roundtable’s ongoing focus on philanthropic freedom also merits quoting at length:

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<sup>50</sup> Le “[No, Not All Philanthropic Views Are Good, and Many Don’t Deserve Our Respect](#)”.

“[Philanthropic freedom] was invaluable in earlier times, when we could assume it would sustain a rich and diverse civil society. Today, though, it simply means blocking any political interference with a vast and ever-expanding progressive philanthropic monoculture. The foremost task of the conservative philanthropy association seems to be to insure that progressive philanthropy is unhindered in its pursuit of the radical transformation of the American political order.

Just as ... it’s time for a substantial rethinking of the conservative intellectual apparatus, so the conservative philanthropic apparatus also needs to reconsider its priorities. Should its primary goal continue to be defending the rights of foundations, at a time when the overwhelming majority of philanthropic dollars are actively working to transform the very regime upon which those rights rest? ...

When electoral politics is the only major national institution not entirely controlled by the left, and when Congressional inquiry is one of the very few tools available to check this domination, will the Roundtable continue to abide by the self-denying ordinance of philanthropic freedom?”<sup>51</sup>

Senator and now Vice Presidential Candidate J.D. Vance of Ohio is prominent among the growing number of Republican elected officials who share this perspective — hence his ongoing diatribes against the Ford Foundation, progressive institutions like it, and the tax advantages they enjoy. In 2021, when Vance was first running for the Senate, he declared to Tucker Carlson and his Fox News audience that,

“We are talking about hundreds of billions of dollars in ill-gotten accumulated wealth. It serves as a tax haven for left-wing billionaires and what do they do with this? They fund critical race theory, they fund ridiculous racism, they fund teaching 6-year-olds that they should, you know, cast off their gender. We are actively subsidizing the people who are destroying this country and they call it a charity. It’s just ridiculous.”<sup>52</sup>

An implicit corollary to this view is that right-leaning philanthropists need to get on the right side of the political and cultural war that the MAGA populists and national conservatives are waging. This means rejecting collaboration with enemies on the left. Donor’s intent cannot and should not be respected if it leads to such collaboration. This even goes for the (living) donor’s intent embodied in the philanthropy led by Charles Koch and Brian Hooks, the CEO of Stand Together, Koch’s philan-

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Schambra, [“Time for the Right to Rethink and Reconsider All Around,”](#) *The Giving Review*, November 22, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Schwartz, [“J.D. Vance on the Ford Foundation: ‘We Are Actively Subsidizing the People Who Are Destroying This Country,’”](#) *Real Clear Politics*, September 28, 2021.

For all the ideological differences that separate these sharp critics of philanthropy on the left and the right, both camps have adopted bleak worldviews that uncannily mirror each other.

thropic network. Koch and Hooks have, quite candidly and commendably, discussed how they have been intentionally changing tacks and embracing pluralism to better secure their long-run principles. Their course corrections, however, indicate to populists and ideologues on the right that Koch and Hooks have been duped into the fool's errand of trying to win progressives' favor.<sup>53</sup>

For all the ideological differences that separate these sharp critics of philanthropy on the left and the right, both camps have adopted bleak worldviews that uncan-

nily mirror each other. They see their respective sides as perpetually at risk of succumbing to either a naive wish or alluring temptation to collaborate with the denizens of the dark side. Hence, they must gird themselves with righteousness to ward off their enemies. It is essential to remain vigilant for, and quickly call out, wavering allies who appear ready to soften entrenched battle lines. In both camps, philanthropy is seen more and more as a suspect activity undertaken by wealthy elites who don't know what time it is. Those who seek rapprochement with others who see things differently are deluded. Hence the parallel push by antiracist and decolonizing progressives as well as national conservatives and MAGA populists to bring philanthropy to heel.

At one level, these rival camps of critics cannot both be correct. If progressive funders have the upper hand and are using it to skew and corrupt American democracy, then conservative funders cannot hold the same illicit power, and vice versa. However, perhaps there is a shared grain of truth we can draw from these rival viewpoints. Philanthropy does appear to be underwriting efforts that are pulling the country apart, away from the mainstream of its culture and values. These efforts undermine — and in many cases negate the possibility of — shared democratic ideals and institutions.

Perhaps the big problem with philanthropy is not that it gives a decisive advantage to one side or the other. Rather, it has come to accelerate the polarization of civil society and democracy. What can we do about that?

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<sup>53</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "[At Koch Gathering, a Turn Away From Partisan Politics](#)," *Washington Post*, January 28, 2019; Charles Koch with Brian Hooks, [Believe in People: Bottom-up Solutions for a Top-down World](#) (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020); Adam Kissel, "[New Koch](#)," *The American Mind*, April 26, 2023.

## Part II: Where Do We Go From Here?

Having traced how philanthropy has come to be implicated in polarization and the problems this has produced, we now turn to consider responses that could reverse these trends. We begin by reviewing a set of promising initiatives that philanthropic funders have pursued in recent years. These efforts anticipate the right direction forward, but they are incomplete in two respects. So far, they have been driven by a subset of the funders concerned about the health of democracy, pluralism, and civic life, not the broader philanthropic sector that needs to be engaged. And they do not yet reflect all the steps that philanthropists seeking to practice responsible pluralism must take. Here, we lay out these essential steps and explore how they can help restore the legitimacy of philanthropy, pluralism, and democracy in America.

### A. Harbingers of a Better Way Forward

One promising development is the work of two affinity groups of philanthropic funders in the democracy field that are helping participating funders practice more responsible pluralism. [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#) (PACE) began as a forum for funders supporting community and national service efforts in the 1990s. Having broadened its mission over the years, it now serves as “a philanthropic laboratory for funders seeking to maximize their individual and collective impact on democracy and civic life in America.” The [Democracy Funders Network](#) (DFN) got its start amid the tumult of Trump’s presidency. It operates as “a cross-ideological learning and action community for donors concerned about the health of American democracy.”

Both PACE and DFN are dedicated to viewpoint diversity on multiple dimensions. Their shared emphasis on learning, relationship-building, and experimentation helps participating funders broaden their perspectives and coalitions. They also share an orientation to helping funders envision and work toward better futures for American democracy. Their forward-looking perspectives enable PACE and DFN to engage their members constructively on longer-run issues where philanthropy is uniquely positioned to make a difference. They stand in marked contrast to the defensive posture of efforts focusing on saving democracy before the next election.

PACE CEO Kristen Campbell recently drew out this contrast in a post introducing the affinity group’s theme for 2024: “Democracy is Larger Than Politics.”

“This is a year that everyone and everything will be forcing us into political binaries all in the name of ‘saving democracy.’ ... There is often a tendency to conflate our ideas about whether democracy is working or not with whether or not we’re getting what we want politically speaking. ... PACE is working with foundations and funders to help them discern in what ways their strategies are about democracy, and when their strategies are

about politics. To be sure: Our Democracy > Politics campaign is not intended to mean that politics is not important, that politics is bad, or that we need to scrub politics from everything we do. Rather, there needs to be a distinction between when we're operating from a democracy mindset and when we're operating with a political mindset."<sup>54</sup>

These affinity groups are not the only collaborative efforts meant to bolster long-term democracy mindsets rather than short-term political mindsets among philanthropists in the field. In recent years, three sets of funders with different ideological orientations have joined forces and pooled resources at impressive scale to begin making grants in overlooked domains and/or new ways.

- [The New Pluralist Collaborative](#) launched in 2021 as a three-year, \$30 million effort to support “the growing field of practitioners, storytellers, researchers, and innovators working to foster a culture of pluralism in America.” Seven core funders each pledged \$3 million to support the initial effort, supported by a broader network of eight affiliate funders. From the start, the New Pluralist funders have worked “in deep partnership with a community of Field Builders.” These nonprofit leaders have helped the funders “shape our shared aspirations and strategy and learn alongside us.”
- [The Election Trust Initiative](#) began in 2022 as a five-year, \$100 million effort “to strengthen the field of election administration, guided by the principle that America’s election systems must be secure, transparent, accurate, and convenient.” Its four founding partners—the Hewlett, Klarman, and Peterson Foundations and the Pew Trusts—have each “made an initial five-year \$25 million commitment to support the initiative’s long-term, nonpartisan goals.” They seek to counter the short-term and, at times, politicized funding that has frequently driven philanthropy in this area.
- [The Trust for Civic Life](#) started in 2024 as a five-year, \$50 million effort to invest “in local efforts that help people connect and create their community’s future together, ultimately reshaping civic life and building a stronger democracy.” The 15 philanthropies contributing to the Trust thus far seek to bolster everyday democracy and civic life from the bottom up, in places that mainstream philanthropy tends to overlook. These include “the Black Belt, Central Appalachia, Tribal Lands, Southwest Border, and communities in transition in the rural U.S.”

These three efforts are promising for several reasons. They reflect the cross-partisan and/or non-partisan ethos that readily distinguishes democracy work from political work. Moreover, they are all using longer-term time horizons which inevitably take their aspirations for impact well beyond the next election cycle. Their initial 3-5-year time horizons are merely starting points; the funders involved recognize that it will take many more years of sustained investment to realize their aspira-

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<sup>54</sup> Kristen Cambell, “[Our 2024 Theme: Democracy is Larger Than Politics](#),” LinkedIn, February 13, 2024.



tions. They are intentionally seeking to build up their respective fields of endeavor and stimulate new and helpful patterns in civil society and democracy as a result. And the philanthropists participating in these efforts are focused on mutual learning and relationship-building to enhance the support, staying power, and influence that comes with funder collaboratives.

So far, so good! However, these promising beachheads risk letting funders supporting other aspects of democracy, and those focused on other policy areas entirely, off the hook. All philanthropists have an obligation to support pluralism through their work; it is not simply up to the funders behind the New Pluralists Collaborative to do so. What can be done to engage this much broader group of funders and bring them around to the practice of responsible pluralism?

The Council on Foundations is undertaking an important experiment in this regard. The Council's membership spans the broader field of philanthropy that will ultimately need to be engaged for more responsible pluralism to take root. Through its [Building Common Ground](#) initiative, the Council seeks to foster a world in 20 years in which "philanthropy models difficult but transformative conversations," one in which "people across the ideological spectrum come together, actively listen to one another, and collaborate to move us forward as a society."

To help jump-start the effort, the Council dedicated its entire annual meeting in 2024 to the theme of "[Building Together: Leading Collaboratively Across Difference](#)." Participants heard from a diverse set of speakers working on bridging, belonging, depolarizing, interfaith, and pluralism initiatives. They also joined in a series of workshops and training sessions both to learn more about and to practice the perspectives and skills that doing this work requires. Coming out of the meeting, the Council has organized an initial [Bridging Differences Leadership Cohort](#) whose members will continue this line of professional development over an eight-month period.

The Council's efforts hold real promise. If Building Common Ground helps more funders learn how to bridge and work productively across political and ideological divides, that would be a big win. But it remains to be seen whether the ethos the Council seeks to establish in philanthropy can take hold among funders who do not see pluralism and depolarization as good things.

Those calling for greater and more sustained funding for racial equity, for example, accurately discern that calls for pluralism in philanthropy undermine the "cause prescription" they see as essen-

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tial. The ethos of pluralism certainly allows for and indeed supports the right of funders to prioritize and dedicate themselves to the cause of racial equity. However, pluralism does not accommodate the idea that all funders are obliged to do so. Moreover, insofar as pluralism requires a modicum of moderation and a willingness to engage with groups one disagrees with, ideological advocates and activists rightly see it as a constraint.

The case for pluralism in philanthropy cannot and should not gloss over these differences. Nor will workshops and conferences alone suffice to re-establish pluralism as an organizing principle for philanthropy. The case for pluralism needs to be made persuasively in the public sphere. The philanthropic pluralists' manifesto was a noteworthy and laudable effort to do just that.

The manifesto appeared in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the flagship journal of the field, in April 2023. The six co-authors included the leaders of the Duke, Ford, and Templeton foundations, Stand Together, the Council on Foundations, and the Philanthropy Roundtable. The orientations and patterns of giving across the leaders' institutions and membership networks spanned the ideological spectrum, from the progressive and liberal left to the libertarian and conservative right. In framing their argument, the co-authors wrote:

“Each of us represents foundations and individual donors with different — and strongly held — views on issues of fundamental importance to society. Yet together we recognize that philanthropy provides the greatest value when donors enable and encourage pluralism by supporting and investing in a wide and diverse range of values, missions, and interests.”<sup>55</sup>

The incongruous combination of the philanthropic pluralists' ideological differences on one hand and their shared public purpose on another ensured that everyone would read and talk about their manifesto. They exemplified the philanthropic pluralism they were preaching. Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, and Brian Hooks, CEO and chairman of Stand Together, in particular, stood out as co-signatories. They lead the most visible philanthropies on the left and right, respectively. Their critics regard their institutions as the vanguard of the rival shadow party. And here they were, joining forces with others to defend enduring principles in which they all believed! The group's title reflected the improbability of their collaboration: “We Disagree on Many Things, but We Speak with One Voice in Support of Philanthropic Pluralism.”

The authors begin by situating their big idea in the broader “tapestry of U.S. democracy, which, alongside government and business, encompasses a large and diverse civil society made up of vary-

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<sup>55</sup> Dill, Enright, Gill, Hooks, Walker, and Westhoff, “[We Disagree on Many Things, but We Speak With One Voice in Defense of Philanthropic Pluralism](#).”

ing forms of association and collaboration.” Philanthropy’s primary contribution is ensuring that civil society, one of three critical elements woven into the tapestry, is resilient and pluralistic.

Philanthropy stimulates civil society by taking risks and experimenting in ways that government and businesses cannot or will not. It takes up issues being ignored or left behind that we need to reckon with and underwrites different and often competing ideas and solutions for them. However, as the philanthropic pluralists lament, in our polarized environment, “foundations and philanthropists are often expected to pledge allegiance to one or another narrow set of prescribed views.” These expectations, by pushing funders to pick a side and join Team Red or Team Blue, impose a heavy-handed duopoly on the marketplace of ideas in civil society.

Philanthropy must avoid the trap of aligning with ideological and / or partisan actors who reject the need for debate. To do so, funders need to improve at “engaging in disagreements on approaches or even outcomes.” Philanthropy must model and support constructive engagement not for its own sake, nor because all ideas have equal merit and are “morally equivalent.” Precisely because some agendas are better than others, society needs an interplay and contest between and among a multitude of them to sort out which are wheat and which are chaff.

Hence the pluralists’ affirmation of a “truly healthy independent philanthropic sector” that “encourages consensus on common values, such as respect and open inquiry, as well as disagreement on contested issues of societal significance.” Holding the creative tension between these two good things requires us to grant the legitimacy of opposition to funders we disagree with — especially when we disagree sharply. We can and should contest the substance of the views they are underwriting. That is what leads to better ideas and solutions for society. But, provided funders carry out their philanthropy consistent with the law, we cannot and should not deny their right to support agendas that strike us as wrongheaded or even malign. The place to counter them is in the marketplace of ideas, not by erecting barriers to its entry.

The manifesto contends we need to presume and “behave as if the foundations and individual donors who take stances with which we disagree are also committed to the betterment of society.” We must do so not because they always are, but because this presumption, and the behavior it leads us to adopt, enable the most productive and illuminating debates to occur. It means focusing our criticism on the ideas and agendas rather than the people and institutions with whom we disagree. It means remaining open to critiques and opportunities to sharpen one’s own point of view in light of those critiques.

The advocates of philanthropic pluralism emphasize that granting this modicum of respect to our opponents “does not imply acceptance of a view or even commitment to a common resolution. It does recognize our common dignity.” In our sprawling and disputatious democracy, we are never

going to see eye to eye on many or perhaps even most issues. But if we are going to live peaceably together, we owe at least this acknowledgment to our fellow free and equal citizens.

If philanthropists keep these precepts in mind, the manifesto argues, it will enable the marketplace of ideas, and their own agency within it, to have their most constructive effects. The authors readily acknowledge that the marketplace and the causes they support are not perfect. But over time, the dispersed, multifaceted, and evolving debates underwritten by philanthropic pluralism will lead to better winnowing. As the manifesto states, “philanthropy as a whole makes its greatest contribution to democracy when all foundations and donors engage in the unfettered pursuit of their own mission, interests, and prerogatives.”

The authors conclude their manifesto by appealing to the American political tradition. They observe that, while foundations operate in many other countries, “they are in many ways a quintessentially American institution.” Hence their closing call to action: “At a time of unprecedented stress on our institutions, we invite our peers to join us in affirming and putting these commitments into practice as we work together to keep America’s independent philanthropic tradition alive, vital, and relevant.”

There is much to be admired in the optimistic outlook, spirit of partnership, and belief in the redeemability of democracy in America embodied in the call for philanthropic pluralism. In a sector increasingly unsure of itself and besieged by the opponents on the right and left alike, the authors put their

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many substantive disagreements aside to clarify and affirm their collective reason for being. As experienced leaders, they no doubt expected they would have some colleagues, trustees, grantees, members, or commentators who took umbrage over what they said and/or with whom they said it. It took both vision and fortitude for them to craft and sign the statement together. Those who care about the health of civil society and democracy in America — and philanthropy’s role in supporting them — are in their debt.

At first glance, the signatories upheld and modeled a venerable understanding of pluralism and philanthropy’s role in supporting it in the U.S. In doing so, they spoke not only to colleagues, peers, and grantees in civil society. They also spoke, clearly if indirectly, to critics attacking the legitimacy of philanthropy, seeking to prescribe its causes, and/or wanting to dismantle its legally privileged status. Their manifesto was at once an attempt to rally friends and allies and defuse if not defend against an increasingly sharp opposition.

The public reactions to the manifesto, however, demonstrated the extent to which the perspective that informed it is no longer venerated. Prominent commentators in the social sector, whom we might have expected to endorse the authors' call, read it with little sympathy, expressing befuddlement and skepticism about their purposes. Meanwhile, ideologues on both the left and right subjected philanthropic pluralism and those defending it to caustic wire brush treatments.<sup>56</sup> Rather than clarifying things, then, the philanthropic pluralists' manifesto, combined with the muted and over-the-top reactions to it, clouded the waters. But the manifesto did call an important question that, among other things, animates this paper: Can pluralism — as a vision for civil society in general and for philanthropy in particular — be saved?

As is often the case with calls to action of this sort, especially when written by a diverse group of leaders, the manifesto has a blindspot that needs to be corrected. It lies in the claim that “philanthropy as a whole makes its greatest contribution to democracy when all foundations and donors engage in the unfettered pursuit of their own mission, interests, and prerogatives.” We saw earlier how philanthropies engaging in this “unfettered pursuit,” including institutions whose current leaders co-authored the manifesto, have over time contributed to a tragedy of the commons in our public life. Philanthropic funders' blinkered dedication to their particular and partial causes have hastened Americans' tribalization. In the democracy field, many funders have come to operate as de facto partisans, increasing cynicism about democracy and philanthropy alike. Meanwhile, our governing institutions and civic culture struggle to make policies on contested issues and reconcile a critical mass of the public to support them.

Ever more strategic and relentless advocacy and activism cannot realize funders' ends, whatever they might be, amid this system-level decline and loss of trust. But they can — and if unabated will— worsen the erosion. All the while, the legitimacy of philanthropy as an activity becomes ever more precarious and contested. Unfettered philanthropic pluralism is not an adequate solution to the problems at hand. Instead, philanthropic funders need to practice responsible pluralism to help restore the commons in which they all operate.

## **B. Six Steps Toward Responsible Pluralism**

Practicing responsible pluralism ultimately depends less on *what* specific causes are being funded and more on *how* funders are supporting them. We turn now to survey six concrete steps funders

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<sup>56</sup> See, Phil Buchanan, “[Who Is Threatening 'Philanthropic Freedom?'](#),” *Center for Effective Philanthropy* blog, April 2023; Craig Kennedy, “[What Was the Philanthropic Pluralism Manifesto Really About?](#)” *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 4, 2023; Naomi Schaefer Riley and James Pierson, “[Philanthropy and Pluralism](#),” *Quillette*, June 13, 2023. Le, “[No, Not All Philanthropic Views Are Good, and Many Don't Deserve Our Respect](#)”; Edgar Villanueva, “[Debunking the Myth of Philanthropic Pluralism](#),” Letter to the Editor, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 26, 2023; Adam Kissel, “[New Koch](#),” *The American Mind*, April 26, 2023.

can take toward this end. Whatever their focus area, funders ready to do their part to avoid compounding the problems bearing down on democracy in America will need to take the first five steps. A critical mass of philanthropists will also have to take the sixth step for pluralism, liberal democracy, and, ultimately, their own field of endeavor to flourish.

### 1) Admit There is a Problem

The first and most important step is the easiest one to take. Philanthropists need to admit there is a problem. Or, put differently, they have an obligation that too many large-scale institutional and individual philanthropists have shirked. They need to assume their fair share of responsibility for the health of the democracy into which they are dispatching all the political activism and policy advocacy they support. In economic terms, they need to internalize the externalities of this grantmaking. Should philanthropists fail to fulfill this obligation, it will not only have dire consequences for democracy in America, but also (and rightly) continue to diminish the legitimacy of their role and contributions.

For institutional and individual funders alike, recognizing and assuming this responsibility, then ensuring it is carried out, needs to occur from the top down. It will fall to foundation boards and presidents, as well as individual and family donors to make sure that it is happening. Otherwise program staff and philanthropic advisers will default to the current patterns in determining what strategies to pursue and which grantees to support.

An integral part of this first step — and proof that it has been taken — entails that funders accept the facts and reflect the values of pluralism in their strategies and approaches. This means accepting

An integral part of this first step — and proof that it has been taken — entails that funders accept the facts and reflect the values of pluralism in their strategies and approaches.

that Americans live in a big and diverse country that by design contains all sorts of people, groups, causes, and ultimate commitments. Precisely because we are a free and equal people distributed across multiple dimensions of difference, we must figure out how to accommodate each other and engage in self-government together.

Accepting this reality bids us to extend a modicum of respect, and the toleration and forbearance that accompany it, to our fellow Americans, especially when they see

the world very differently. Contempt for those we disagree with, a determination to silence opposing views, and a visceral fight or flight response vis-a-vis out-groups from our own are part of human nature. But so too is the capacity to listen, to inquire and understand why others see things as they do, and to identify and work toward goals we hold in common.

## **2) Practice Pluralism from the Inside Out**

The second step requires philanthropists to expand the viewpoints informing their grantmaking so they better reflect the country as a whole. By dint of what they do (grant money to groups that depend on it) and who they are accountable to (effectively, themselves), funders are well insulated from opposing viewpoints and critics. They thus need to cultivate biodiversity rather than a monoculture when it comes to their demographic, cultural, and ideological ecosystems. This means recruiting people, building relationships, and seeking out perspectives that complement, challenge, and even contradict their prevailing patterns of thought and behavior. It means being attentive and responsive to the full sweep of stakeholders whose lives the philanthropy in question will impact—not just those already on board with the plan. It means welcoming dissent and alternative viewpoints that enrich and complexify discussions, and that ultimately enable philanthropists to pursue their chosen ends more effectively.

With this second step, it is important to be concrete and practical. Funders should nurture viewpoint diversity within the groups that have the most direct influence on their grantmaking. For institutional foundations, program staff are especially important. In addition to demographic diversity, foundations should have program team members who introduce different political, ideological, and cultural viewpoints into the mix. For individual funders and family office donors, attaining sufficient viewpoint diversity among the external advisers informing their grantmaking is critical.

This doesn't mean that the Open Society Foundation needs to hire conservatives at levels exactly proportionate to their presence in society as a whole. Nor must the stalwart members of the Philanthropy Roundtable do likewise with left-leaning liberals or progressives. But introducing more viewpoint diversity into these and other philanthropic endeavors would make them better informed and equipped to advance the changes they wish to see in diverse society. This would reduce the reinforcing but counterproductive groupthink that has come to hold sway among far too many institutional and individual philanthropists.

We might think of this step as putting grit in the oyster of philanthropic efforts in order to produce pearls. Of course it will seem counterintuitive for funders to hire program staff, retain advisers, or add board members with heterodox viewpoints on the problems they are tackling and solutions for them. But it is hard to identify viable solutions for a pluralistic society with a team that lacks substantive connections to and sympathy for broad swaths of the people comprising it.

## **3) Build Expansive and Varied Coalitions**

Incorporating a wider range of viewpoints within the internal team is a necessary but insufficient step. It is also critical for philanthropists practicing pluralism to broaden the mix of external partners they work with — the organizations they support and the funders they join forces with.

Funders do not have to agree on everything with their grantees and co-funders; in fact, it is better if they do not. They just need to have at least one goal in common and mutually recognize that the odds of realizing it will increase if they work toward it together. Indeed, it is entirely possible to agree upon and collaborate to realize one goal with partners while disagreeing and working at cross purposes on others. If they are left free to do so by their philanthropic patrons, the members of policy coalitions will naturally fluctuate and form different alliances from issue to issue. That is how pluralism is meant to work.

If funders limit their partnerships to organizations they agree with on all substantive issues, then they resign themselves (and their partners) to permanent minority status and reduce their influence accordingly. Conversely, if funders adopt a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to their partnerships and coalitions, they increase their likelihood of helping to build and sustain broad majorities. They also reduce the risks of blind spots and belief polarization that are pervasive in homogenous groups.

In the extended sphere of Madison's republic, the goal is not to get 50% plus one, but rather to build expansive and enduring majorities so policies can be enacted and sustained. As middle-out economics advocate and funder Nick Hanauer recently told the Bridgespan Group, "You can't win without a narrative that is appealing to 70 percent or more of the public."<sup>57</sup> Effective and enduring majorities do not cluster at the poles but encompass the center of American politics.

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#### **4) Grant the Initiative Alongside Funding**

The fourth step might at first glance seem prosaic, as it concerns the mechanics of how funders distribute their philanthropy. In addition to money, grantees need and benefit from leeway to pursue their various strategies. When philanthropists set and control the courses of action their grantees pursue, they impose a uniformity of thought across their networks that limits creative and timely responses to new developments. Distributed leadership and initiative are not only good for grantees; they allow pluralism to develop and flourish in the fields that funders support.

A time-tested way to cede the initiative to grantee organizations is for funders to provide them with multi-year general operating or unrestricted support. This allows the nonprofits receiving the funding to use it and respond to emerging challenges and opportunities as they see fit. Given these

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<sup>57</sup> William Foster, et al., "[Betting on the Tortoise: Policy Incrementalism and How Philanthropy's Support Can Turn Small Incremental Steps Into Big Impact](#)," The Bridgespan Group White Paper, April 2024, 10.



organizations see firsthand what the work demands, they are likely to make better choices about how to deploy resources than funders in faraway offices in Manhattan, Seattle, or Silicon Valley.

Distributed leadership and initiative are not only good for grantees; they allow pluralism to develop and flourish in the fields that funders support.

When such grants are made at a larger scale and/or over longer terms, it further frees up recipients. They are better positioned to find the best way to proceed when they don't have to worry immediately about securing the next tranche of funds needed to power their work.

Funders can also enable pluralism by supporting shared infrastructure (e.g., research, intermediary capacity, network convenings) for the field that other entities can

use. Their missions may be proximate to but not directly aligned with those of the underwriting funder. But these other parties can still take advantage of the public goods the funder has underwritten and made available to the field. A fuller set of perspectives and more diverse activities will develop as a result.

### **5) Think in Decades, Not Years**

Philanthropic funders consistently overestimate the impact they can have in the near term, over the next 1-2 years. They are just as apt to underestimate what they can help accomplish over the longer term, over 5 or 10 years, and even longer if they stay focused. Longer time horizons are not only more fruitful, but they also reinforce pluralism in two ways.

First, it takes time to build super-majority coalitions. There are more differences to reconcile and overcome in getting to workable unity among larger and more diverse groups. It takes longer to build relationships, clarify goals, and develop shared plans and ways of working to realize them when the participants are more disparate. To paraphrase the African proverb, if you want to go fast, go with like-minded colleagues; if you want to go far, travel with less familiar partners and improbable allies.

Second, longer time horizons elevate institutional visions over and above the narrow, political, and polarized confines of a particular electoral cycle. They reduce the temptation of philanthropic funders to pull out stops and seek to affect, however indirectly, what happens in the course of that election or its aftermath. Rather than pulling funders and thus their grantees into the immediate political fray, with its crowded and tribalized cacophony, it keeps them focused on changing the world in 5-10 years, where there is more room to maneuver.

## 6) Strengthen Democracy and Civic Life

Whatever their issue areas, all funders need to take the five steps outlined above to avoid being free riders taking advantage of democracy in America while eroding its staying power. This sixth step is optional, but an ample subset of public-spirited funders will have to take it: building up the institutions, civic culture, and infrastructure of liberal democracy itself.

Democratic institutions are critical because they are the arenas in which Americans register and work out their differences. Legislative bodies and systems for administering elections are especially vulnerable and need shoring up given the intensifying contestation occurring within and around them. But these institutions also need to be reformed and refreshed, e.g., through ranked-choice voting (RCV), proportional representation, and citizens' assemblies.

Beyond shoring up and reforming the institutions of democracy, philanthropy also can help revitalize the civic culture needed to sustain them. For example, the exploration of pluralism and belonging by a cross-ideological set of funders in recent years has developed several promising approaches. Civic education presents another opportunity in the cultural domain. Americans agree much more than we would know from the sterile and polarizing debates on what to teach students about their country's history, ideals, and the uneven progress toward them. Dedicated civic educators are honing promising approaches for cultivating reflective patriotism in K-12 students and re-grounding higher education in civic thought.<sup>58</sup>

It is tempting for philanthropists to see investments in the more intangible aspects of democracy as something to back-burner until they have defeated immediate dangers to it. That argument has been proffered for several electoral cycles now, with rapidly accumulating opportunity costs in the form of foregone investments in our civic culture and infrastructure. No doubt there is important work to do in checking illiberal gambits. But the long-term goal cannot wait. Until it is realized — and it could take decades — each election will bring new risks.

In the early 1900s, Andrew Carnegie invested in public libraries in ways that continue to pay dividends for democracy and civic life in America today. The ambitious philanthropists of today should make investments in the same spirit, such that they will still be paying dividends in the early 2100s. In our time, as in Carnegie's, most of this civic infrastructure will need to be built at the local level. Within communities, these initiatives will not necessarily be understood as being about democracy or civic life per se, but they are nonetheless critical for their health.

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<sup>58</sup> See More in Common, "[Defusing the History Wars: Finding Common Ground in Teaching America's National Story](#)," December 2022; Educating for American Democracy Initiative, "[Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy](#)," March 2020; Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, "[Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education](#)," American Enterprise Institute white paper, December 11, 2023.

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We saw earlier how the polarization of our government and politics contributed to the erosion in our associational lives. Democracy in America has not been the better for it. But philanthropy now has an opportunity to help erect scaffolding that can support the revitalization of Tocquevillian forms of association from the bottom up, in a pluralistic fashion. These efforts could include, for example, strengthening civic media and journalism in local settings and enhancing the places and programs in which community members can gather and work together. There is also a need and opportunity to support the growing number of constructive communities that exist online, many of which are rooted in particular places.

Funders who take this sixth step to build up the institutions, civic culture, and infrastructure of liberal democracy itself need to resist two common temptations. One is presuming that the solution(s) they are supporting should be the focus and priority for everyone else. Now is the time for a pluralistic, all-of-the-above strategy, and for philanthropists to work in a spirit of reciprocity with those who have opted to bolster democracy in different ways.

The other temptation, more common and especially problematic, is for funders to back grantees in the democracy field to achieve their partisan ends. Many philanthropists on both the left and the right have conflated their political preferences with what they are convinced is necessary to save democracy in America. They cloak the former with the latter. This may pay off for them at times, at least in the short term. But over time, it tends to set back their preferences and democracy alike. It also leads fellow citizens to question — understandably — the democratic legitimacy of such philanthropy.

## Part III: Case Study of the Hewlett Foundation's U.S. Democracy Grantmaking, 2013–2022

We turn now to a case study of a foundation program that strove to take the steps outlined above. I served as the inaugural director of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's U.S. democracy grantmaking from 2013 to 2022. During my tenure, I led a team that distributed \$180 million in grants to more than 150 nonprofit organizations. We also joined forces with dozens of other funders and participated in multiple philanthropic collaborations to strengthen democracy and promote pluralism in the US. Our experience thus constitutes a revealing object lesson on the opportunities and challenges of doing philanthropy with these goals in mind.<sup>59</sup> I will use the six steps outlined above to organize the following discussion and flesh out the framework.

But first, a caveat: there is inevitably a coherence that creeps into a retrospective and stylized account like this one that belies the uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness of things as they unfolded. For instance, we did not set out to take the six steps with any precision. We had rough plans to take some, and then discovered the merits of and pursued the others once we got going. This is all to say, in between the lines below, readers should presume and posit more or less continuous learning and adjustment in the wake of many trials, errors, and unforeseen events. To keep the account grounded in the swirling reality in which it unfolded, I draw upon and link to publicly available and contemporaneous documents whenever possible.

### 1) Admit There is a Problem

I joined the Hewlett Foundation in May 2013. Larry Kramer, Hewlett's new president, hired me to lead the development of a strategy for how the foundation could support U.S. democracy. Larry was an accomplished legal scholar and constitutional historian who, before coming to Hewlett, had served as dean of the Stanford Law School. He decided to become president at Hewlett in part

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<sup>59</sup> This is not a comprehensive account of the Hewlett Foundation's efforts to strengthen U.S. democracy during my tenure as the inaugural program director. It focuses instead on the episodes, trends, and themes most relevant for the discussion of how philanthropy can take the six steps toward responsible pluralism outlined above. I should also say more about who the "we" is in this part of the paper. While this is my account, I am describing the work of a broader team at the Hewlett Foundation. It included Larry Kramer, our president. In addition to jumpstarting our work and actively sponsoring it throughout his tenure, Larry was closely involved in the development of our strategies, which had to pass muster with him before they went to the full board for approval. Kelly Born helped us develop and implement our initial strategy as a special projects fellow. Subsequently, as a program officer, Kelly led our efforts to support electoral and campaign finance reforms and to combat misinformation. Jean Bordewich served as the program officer who led our grantmaking and networking to strengthen Congress as an institution and, starting in 2021, the executive branch as well. Vanessa Tucker joined us as a program officer in early 2020 and led the development and implementation of Hewlett's Trusted Elections strategy. Over the years our team was supported and organized by a series of highly capable program associates: Linda Clayton, Dominique Turrentine, Carla Bernal, and Carlos Aguilar. We also relied heavily on teammates based in the foundation's communications, effective philanthropy, grants management, and legal functions. I do not presume to speak for my colleagues. That said, I trust my account is readily recognizable, and not disagreeable, to their perspectives about the work we did together.

because of his interest in launching a new line of grantmaking to shore up the country's sputtering democratic process. If the foundation's board approved the strategy we developed, my job would then be to lead the implementation of it.

In early 2014, Larry and I opened the memo in which we proposed our strategy to the board by admitting we faced a really big problem:

"As current events make all too clear, the democratic process of the United States is breaking down. Even apart from the travails of Obamacare and ongoing high-stakes combat in Washington over issues like the budget, we are confronted by continuing legislative inaction on a number of pressing issues ranging from climate change and entitlement reform to education, immigration, and tax reform....

The Hewlett Foundation has a particular interest in these issues. We cannot always count on persuading government to adopt policies we favor, nor is our ability to do so the measure of whether our political system is working. But our grantmaking presumes a minimally rational and functioning policymaking process, and unless the mounting problems of governance are removed or reduced in importance, we face being stymied in much if not most of our other work.

To focus our efforts to repair America's politics, we propose to zero in on what we see as the fundamental problem underlying our dysfunctional government: political polarization."<sup>60</sup>

We recognized that we needed to address the problem of polarization in ways that did not compound it. Hence our determination to take a pragmatic, non-ideological approach, in keeping with the Foundation's long standing values. We also committed to remaining agnostic about policy outcomes. We wanted to avoid any suggestion that we were framing and undertaking our democracy work instrumentally, to further Hewlett's policy aims in other program areas. These included, for example, mitigating climate change, protecting reproductive rights, and reforming K-12 education. Our view was that if we could help get our democratic system back on track, policy outcomes would be a matter for the American people and their elected representatives to decide. That is, after all, how democracy is meant to work! We had confidence that the Foundation's other aims would not suffer as a result.

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<sup>60</sup> Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid, Memo to Hewlett Foundation Board of Directors, "[Request for Approval of the Democratic Process Initiative](#)," February 17, 2014.

We knew that we were embarking on an unconventional path. David Callahan, the founder and editor of *Inside Philanthropy*, wasted no time in critiquing it. Callahan contrasted our commitment to non-partisan pragmatism with the willingness of conservative foundations like Scaife, Olin, and Bradley to take up the ideological cudgels to advance their values. He argued that we would inevitably fail unless we did likewise. “It’s silly for Hewlett to say its grantmaking is ‘non-ideological,’” Callahan insisted. We had a “clear enemy:” ideologues in the Republican Party, on whom he blamed the entire problem of polarization. So, he asked incredulously, “Why won’t Hewlett just step up and directly fight these folks?”<sup>61</sup>

Callahan’s prescription essentially was for us to help the Democratic Party beat the GOP into submission. Only this, he argued, would force the latter to moderate its politics and policy and end polarization. How were we, a private foundation proscribed by law from electioneering to assist in bringing about this result? By following the lead of liberal and progressive foundations “deep into efforts to help low-income people and communities of color fully engage in our democracy, which can change the electoral balance of power (and has already).” Callahan acknowledged that “this kind of stuff sounds like a blueprint for Democratic ‘dominance.’” But he argued that is how partisan politics, and philanthropy done in service of them, works. To improve democracy, we needed to engage in “more political combat, not less.”<sup>62</sup>

I responded with an op-ed titled, “We Are Partisans for Representative Democracy” that sought to convey what it was that we were prepared to fight for. I began with a note of gratitude: “In conversations with left-leaning funders, advocates, scholars, and elected officials, we’ve heard oblique hints of what Callahan has now said loudly and forthrightly.” His upbraiding gave us an opportunity to share the deeper historical judgment informing our strategy:

“For the past several decades, foundations on both the right and the left have been doing what Callahan urges us to do, namely, working to realize substantive and sharply differing conceptions for the future of the country. But as these competing ideas and principles have been translated into the work of advocates and parties, they have helped polarize our system and sharpened the electoral contest within it. The resulting political conflict is wearing down not just the effectiveness, but the very legitimacy of our representative institutions and processes.

Which brings us to the nub of the problem: The philanthropic sector has paid too little attention to shoring up the system of representative democracy through which it seeks to

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<sup>61</sup> David Callahan, “[Why Won’t Foundations Like Hewlett Just Stand Up and Fight for Their Values?](#)” *Inside Philanthropy*, July 14, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, his emphasis.

push all these competing political and policy goals. We think that needs to change.”<sup>63</sup>

In concluding my response to Callahan’s broadside, I admitted that we could be wrong: “In this venture, like any worthy philanthropic endeavor, success is uncertain.” We turn now to the approaches that led us to be cautiously optimistic, though by no means assured, we were headed in a promising direction.

## 2) Practice Pluralism from the Inside Out

Philanthropic funders carry their own echo chambers around with them wherever they go. We sought to avoid this pluralism-killing pitfall in several ways, beginning with how we built our team. We ended up incorporating a blend of ideological perspectives into the mix. Larry saw my center-right political views and network as helpfully complementing and balancing his own, which lay more on the center-left. In my role as program director, I followed his lead. I hired Jean Bordewich, an experienced congressional aide and Democratic staff director of the Senate Rules Committee, as the program officer to lead our work bolstering Congress as an institution.

We also decided to undertake a different kind of evaluation of our work, which gave us a rich and steady supply of outside-in feedback. The usual approach would have been to wait until completing a body of grantmaking, then commission a retrospective evaluation of how it had unfolded and/or the impact it had. However, we wanted to pressure-test and assess our work from the outset so we could learn, reflect, and adjust our course along the way. For this to happen, we needed to have the benefit of continuous feedback coming in from outside parties, solicited whenever possible from anonymous informants to ensure candor. As we got started, we commissioned Julia Coffman and Tanya Beer of the Center for Evaluation Innovation to gather, synthesize, and help us make sense of these critical inputs.<sup>64</sup>

Along similar lines, we relied extensively on recurring Grantee Perception Reports prepared for all Hewlett Foundation programs every 2-3 years by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP). They surveyed our grantees anonymously to get their quantitative and qualitative perceptions on the experience of working with us and our contributions in the broader field. CEP staff benchmarked the quantitative input against the results for Hewlett’s other foundation programs and a comparison

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<sup>63</sup> Daniel Stid, “[We Are Partisans for Representative Democracy](#),” *Inside Philanthropy*, July 21, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Julia and Tanya worked with us in this fashion for the next five years. They met with our team for day-long sessions on a quarterly basis to share what they were finding, hearing, and observing and to facilitate reflection and learning sessions. Subsequently, Kathy Armstrong picked up the baton as our evaluator and measurement and learning adviser from 2019-2022. Their efforts, insight, and counsel materially improved our work. Julia, Tanya, Kathy and I have since published a retrospective reflection on our work together, “Using Developmental Evaluation to Support Adaptive Strategies: An Application from a Social Change Initiative,” in Anu Rangarajan, ed., [The Oxford Handbook of Program Design and Implementation Evaluation](#) (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023), 151-171.

set of ten or so other foundations. This helped us see where and how we were doing well relative to peers and, more importantly, where we needed to get better. Our team used this feedback to improve our grant practices (more on this to follow) and detect early signals about our evolving strategies from grantees' responses to open-ended survey questions.

Another way we escaped our echo chamber was via Larry's push to have Hewlett's program staff engage with their external critics. Larry became concerned about the challenges Hewlett's teams, and other foundation leaders and staff across the country, had in listening with empathy to people who saw the world differently. Rather than countering trends toward polarization with reason and nuance, grantmakers were succumbing to them. Trump's presidency and the conflicts he incited accelerated this phenomena. As Larry noted in a January 2019 blog post titled, "Listening to People Who Think We Are Wrong:"

"It's easy to preach to the choir, and even easier to be part of it. It's easy to surround ourselves with people who think as we do and to dismiss everyone who disagrees as stupid or corrupt. It's especially easy to act this way when our political leaders — led or goaded by the president, with his outsized megaphone — relentlessly fan the flames of discord and contempt. Adopting a tribal mindset when everyone else seems to be doing so is more than just easy. It's satisfying.

Which makes it all the more important not to fall prey to this way of thinking. We must instead discipline ourselves to argue with opponents empathetically, and not only because this could make our efforts to overcome them more effective. We must do it because, unless we can hear our opponents and make them feel heard (and they us), we stand little chance of maintaining our democracy — not in a society as complex and diverse as this one, comprised of people with so many different, intensely-held interests and passions and beliefs."<sup>65</sup>

Larry thus asked each program team to bring in 1-2 critics of their work, then engage them in an extended discussion. Our objectives in these sessions were not to rebut or debate our guests but rather to listen and learn from them.

The Madison Initiative brought in two such critics: Eric Posner, professor at the University of Chicago Law School, and Vanita Gupta, then Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. Posner had co-authored a book with Adrian Vermeule of Harvard Law School titled *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*. Their thesis was that "we live in a regime of executive-centered government, in an age after the separation of powers."<sup>66</sup> If they were right, then

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<sup>65</sup> Larry Kramer, "[Listening to the People Who Think We Are Wrong](#)," *Hewlett Foundation* blog, January 10, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule, *The Executive Unbound: After the Madisonian Republic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4.



I had always made a point of saying to internal and external audiences that, well, we could be wrong! Soliciting direct and candid feedback from smart people who disagreed with us underscored this as a real possibility.

our strategy to strengthen Congress as the first branch of “the Madisonian Republic” was wrong. From her position, Gupta shared a comprehensive view of where and how the civil rights of Americans, especially communities of color, stood in jeopardy. These risks had proliferated under the Trump administration. Her perspective pushed us to reckon more clearly with current threats to and violations of civil rights and liberties.

The work our team did before, during, and after these sessions to wrestle with the countervailing arguments to our strategies was bracing. I had always made a point of saying to internal and external audiences that, well, we could be

wrong! Soliciting direct and candid feedback from smart people who disagreed with us underscored this as a real possibility. It also pushed us to reconsider many of our prior assumptions about the issues we were tackling as well as the coalitions we were tackling them with.<sup>67</sup>

### 3) Build Expansive And Varied Coalitions

When we started with this work, most of the grantees and funders in the democracy field resided in the non-partisan center or on the liberal and progressive left. We were glad to partner with many of these organizations and quickly began doing so. But we also recognized that the field as a whole, and our strategy in particular, needed to have effective grantee organizations and co-funders across the ideological spectrum. Given the evenly divided polity, it was hard to see how efforts to strengthen democracy could prosper if the coalitions working toward this end tilted leftward. We thus began supporting existing efforts, seeded new ones, and built relationships with leaders and institutions on the right who shared our goals. We and the broader field of which we were a part soon began reaping the benefits of a more ideologically diverse and balanced portfolio of grantees and funding partners.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> While the sessions with Posner and Gupta did not lead directly to changes in our work, two years later, when we promulgated our refreshed strategies to strengthen [national governing institutions](#) and support [trust-worthy elections](#), they would include several new elements reflecting the issues we had discussed with them.

<sup>68</sup> Established center-right grantees we supported in this period included National Affairs, the Niskanen Center, and the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. New efforts we seeded included the Federalist Society’s Article I Initiative, the R Street Institute’s Governance Program, Take Back Our Republic, and AEI’s “Is Congress Broken?” project. We also supported research and public advocacy by Stuart Butler at the Brookings Institution, Chris DeMuth at the Hudson Institute, Greg Weiner at Assumption University’s Moynihan Center, and Peter Wehner and the late Michael Gerson at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. New funding partners we developed through this work included the Bradley Foundation, the Searle Freedom Trust, and the Peterson Foundation. We also greatly benefited from the counsel of and began a long partnership with Adam Meyerson and the team at the Philanthropy Roundtable.

We had to revisit and rebuild our coalitions in the wake of Trump's ascension to the White House. The good news was that philanthropy was flooding into the field. Unfortunately, the lion's share of the influx was sharply polarized. Most of it came from new entrants determined to resist Trump's policies and political prospects, and from existing center-left and liberal funders rejecting bipartisanship for the same reasons.<sup>69</sup> A smaller and opposing pattern played out on the right, where many funders fell in with and sought to support Trump's agenda.

As a result, we found it more challenging to hold the space and find funding partners in between these camps.

We ended up shouldering the costs of several longer-term projects to bridge divides and strengthen institutions we had previously shared with co-funders on the left and right. We stayed the course, concluding our approach was even more important now given the polarized and politicized responses of a growing number of other funders. At the same time, we recognized the need to find new philanthropic partners and allies.

We found one group of like-minded actors in the Patriots and Pragmatists (P&P) network founded by Rachel Pritzker and her philanthropic adviser, Mike Berkowitz. Rachel had been a self-described "partisan warrior" and donor to political causes and policy advocates affiliated with the Democratic Party, especially in the environmental arena. However, she and Mike had come to see that the giving they had been doing through groups like the Democracy Alliance was actually making it harder to realize their goals. It was spurring polarization and impractical, all-or-nothing policy solutions. Braced by Trump's election, they decided to change course.<sup>70</sup>

Rachel and Mike formed the P&P network through a series of semi-annual meetings starting in July 2017. The convenings brought together strange bedfellows across the left, right, and center. Network members included journalists, opinion leaders, policy advocates, democracy reformers, think tankers, and funders. The common ground for the disparate group was their abiding belief in the values, norms, and institutions of liberal democracy and the need for a broad, cross-ideological coalition to defend it. We experienced the P&P network as encouraging and helpful in equal measure. So did several of our grantees who also had joined. We thus helped underwrite the activities of P&P

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<sup>69</sup> See Joe Goldman, "[Why Democracy Fund Is Declaring Independence from Bipartisanship](#)," Democracy Fund blog, June 16, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Rachel Pritzker, "[A Partisan Warrior's Reckoning](#)," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 1, 2024.

and the Democracy Funders Network, an affiliated offshoot set up to assist funders looking for more constructive ways to support democracy.

At this same juncture, we had to acknowledge and begin work to resolve another challenge to the ethos of pluralism we sought to support and reflect in our grantee portfolios and coalitions. We had intentionally cultivated an ideologically and politically diverse set of grantees, co-funders, and field partners. The resulting viewpoint diversity we had access to was proving to be a singular asset. However, we came to recognize that our network lacked sufficient diversity on another important dimension of difference: race and ethnicity.

We knew we had to reckon with and close this gap. The 2016 election made clear that the problem of polarization we sought to address was increasingly entangled with political appeals based on racial and ethnic identities. If the leaders and organizations in our grantee portfolio did not reflect and represent the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the country, we risked misunderstanding this challenge. More importantly, the coalitions we were supporting would lack the full suite of perspectives and staying power they would need to succeed. Finally, we were distributing \$20 million in annual grantmaking. We had an obligation to surface and rectify any biases and blind spots in how we were distributing these resources.

In 2016, we commissioned Amy Dominguez-Arms, an experienced grant maker and advisor in the field, to assess our work and make recommendations for ways we could improve in this regard. This review led to fruitful relationships with the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and the National Association of Latino Elected & Appointed Officials (NALEO) Education Fund. These two organizations were founded in the 1970s to support and inform the growing cohorts of African American and Latino elected officials, respectively.<sup>71</sup>

The experienced leaders of these organizations — Spencer Overton of the Joint Center, and Arturo Vargas of NALEO — proved to be especially constructive critical friends of our work. On several occasions they pointed out blindspots and apparent biases in our strategy, the assumptions underlying it, and/or the approaches we were taking in executing it. Their critical friendship helped us bring considerations of race and ethnicity more squarely into our work. It also helped us connect with and appreciate the work of other new grantees and coalition partners.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> While our grants to these organizations took the form of multi-year general operating support, we appreciated how specific projects the organizations were focused on furthered concrete goals we held in common. The Joint Center's research on the dearth of senior staffers of color in Congress surfaced an egregious failure of inclusion that hurt the institution and required a remedy. NALEO was already at work preparing for a full and accurate census count in 2020 — a starting point for apportionment and representation in Congress.

<sup>72</sup> Examples included the African American Federal Executives Association; Asian Americans Advancing Justice; the Leadership Conference Education Fund; the Public Policy and International Affairs Fellowship Program; Spread the Vote; the State Infrastructure Fund; and Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security, and Conflict Transformation.

#### 4) Grant the Initiative Alongside Funding

When funders assume the initiative and see themselves as the lead actors in determining how to solve big problems, it tends to backfire in two ways. First, it hampers the ability of grantees to innovate and set their own course in addressing the problems as they evolve. Second, it reduces pluralism in civil society by aligning actors around a single point of view. Making larger, longer-term, unrestricted grants helps avoid these pitfalls.

It took two years for this to become our default mode of grantmaking. It turned out to be one of the most important shifts we made. Given the complexity of the field we were setting out to work in, we knew we could not have all the answers at the outset. As Larry and I wrote our board in the memo proposing our strategy:

“The democratic system we want to change is more accurately described as a system of systems (and subsystems) on a national scale. These interconnect in ways no one fully understands, partly because the systems and subsystems are themselves dynamic. This, in turn, requires what has come to be known as an emergent strategy — meaning a strategy that is itself dynamic and meant to be reevaluated and adapted as the work proceeds.”<sup>73</sup>

Rather than making one or two big bets on particular interventions, we opted to begin by making a range of smaller project-style bets in different areas of the system. We reasoned this would enable us to understand better where, why, and how some approaches might pay off and where others might not. Our plan was then to double down on the early bets that paid off.<sup>74</sup>

Over the next two years, we followed through on our spread-betting strategy. This approach gave us some of the insights we were looking for. However, as we acknowledged in a memo to our grantees in June 2016, the time was ripe to revisit our approach. Through a grantee perception survey done by CEP in 2015, we learned the following:

“Grantees rated us highly ... for understanding their strategies and goals, for communicating our own strategies and goals to them, and for being transparent with and open to new ideas from grantees. This was affirming feedback. However, relative to these same benchmarks, Madison Initiative grantees perceived us as having less impact on their organizations, their fields, and public policy. While we might have expected these aggregate perceptions as a relatively new initiative, it is through such impact that our funding will in the end pay off. As we worked to make sense of these findings, we had to acknowledge

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<sup>73</sup> Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid, [“Request for Approval of the Democratic Process Initiative,”](#) February 17, 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Our approach in this regard drew on Steve Teles and Mark Schmitt, [“The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy,”](#) *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer 2011.

that the strategy we have intentionally pursued in the first two years of the Initiative has kept us, and our grantees, spread thin.”<sup>75</sup>

We had come to realize that, paradoxically, by ceding control, we ended up with more trust and thus influence among the organizations we supported. That helped the work we all did together prosper.

With the goal of boosting our impact, we changed our default mode of funding so that we granted most of it in the form of multi-year unrestricted support. This made us the exception to the rule in the democracy field, where most funding was meted out in smaller, shorter term, restricted grants.<sup>76</sup> Making larger, longer-term, and unrestricted grants reduced the number of grantees we could support. But this was a tradeoff we were prepared to make.

These shifts paid off. In subsequent anonymous benchmarking surveys, grantees consistently ranked us in the

top quartile relative to other funders in our impact on their organizations, the field, and public policy. And, at the same time, grantees ranked us just as highly for not requiring them to adjust their plans and priorities to receive funding from us. Our trust-based approach left grantees free to use our funding to respond to challenges and opportunities as they saw fit. Given they knew first-hand what the work demanded, they could make better choices about how best to use our resources than we could from our offices in Menlo Park.

This approach to funding, combined with a grantee-informed streamlining of our proposal and reporting processes, made it relatively easy for grantees to do business with us.<sup>77</sup> We took pride as a team in this. We had come to realize that, paradoxically, by ceding control, we ended up with more trust and thus influence among the organizations we supported. That helped the work we all did together prosper. And it ensured that the wide-ranging pluralism we intentionally built into our grantee portfolios was not being diminished by heavy-handed, overly-directive funding.

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<sup>75</sup> Madison Initiative Team, “[Update on Our Work to Date and Plans for a Renewal of the Initiative](#),” June 2, 2016, 5.

<sup>76</sup> In 2016, to test this hypothesis, we commissioned the Foundation Center staff to do an assessment of six different areas in which larger foundations like ours tended to focus. In aggregate, there were 2,000 grants totalling more than \$340 million over a three year period in these areas. The analysis found that only 1% of the grants and 5% of the funding came in the form of unrestricted grants of \$100,000 or more with a duration of more than two years.

<sup>77</sup> For more on this process redesign, see Daniel Stid and Jillian Misrack Galbete, “[Streamlining a Foundation Initiative’s Grant Practices](#),” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* blog, November 7, 2017. In addition to the categories noted above, our team’s grantee perception reports consistently ranked us in the top quartile of performance relative to peer benchmarks in our understanding of the fields in which grantees were working and the challenges grantees faced; the consistency, transparency, and candor of our communications with grantees; our openness to ideas from grantees about our strategies; the extent to which grantees found our selection process strengthened their organization or program; and the extent to which grantees experienced our reporting process as straightforward, adaptable, relevant, and a helpful opportunity for reflection and learning.

Another productive way we found to grant the initiative to our partners was underwriting what we came to call “infrastructure” for the democracy field (e.g., databases, research, networks, and affinity groups with broad appeal and usage). Our hope was that a wide array of institutions and leaders could take advantage of these public goods to pursue their own goals for strengthening democracy.<sup>78</sup> We funded these infrastructure efforts in the spirit of what Larry referred to as “diffuse reciprocity.” Their benefits did not necessarily accrue to our strategies; in fact, the majority did not do so directly. But we supported them to do our part with respect to providing shared resources for what we regarded as an inherently collective effort.<sup>79</sup>

### 5) Think in Decades, Not Years

In early 2014, as we embarked on our work, Larry and I shared with the Hewlett board that, “the current situation took several decades to develop, and even if things go well, it could take as much time to set things right.”<sup>80</sup> At that point we were not proposing (nor would the board have approved) a decades-long strategy and budget. But we wanted everyone to understand the likely duration of what we were setting out to do and that we should not get started if we were not prepared to stay

Our time horizon left us at liberty to pursue the field-building strategy, grounded in multi-year unrestricted grants and infrastructure support, that enhanced the pluralism we sought to foster.

with it. With this time horizon in mind, the board approved our request for \$50 million over three years to undertake an exploratory round of grantmaking. We were to report back in November 2016, when the board would decide whether to renew the initiative.

The foundation’s willingness to invest on an exploratory basis in order to lay the groundwork and test the potential of an enduring effort was transformative. It enabled us to dig into longer-term yet high-potential opportunities from which funders operating with urgent time horizons shied away. These included, e.g., strengthening Congress as an institution and promoting RCV—challenges that required a perspective spanning decades to pursue.

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<sup>78</sup> For example, we joined forces with several other funders to help the Foundation Center develop *Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy*, a public database and visualization tool of all grants in the democracy field. In addition, we funded the Social Science Research Council’s multi-year Anxieties of Democracy Research Program, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, a funder affinity group, and Citizen University’s Civic Collaboratory, a mutual aid network. We supported the Pew Research Center’s recurring studies of polarization and “States of Change,” a multi-year project on demographic shifts undertaken by scholars at the AEI, Brookings, and CAP.

<sup>79</sup> Larry proposed that “diffuse reciprocity is an attitude, a willingness to give without demanding a precise accounting of equivalent benefits for each action, albeit because others in the community do so as well.” Kramer, “[Collaboration and ‘Diffuse Reciprocity,’](#)” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* blog, April 25, 2014.

<sup>80</sup> “[Request for Approval of the Democratic Process Initiative,](#)” February 17, 2014.

That we had such a vantage point also allowed us to experiment, learn, and course correct as we went along. When early assessments of our work pointed to signs of progress but also room to improve and, in some cases, the need to try different approaches, that was okay.<sup>81</sup> It was what we had expected would be the case, and we had the time and autonomy to adjust our course.

Our time horizon also left us at liberty to pursue the field-building strategy, grounded in multi-year unrestricted grants and infrastructure support, that enhanced the pluralism we sought to foster. We recognized these approaches would be hard-pressed to yield observable results in one or two years. But we had confidence they would bear fruit in one or two decades.

On November 1, 2016, Larry and I submitted a proposal to the Hewlett Foundation board to extend our work for five more years, through 2021, with an annual grantmaking budget of \$20 million. As we told the board in our memo, the good news was that, after three years of grantmaking, we could see a clear path forward. The bad news was this:

“From a global perspective, the challenges that motivated the Madison Initiative have persisted and, in some ways, worsened. ... The success of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders has highlighted the profound failure of our polarized party system. Discomfort in the electorate — over globalization, income inequality, and the power of elites — is clearly deeper and more widespread than either party has yet recognized or addressed, gridlocked and distracted by internecine warfare as they have been. Just as clear is the connection between congressional inaction and voters’ anger. Doing nothing has plainly exacerbated deep-seated frustration in a large part of the electorate, many of whom feel Congress is fiddling while the nation burns.”

In light of these developments, our memo concluded that, “the goal of the Madison Initiative is more imperative, more urgent than ever.”<sup>82</sup> We sent it to the board right before the 2016 election, then met to discuss it with them the week after Trump’s victory. Needless to say, it was a fraught conversation. At our team retreat in August, we had done a scenario planning exercise in which one outcome had Trump prevailing. However, in retrospect, we had not begun to reckon with the huge shifts in politics and government — and thus our strategy — that hypothetical would entail. And now it had come to pass.

I admitted to our board that, given the pre-election polling, we were as gobsmacked as many others were by the election results. It felt as if we were at sea. How practically could we counter

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<sup>81</sup> See Center for Evaluation Innovation, “[Campaign Finance Data Cluster Assessment—Topline Findings](#),” March 2016; “[Bipartisan Relationship Building Learning Memo](#),” April 13, 2016; [The Madison Initiative Developmental Evaluation Report](#), August 2016; and “[Congressional Oversight Learning Memo](#),” September 16, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Kramer and Stid, Memo to Board of Directors, “Proposal to Renew the Madison Initiative,” November 1, 2016.

polarization now that an unabashed polarizer had just been elected to the White House, not despite but evidently because of his antagonistic style?

Fortunately, the board was stalwart and concurred with the main thrust of our memo. Despite the headwinds buffeting U.S. democracy, they agreed that now was the time to press ahead, not pull back, and approved a five-year renewal of our work. At the same time, the board asked us to revisit and clarify the objectives and values that would serve as our bearing points for the next stage of our journey. Also, while endorsing our agnosticism on policy issues, the board asked us to detail the outcomes for democracy itself that we could not remain agnostic about.<sup>83</sup>

I will say more about the post-2016 shifts in our strategy in the next section. Here, I will just note that some of our longer-term pushes actually gained momentum in the Trump years. In early 2019, a huge bipartisan majority of House members voted to establish the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Over the next two congresses, the committee developed more than 200 bipartisan recommendations to improve the House. It worked closely with Hewlett grantees as it crafted, communicated, and began to implement these fixes.<sup>84</sup> We also saw the effort we supported to spread RCV gain momentum. In 2020, Maine became the first state to use RCV for federal elections. Alaska would soon follow suit. Also, the coalition of RCV funders and advocates greatly expanded, a prime goal of our work in this area.

In early 2020, encouraged by these and other green shoots, the Hewlett board decided to convert our time-bound initiative to an ongoing foundation program. The upgrade in status came as a validation of our work to date. It also acknowledged the seriousness of the problems we were working on and that, as we had expected, solving them would take not years but decades. In a blog post announcing the establishment of the U.S. Democracy Program, Larry and I reiterated what would continue to be the hallmarks of our approach:

“As a private foundation, we are proscribed by law from supporting or opposing any candidate or party in an election. We honor not only the letter but also the spirit of this proscription, as we are convinced that philanthropy is best positioned to improve U.S. democracy by investing in ideas, institutional developments, and reforms that will come to fruition over periods spanning multiple election cycles, and that garner the support of leaders and parties on both sides of the aisle. ... [They] will be aided by the kind of

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<sup>83</sup> We shared our subsequent reframing and the “bright lines” we would actively monitor in Memo to Partners and Stakeholders, [“Update on the Madison Initiative in the Wake of the 2016 Election,”](#) June 12, 2017, 5-7, 16.

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Stid, [“The Best-Kept Secret of the Secret Congress,”](#) *The Art of Association*, January 2, 2023; by late 2023, more than half of the recommendations had been implemented or were in process. See Sunwater Institute, [“Tracking the Recommendations of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress,”](#) December 23, 2023.



long-term, patient capital that we plan to provide and our overall approach — pragmatic, nonideological, and willing to actively engage with grantees, funders, and leaders on both the left and the right.”<sup>85</sup>

## 6) Strengthen Democracy and Civic Life

Thus far the case study has reviewed five steps that all funders can and should take, regardless of their focus, to practice responsible pluralism. The sixth step, strengthening the institutions, culture, and infrastructure of democracy itself, is optional, though a critical mass of funders need to take it. Let’s turn to how the Hewlett Foundation did so — and how our strategies evolved.

Initially, we set out to address the problem of polarization in two primary ways. First, we sought to explore whether and how we might be able to help restore pragmatism and the spirit of compromise in Congress. There, polarization had taken its deepest root. The resulting dysfunction was

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election, we realized we had to update our mission. It rested on a deeper set of values and norms. We needed to articulate and help defend these foundational premises.

rapidly spreading to other parts of the polity. Congress is the one national institution in which Americans’ different and often divergent values, interests, and agendas are supposed to be represented and balanced, if not fully reconciled, by elected officials. Hence our ongoing interest in helping bipartisan groups of reformers and institutionalists in Congress tackle core responsibilities like legislation, oversight, budgeting, and appropriations. If Congress got to work in these practical ways, we hypothesized, it would have a salutary secondary effect: modulating the performative and polarizing rhetoric too many members had started using.

Another strategic thrust was to see whether we could help reform and strengthen our systems of elections to mitigate polarization and bring more pragmatic, solutions-oriented lawmakers to Congress. There were a few major components to this approach. We underwrote research to understand if it might be possible and practical to broaden participation in primary elections so that their outcomes better reflected the diversity of the electorate. We supported structural changes like RCV and campaign finance reform as innovations that could help to depolarize the polity by shifting the incentives of candidates and parties. And we funded bipartisan efforts to strengthen our decentralized system of election administration, reasoning that, in a polarizing system, it would be key for elections to be impeccable and trustworthy.

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<sup>85</sup> Larry Kramer and Daniel Stid, “[Deepening Our Commitment to U.S. Democracy](#),” *Hewlett Foundation* blog, April 21, 2020.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 election, we realized we had to update our mission. We had originally set out “to help create conditions in which Congress and its members can deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in ways that more Americans support.” We remained committed to that as an important end of our work. But based on feedback from grantees and trustees, we recognized our goal rested on a deeper set of values and norms. We needed to articulate and help defend these foundational premises. They included self-restraint on the part of the party controlling political institutions at any point in time, the legitimacy of political opposition, and a willingness to abide by election results. Many grantees were already upholding these values and norms, and we identified and began funding others as well.<sup>86</sup>

In 2018, we added a new line of grantmaking to combat disinformation spread via social media. Back in 2013–14, we had considered whether we might address how the evolving media landscape had come to accelerate polarization. But the scale and complexity of that problem, combined with the lack of practical ways for us to intervene, led us to hold off. In the wake of 2016, the corrosive and polarizing impact of viral disinformation on social media became impossible to ignore. Moreover, the primary location of the problems in the algorithms of a few companies — Facebook, Google, and Twitter — that were like us based in Silicon Valley made this work seem less intractable.

Then came 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and President Trump’s attempt to overthrow the 2020 election. As we refreshed our strategies in response to these tumultuous events, we decided to consolidate and focus our efforts on two essential elements of democracy. As I described them in blog post introducing our new strategies:

“The first essential element is free and fair elections in which all candidates, parties, and voters — including, especially, those on the losing side — trust in and agree to abide by the results. Toward this end, our new trustworthy elections strategy will seek to help counter the increasingly rampant disinformation undermining trust in our elections, ensure that our elections system has sufficient public funding and is professionally and competently administered in a nonpartisan fashion, and enable every eligible voter to cast a ballot easily and securely.

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<sup>86</sup> “[Update on the Madison Initiative in the Wake of the 2016 Election](#),” June 12, 2017, 5-7. Also, while it was not pursued through the Madison Initiative, one other project the foundation launched after the 2016 election warrants a brief mention here. It arose from Larry Kramer’s reflections on the increasingly charged, identity-based debate between the two polarized parties. As Larry saw it, the neoliberal consensus on economics left the parties little to disagree about except for inflammatory issues hinging on Americans’ racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. At the same time, the neoliberal consensus stifled the development of solutions to the looming economic problems that were clearly spurring the rise of illiberal populism in the U.S. and elsewhere. Larry thus proposed that the foundation should help seed a new paradigm for political economy, instilling ideas into policy debates that would enable more constructive and pragmatic politics. We discussed whether this work should be part of the Madison Initiative. We recognized it would run counter to our professed agnosticism on substantive policy outcomes. Larry ultimately decided it would be best to launch the effort as a standalone initiative to avoid any confusion. See Larry Kramer, “[Beyond Neoliberalism: Rethinking Political Economy](#),” Memo to Hewlett Foundation Board of Directors, March 2018.

The second essential element is strong governing institutions that can make and administer laws and policies that represent citizens' preferences and are responsive to their needs. Our newly named national governing institutions strategy will continue our work to shore up Congress, which is now quietly leading to tangible results. But we also need a stronger and more capable executive branch to administer policies and respond to emergencies competently. Toward this end, we seek to help revitalize the federal workforce by attracting young, diverse, and tech-savvy Americans to public service and by reforming the outdated civil service system that stands in their way.”<sup>87</sup>

Looking back over the first eight years of Hewlett's grantmaking to strengthen democracy, two constants stand out. The first was the stability of our ultimate goal, alleviating polarization by buttressing the democratic institutions in which Americans are meant to work out our myriad differences. The second was the necessity of and our openness to changing tacks toward this goal. Larry and I told the board back in 2014 that the situation called for “what has come to be known as an emergent strategy — meaning a strategy that is itself dynamic and meant to be reevaluated and adapted as the work proceeds.” If nothing else, we succeeded in doing that!

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<sup>87</sup> Daniel Stid, “[Grantmaking Strategies to Help U.S. Democracy Survive and Flourish](#),” *Hewlett Foundation* blog, June 24, 2021.

## Coda: Responsible Pluralism in a Populist Age

Before closing this extended reflection on why and how more philanthropists need to practice responsible pluralism, I need to speak to an awkward fact. By any measure, democracy in America was in worse shape in 2022 than it was when the Hewlett Foundation began its work eight years earlier. Indeed, in the dark humor I increasingly resorted to in the aftermath of the 2020 election, I joked that my fixed-term appointment couldn't end soon enough. The efforts I had been directing to strengthen U.S. democracy were clearly having the opposite effect!

More seriously, in retrospect, the seemingly stabler aspects of the polity in 2014 masked deeper-seated, tectonic forces that had worked their way inexorably to the surface in the intervening years. We were not able to prevent their eruption, nor to resolve the problems that it produced. Nevertheless, we sought to respond as best we could in the circumstances, and we consistently held ourselves accountable for doing so in ways that did not make things worse. I remain convinced that the creative and determined responses we and our partners made in the face of the adversity we grappled with helped alleviate its worst consequences. Rowing toward shore against an ebbing tide is exhausting, and it can leave the crew with little headway to show for it. But how farther out to sea might we have been had we not rowed steadily all along?

I should also note two countervailing and encouraging trends. The first is the emergence of philanthropic networks, affinity groups, and pooled funds in the democracy field (broadly defined) that accept the facts and reflect the values of pluralism. They include PACE, the Democracy Funders Network, the New Pluralists Collaborative, the Election Trust Initiative, and the Trust for Civic Life. These efforts are dedicated to nonpartisan or bipartisan approaches and seek to bring about longer-term changes; they are practicing responsible pluralism. In doing so, they are helping offset the polarization and politicization that marks so much funding in the field.

Rowing toward shore against an ebbing tide is exhausting, and it can leave the crew with little headway to show for it. But how farther out to sea might we have been had we not rowed steadily all along?

The second trend is the emergence of new nonprofits and the rapid adaptation of existing ones to bolster U.S. democracy in a polarized, crisis-ridden era. The social entrepreneurship, strategic clarity, and dedication so many leaders and nonprofits brought to bear on the problems we sought to address together were truly impressive. I see their success and ongoing impact as the ultimate legacy of my time at the foundation and the work of the team I led there. Reflecting on all of these

organizations' accomplishments and the future contributions they are poised to make, I am full of gratitude.<sup>88</sup>

In the years ahead, it will be critical to cultivate these green shoots of more responsible pluralism in civil society so that they can take deeper root and spread. In the U.S. and around the world, our populist age will continue to bear down on and threaten to squelch the ethos of pluralism. One response to this threat would be for civil society groups to counter-mobilize and form the political resistance to populism. This has been the strategy that many philanthropists and grantees seeking to protect democracy have pursued during the rise, fall, and resurgence of Donald Trump's political fortunes. Should he and his party prevail in the 2024 elections, calls to enlist in and fund the resistance will no doubt intensify even more. However, the demonstrated staying power of Trump and the GOP he has remade along populist lines — despite billions in philanthropy devoted to opposing them — indicate this is not a winning strategy.

Such a defensive approach, in which philanthropy underwrites resistance to Trumpian populism in the elusive quest to protect democracy against itself, has several limitations. It provides MAGA enthusiasts with nearly perfect foils — wealthy and unaccountable elites based in blue coastal enclaves financing efforts to counter the people's will. It accelerates polarization by fomenting an apocalyptic, fear-based politics in which the population is starkly divided into friends and enemies, darkly mirroring the populists' Manichean worldview. It embroils philanthropy in the near-term political fray, where it enjoys little comparative advantage. It thus generates mounting opportunity costs in the form of forgone longer-term investments in the fertile expanse of our civic culture, where philanthropy is uniquely positioned to make a difference. It overlooks the negative effects of illiberalism on the left that has come to predominate in and emanate from a range of institutions and professions in civil society including outposts of philanthropy. And it does not begin to take responsibility for the tragedy of the commons in our public life. This tragedy — by hampering policy settlements on issues like climate, education, immigration, and policing — further stokes the fires of populism.

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<sup>88</sup> We funded a wide range of organizations, more than 150 in all, and we were pleased to do so in each case. That said, there are ~30 entities whose work would have been substantially constrained (and in some instances not started up or sustained) had we not come along to support them as we did. They include the [Program on Legislative Negotiation](#), the [Bipartisan Policy Center's Democracy program](#), [Braver Angels](#), [Bright Line Watch](#), the [Center for Election Innovation and Research](#), the [Center for Effective Lawmaking](#), the [Center for Media Engagement](#), [Citizen University](#), the [Congressional Management Foundation](#), [Convergence](#), the [Democracy Funders Network](#), the [Election Official Legal Defense Network](#), the [Election Trust Initiative](#), [FairVote](#), the [Federalist Society's Article I Initiative](#), the [Fix Congress Cohort](#), the [Future Caucus](#), the [Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies](#), [Lawfare](#), the [Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy](#), [MIT's Election Data and Science Lab](#), the [National Association of Latino Elected & Appointed Officials Education Fund](#), the [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#), [New America's Political Reform Program](#), the [New Pluralists Collaborative](#), the [Niskanen Center](#), the [North Carolina Leadership Forum](#), [OpenSecrets](#), [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement \(PACE\)](#), the [PopVox Foundation](#), the [Project on Government Oversight](#), the [Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center](#), and the [R Street Institute's Governance Program](#).

When it comes to populism, the way out is through. Philanthropy should adopt not a defensive stance but a proactive and engaging one. Its emphasis should be not on protecting democracy from populism but rather on practicing and promoting responsible pluralism. To be sure, such an effort

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will necessarily include some hard edges. It requires the vigilant safeguarding of civic space against mounting efforts to close it, regardless of the direction from which the attacks come.<sup>89</sup> Likewise when it comes to ensuring free and fair elections. But holding these essential ramparts can and often will coincide with losses on substantive policy matters, even the most important ones, and indeed in elections themselves.

Ultimately, if the multi-faceted pluralism built into the republic's founding and more fully realized over the course

of our history is reawakened, enabled, and defended, then democracy in America will prosper. If that pluralism continues to be subordinated and diminished by polarization, then all bets are off — for democracy and philanthropy alike.

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<sup>89</sup> See Rachel Kleinfeld, "[Closing Civic Space in the United States: Connecting the Dots, Changing the Trajectory](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2024.

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