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National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

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RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER: SUPPORTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

IN THIS ISSUE

NCRP STAFF

A message from the President and CEO

Dear Reader,

It seems like every news story brings a new reason to catastrophize about our democracy. The stakes have never been higher, some lawmakers are blocking every piece of legislation that would help build a stronger society, and once revered institutions are losing public trust.

Times like these feel discouraging until we look to movement groups on the ground. This summer's Power Issue highlights movement groups building their community's political power and challenges funders to wield their power well. At a time when American society seems to transform every week, movements remind us that change comes at the speed of trust.

Karundi Williams and Kavita Khandekar of re:power (whose Board of Directors I serve on) powerfully describe this, saying that "civic engagement work can move beyond being transactional, to being transformational."

Nonoko Sato from the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits writes that frontline groups doing civic engagement are hampered when funders don't audaciously support the work.

Dakota Hall from the Alliance 4 Youth Organizing agrees, challenging funders to boldly support 501(c)(4) organizations. Addressing foundations who fear being viewed as partisan, he says, "This isn't about political parties. It's about moving the political process closer to the people. It's about investing in a more accurate and engaged electorate by allowing the groups on the ground to have the full, robust conversations our communities deserve."

In Puerto Rico, the directors of Mentes Puertorriqueñas en Acción describe their own ladder of civic engagement from volunteering to leadership, and map how marginalized young adults can become activist leaders when they are centered. They ask, who are we building power for?

Asserting that a community-focused political process involves meeting needs, Tim Wallace pushes back against funders' arbitrary categorization of direct service and advocacy organizations, arguing that the nonprofits advocating most effectively can do so because of deep relationships to communities *through* their direct service.

Laleh Ispahani from Open Society Foundations shares evolution in thinking that has occurred at the foundation in recent years. They no longer fund civic engagement around particular issues in siloes. Instead, she writes, they have learned "that the best way to advance reforms is by ensuring that impacted communities have enough power to shape the policies that shape their lives." She shares about OSF's "10-year strategy to build a pro-democracy, multi-racial majority in the U.S., an open society alliance fully committed to inclusive democracy, with enough political, economic, and cultural power to govern."

From youth engagement to voting rights to reproductive justice, frontline groups have been building communities and building lasting power in a hostile climate for years. These nonprofit groups show that the challenges the U.S. face are far from unprecedented – and that they can be overcome. More than that, they give philanthropy the unique opportunity to do more than just keep current systems from crumbling, showing that if we are bold, we can all be part of transforming our society for the better.

Be Bold,

Aaron Dorfman

NCRP PRESIDENT AND CEO

Beyond voting: Building power in BIPOC communities

*By Karundi Williams and Kavita Khandekar Chopra re:power**

In a year like 2022, it is simply impossible to turn our attention away from the relentless attacks on our democracy and our people. While this country has never fully realized a democracy that represents us all, for the last 50 years a strategic, a well-funded, and deeply organized effort has been building to erode any progress that we have made. In just the last two years, states across our country have been systematically restricting voting rights through gerrymandered redistricting, laws targeting who can register voters, increased voter ID laws, and more. And they are not stopping there - moving swiftly to restrict [or erode] other personal freedoms like the right to protest, the right to live in our identities and love whomever we choose, and of course our right to the autonomy of our own bodies.

But let's be clear - this American democracy was never built for us. It was not built for the Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, Asian & Pacific Islander communities who have always supported but never benefited from this democracy. Still though, we fought to build power for our people and started transforming our democracy by getting the 13th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 24th and 26th amendments ratified. Despite these advancements, the cornerstones of our democracy - the rights to vote, to dissent, to be treated equally under the law - have never been equitably applied to BIPOC communities. And this battle remains central to the narratives at play in 2022 and beyond.

When things feel so bleak, it is hard for even the most politically educated of us to remain engaged in a system that does not see our humanity. But the question

Karundi Williams

Kavita Khandekar Chopra

at hand for us now is not *How do we get more people to vote?* The question we must ask ourselves is *What hope can we offer our communities about the outcomes of this rigged system? How can we bring about real change for our people through civic engagement?*

WHAT ROLE CAN PHILANTHROPY PLAY TO OVERCOME THESE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE BARRIERS?

For too long, philanthropy has been focused on civic engagement as an activity that is typically done in even-number years between May and November. Money begins to flow in with purpose - to engage as many voters as is possible to achieve the best outcomes for our communities. But this cyclical, dump-truck style funding doesn't work because it makes far too many assumptions about who is engaged, how communities will vote, how to engage different communities, and ultimately what this engagement is for.

Part of the problem is that philanthropy is often measuring the wrong things. They're focused on voter engagement as the outcome, instead of recognizing it as the *lever* by which we see transformational change for our people. As head of the New Georgia Project Nse Ufot said recently in her panel at the Funders Committee on Civic Participation, voting is a "flex" of the power that communities have built over time. Voting is not the end.

If philanthropy is actually concerned with changing the material conditions of Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, East, South and Southeast Asian, & Pacific Islander communities – as opposed to focusing on holding and retaining power for elected officials – then the philanthropic sector must do the following:

1. Move the majority of civic engagement dollars to organizations that are led by and serve Black, Indigenous, Latiné & AAPI communities.

A Data Strategy course, one of the trainings re:power offered responding to the pivot to virtual.

2. Transform your understanding of civic engagement beyond the transaction of voting. Invest in power-building, base-building, narrative-shifting, governance, and racial justice work as a part of your civic engagement portfolio.

3. Recognize the long-arc of civic engagement and create a civic engagement strategy that is longer than the 2- or 4-year cycle. Include training, capacity-building, and pipeline strategies for the whole movement, not just elected officials, as part of this strategy.

4. In addition to your c3 grants, begin moving c4 money out of your institutions to the movement. C4 dollars are more flexible and allow organizations to do more meaningful and engaged work with our communities.

Let's break these down even further. You might be curious as to why we're calling on you to invest the majority of your civic engagement dollars to organizations that are led by People of Color - don't worry, I'll tell you. According to census projections, the United States will no longer have any one racial group in majority by 2045. In certain states, like Georgia, this transformation will happen even sooner. It is imperative that the money of philanthropy, wealth that has been extracted from communities of color, is redistributed appropriately back to these communities.

And this money must come with the trust that has long been afforded to white leadership. Unrestricted money that allows for leaders to serve their communities best is essential. We have been surviving for decades and not only do we know what we need, we know how to achieve it. Philanthropy can support power-building and boost civic engagement by treating BIPOC-led organizations and leaders as real partners, worthy of long-term investment, and not just the trend du jour.

Believing, and I mean GENUINELY believing, that civic engagement work can move beyond being transactional, to being transformational, must be embodied in your funding strategy as well. If your strategy is just focused on voters, you overlook important community leadership, and ultimately undermine your own strategy of engaging as many people as possible. Communities of color know, and have known, that elections are just one strategy that can be used to move us toward the changes we really need to see. And that strategy hasn't achieved the results we need for decades. This lack of transformation has led to deep distrust of the electoral and civic engagement apparatus as a whole.

For us to build trust in the civic engagement system within communities of color, philanthropy must recognize the need for a multi-prong approach that incorporates large-scale and community-level narrative shifting, strong base-building that engages communities year-round, and strategies that help communities hold our leaders accountable, recognizing that elected leaders are our partners. Voter engagement campaigns aimed at mobilizing voters of color in a one-off way to elect candidates who have zero commitment to represent the interests of communities of color is not an original or effective means of winning social change. Additionally, this approach assumes that communities of color will vote a certain way and assumes we're a monolith. Political education and ongoing engagement is key in a civic engagement strategy. And, it's not enough to just invest in one organization serving a specific population, invest in numerous organizations serving the same specific populations

In addition, a robust civic engagement strategy also needs to address the deep racial injustices that have kept our communities from liberation. It is unconscionable how little funding is directed towards groups working towards racial justice and racial equity. According to a recent report from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, there remains a mismatch between the kind of support the movement is calling for and what

Digital Organizing School

funders are supporting. Only 1.3 percent of racial equity funding and 9.1 percent of racial justice funding supported grassroots organizing. Preliminary data from 2020 also indicated that much of the increase in overall funding did not reach movement organizations led by and for communities of color.

Strong civic engagement strategies, and ones that are currently creating wins for our people, like we see out of Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan, are centering Black liberation - in recognition that Black liberation means liberation for all people. re:power made the decision several years ago to shift our focus to center the needs of BIPOC communities and leadership. And that decision has resulted in wins and real change, even as white supremacy has tightened its grip on so many of our sectors. As an organization we had the audacity to believe that BIPOC leaders, particularly women of color, needed the space to organize and advocate for themselves. Because of this many of the people we have trained delivered key wins in their communities and are poised to be leaders of the future, transforming this country, block by block, city by city.

What would it take for philanthropy to set a 10-year, maybe even a 20-year, strategy around civic engagement and fully commit their dollars to this work? This means you don't change course at year 4 when we didn't win the seats we had hoped to win. You don't arbitrarily push money around from one Latiné group to another because you think their work overlaps too much in states like Texas that are so massive it will literally take every single organization working non-stop year-round to see any real shifts. And you recognize that movement leadership, from top to bottom, doesn't just develop on its own.

re:power knows that our movement leaders and organizations are constantly searching for highly-skilled folks to help fulfill their missions. We train people interested in running for office as well as people who want to manage campaigns and help raise money for campaigns. We train people on the basics of grassroots organizing, how to tell their stories, and how to do computer programming. We get real about data and how we can harness its power to work for our communities, instead of against. We make sure folks have a digital component to their organizing so they can reach more people, and we train newly elected leaders on how to govern effectively and stay accountable to their people. BIPOC leaders and BIPOC-led organizations invest in our communities year round. Philanthropy needs to have that same kind of energy. We need multi-year investment in organizations that train, coach, support and connect BIPOC leaders that speak up, speak out, and organize our communities.

Finally, let's get real about civic engagement dollars. c3 civic engagement work can only go so far and do so much. As I've laid out in this article, for philanthropy to fund transformational civic engagement work, they need to be willing to push beyond the c3 line. More and more philanthropic organizations are learning about ways in which they can move c4 dollars to their grantees and this is an essential step to winning real change for our people. c4 dollars are more flexible and allow organizations to do the full breadth of their work with their communities. Organizations like Alliance for Justice have been helping foundations understand how they can move c4 funding to their grantees. And that funding needs to come *in ADDITION to* the c3 funds they are already providing, not as a replacement of those funds.

Elections are not the beginning or end of our work – they are simply a measurement of where we are as a country. And the upcoming midterms, though important, are no different.

As Amanda Gorman would say – our democracy is "not broken but simply unfinished." It is up to us to continue building this democracy and progressive philanthropy can help shift the power into the hands of Black, Indigenous, Native, Latiné, Asian and Pacific Islander communities to build a democracy that works for us.

Karundi Williams (she/her) is the Executive Director of re:power. Her focus is on creating systems for communities of color to build their political power to create social change – whether it be community organizing, connecting everyday people to policy platforms or investing in infrastructure and resources.

Kavita Khandekar Chopra (she/her) is the Managing Director, Organizational Strategy for re:power - a national training organization building power with and for Black, Indigenous and People of Color organizers across the country. In her role at re:power, Kavita oversees the Development, Communications, Operations/Human Resources & Finance functions of the organization.

*NCRP President Aaron Dorfman currently serves on the Board of re:power.

Nonprofits as agents of democracy

By Nonoko Sato

A formally incarcerated citizen is confused about their eligibility to vote. A rural-based citizen cannot reach their ballot box miles away from home because they do not have access to a reliable form of transportation. A new citizen whose primary language is not English is unsure if their mail-in ballot was counted.

Roads towards meaningful, community-centered change all lead to the ballot box, and community-based nonprofits have played relatively silent, but significant roles in ensuring people most often marginalized can use their power and voices and participate in our democratic process.

In 2020, Minnesota kept our eight Congressional seats by a very small margin in large part thanks to the community-trusted nonprofits who mobilized their communities to be counted in the census. Nonprofit workers knocked on doors, translated critical materials and resources, corrected misinformation, and emphasized the importance of civic engagement in addition to their day-to-day work, because they understood that stronger participation in our democracy contributes to our shared vision towards healthy, just, and equitable societies. While Minnesota boasts a high overall voter turnout rate, in large part due to same-day registration and our culture around voting and civic engagement, the disparities widen by race, ethnicity, age, geography, socio-economic status, among others, due to a history of voter disenfranchisement, unequal access to polling places, and language barriers (MNReformer & MinnPost). The lack of trust, engagement, and participation in our democratic process by our most marginalized communities compounds other disparities in policies, laws, and procedures that have long protected systems that only benefit those with wealth and resources.

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN) celebrates the diverse work of Minnesota's nonprofit sector, from volunteer led parent-teacher associations/organizations (PTA/PTO) to large nonprofit hospitals and colleges. Everywhere in between we have incredible theater, arts, and culture organizations; outdoor recreation programs; media companies; culturally and/or issue specific organizations that empower marginalized communities; capacity building and human services organizations; and associations all leading to a rich and robust sector of over 37,000 tax exempt groups (including 9,000 nonprofits that have at least one paid staff).

Our sector is strong, powerful, and well-connected, and yet our constant challenge continues to be lack of capacity.

As most nonprofits are 501(c)(3) and laws prevent us from engaging in partisan policy work, we are well-positioned to be agents of democracy. Many nonprofits have trust of the communities they serve and can support the communities to mobilize

Nonoko Sato

for positive changes they need to thrive. Nonprofits also have unique expertise in their specific area of focus, who better to testify about the need for affordable housing than a housing expert or even better, the person experiencing homelessness? Young people participating in academic support nonprofits have raised their voices in support of their teachers and advocated for meaningful investment into public schools. 75% of nonprofit workers in Minnesota identify as a woman, and we too have a unique voice in advocating for paid family leave and affordable childcare that will impact our current and future workforce. Our sector is strong, powerful, and well-connected, and yet our constant challenge continues to be lack of capacity.

Over the past two years, nonprofits have seen an increase in demand for services while funding sources remain unpredictable and unstable. Foundations that have promised change throughout the challenges of the dual pandemic of COVID and the racial uprising following the murder of George Floyd have rarely followed through on their promises to "center equity" by eliminating unnecessary barriers for under resourced organizations

MCN meeting with Nexus Community Partners during Voting is Love tour.

and trusting community by simply granting unrestricted dollars. In fact, some may believe that this state of emergency we have experienced during the past two years is over, demonstrating the privilege they hold by not witnessing the constant and ongoing hardships and struggles of not just the nonprofits themselves, but the communities they serve. It is hard to let go of power, and funders eager to return to the "way things were" demonstrate that their statements and temporary changes to their granting processes were simply performative, and they continue to be unwilling to use this critical moment for actual systemic changes they have the influence to make. The tone is harsh because we see day-to-day the disparities of measurements of community health (rates of graduation, homeownership, generational wealth building, physical and mental health, among others) continue to worsen for people of color and other marginalized, intersectional identities. The adrenaline that nonprofit workers felt at the early onset of the pandemic has dissipated into bone tiredness, and tragically without our ability to compete in the job market, our workers are being enticed by other sectors with promises of better pay, benefits, and flexible work schedules. And we don't blame them.

We know that it is important for those serving community to reflect the demographics of that community, and yet we cannot expect community members to be activists and agents of democracy when they do not have safety and security for themselves and their families. Similarly, we cannot continue to expect community nonprofits and their staff to do more with less, when they have barely enough to keep up with basic but rising demands from the communities they serve. The inability to add more work, even for something as important as civic engagement is understandable when nonprofits do not have the time and resources they need. Yet the consequences of inaction are devastating, and philanthropy is poised to play a transformational role.

Be part of the transformation that gives trusted nonprofits the ability to engage their communities in our democracy.

- Invest in democracy and public policy work. They may not always give you the sexy outcomes you want. Recognize that this work is critical to our missions and for our community
- Support organizations that have trust from communities who have historically low voting participation rates and if they ask, connect them to each other for resources and support
- Fund democracy work during mid-terms and off election years, not just during presidential election years. Local elections generally have extremely low turnout, and so each individual vote is particularly impactful. Local and state officials hold a great deal of power, and those elections influence our lives and our country just as much as the presidential elections.
- Help organizations build a strong foundation and support capacity building initiatives. Trust that your grantees know what they need, and give them as much flexibility in funding – ideally as unrestricted and multi-year - as much as possible
- Adjust for inflation for multi-year grants – that $10K you've been giving for 10 years is wonderful, and it will not meet the same needs in attracting strong talent and paying for materials in this current market
- If you have to give program-restricted grants, add on (or at least carve out) the administrative costs associated with running that specific program. Understand that those administrative costs as core program support.
- Eliminate unnecessary barriers & #FixTheForm: don't ask for information that is already publicly

MN VISTA cohort touring the Minnesota Capitol Rotunda.

MCN Staff with MN DEED Commissioner Steve Grove at Coffee with Commissioners event.

accessible or you've asked before and you know the information hasn't changed

- In times of crisis and critical moments (bonus if you do it all the time), consider the annual 5% pay-out of your assets as the floor and not the ceiling

- Be bold beyond performative actions and public statements. Use your own power to advocate on behalf of nonprofits who lack capacity and resources and the communities they serve. If there are legal limits to how much advocacy your foundation can conduct, find the line and go right up to it.

Public trust in the nonprofit sector is critical to sustain our work, and it feels like a constant battle having to educate the public and policy makers about the unique structure and role of nonprofits. Our financials and IRS filings are public information, and yet we are often scrutinized and criticized on how we are to spend our dollars, constantly pressured to do more with less. The past two years alone have demonstrated the devastating consequences when lawmakers lack understanding about the nonprofit sector. MCN's research has shown that nonprofits were generally left behind on one-time relief funds due to nonprofits lacking capacity to identify and navigate complicated state and federal guidelines. Small nonprofits without pre-established banking partners could not access PPP loans and struggled to answer the question "who owns your business." While large and well-resourced companies and organizations have their own in-house policy directors or the ability to hire expensive lobbyists, 99% of nonprofits would not be able to afford such an important luxury. As of this writing, MCN is advocating against a bill created without stakeholder input, which would force nonprofits to comply with duplicative and unnecessary government oversight as we continue to push for a dedicated Nonprofit Relief Fund, which would distribute much needed funding to some of the most vulnerable nonprofits in our state.

As rare as they can seem, we do celebrate joy and small victories. There are strong coalitions of people, organizations, and companies working together on a wide range of issues and utilizing their collective wisdom, voice, and knowledge to push for systemic changes at the local, state, and national levels. We recognize the leadership of some of our largest and most well-established institutions and philanthropic organizations that are being courageous despite their typical aversion to change, and stumbling bravely through actions to forward initiatives that bolster anti-racism initiatives. Minnesota celebrates Give to The Max, our own charitable giving holiday and we raised a record breaking $34 million for Minnesota nonprofits in 2021. Ten "cultural treasurers" of Minnesota, organizations that are led by and serve communities of color, were awarded $500K each to ensure their sustainability during the pandemic. Twin Cities mutual aid programs flourished, especially during and after the racial justice uprising in the summer of 2020. Funds for Black-led and owned nonprofits and businesses like the Transformative Black-Led Movement Fund, were created and distributed. The few foundations that do give money for democracy work increased their giving this year for community – MCN is proud to partner this year with McKnight Foundation and other philanthropic partners to regrant critical dollars to small, rural, and/or culturally specific organizations to ensure communities that are too often under-counted have what they need to use their power and voice, and vote.

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN) is the largest state association for nonprofits in the country, representing over 2300 nonprofit members in our state. We are proud of the strength and resiliency of our nonprofit sector and our communities. We are witnessing heartbreaking news around our inability to meet rising demands and unfortunate closures of critical programs due to reasons so often beyond our control; and yet we know we will persevere through this moment – we always have, and we always will – and we hope we can do so with continued and renewed collaboration with our philanthropic partners.

We often hear that foundations' missions and visions center around supporting the community. There is no better way to genuinely support communities' self-determination than to actively invite community members into the democratic process, support all the ways nonprofits can use their own voices for positive change, and acknowledge that we need each other to meet our respective missions.

Nonoko Sato is the Executive Director of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits.

The case for bold c4 funding

By Dakota Hall

It is time for philanthropy to fund the bold 501(c)(4) political activities of youth-led organizations. Youth organizers building power for their communities year-round need the sustained ability to take partisan political stances on the issues. For young people, it is often necessary to employ a mix of heightened lobbying and aggressive political activity to achieve policy wins. We are at a critical moment where we cannot leave the issue education to chance at the ballot box. This is what true victory looks like.

It is harmful when philanthropy demands huge impact with small budgets. To sustain innovative and impactful organizing work at the local level, youth-led organizations need to be well-resourced and c4 funding must increase. Currently, c4 funding moves too late and only in election years. It is no secret that funders are risk-averse and do not invest in new strategies, but we cannot even maintain the current status quo with the type and level of funding that philanthropy is currently willing to give.

For local youth-led organizations in the Alliance Network, partisan political funding enables organizations to deepen their impact, be innovative in building power for their communities, and allows youth organizers to have the conversations that need to be had in our communities year-round. These dollars are critical for accountability work, growing a pipeline of strong political champions, and how we win elections and policy change. With c4 funding, youth organizations would have the ability to hire more staff to run electoral programming, provide young leaders with paid development opportunities, create impactful digital voter guides in multiple languages, and target specific communities for legislative efforts. Funding 501(c)(4) activities allows youth organizers to make lasting structural

Dakota Hall

change in their communities and deepen youth civic participation. This isn't about political parties; it's about moving the political process closer to the people. It's about investing in a more accurate and engaged electorate by allowing the groups on the ground to have the full, robust conversations our communities deserve.

Young people delivered the election for President Biden and Democrats. In 2020, 50% of all young people under 30 voted, up from 39% in 2016 - making up 13.8% of all ballots cast. This is what happens when youth organizations are invested in far before fall semester. But we know what happens when funding goes away from the youth movement. In 2014 - after funding for youth organizing went away and the infrastructure cracked - we saw youth voter turnout lag behind more than any other group with people under 30 making up only 7.2% of ballots cast. In 2018, no age group saw a larger surge in turnout than voters under the age of 30 - growing their ballot share to 11.4%. What changed in four years? Funders saw the errors of divestment and reinvested to rebuild some of the youth infrastructure lost. But there is still much to rebuild.

We cannot afford to go back to 2014. Young people must be at the center of any winning coalition, and not be an afterthought. Youth-led organizations must receive multiyear investments, to stop the guessing game of where money will come from, not just when fall semester starts in an election year.

The brilliance of youth organizers is always evident. In Kansas, young people at Loud Light are fighting against partisan gerrymandered maps and winning. In Cook County, young people at Chicago Votes were able to

AZ Poder

New Hampshire Youth Movement

write and pass legislation that ensured that individuals within Cook County Jail had the ability to register to vote and put polling locations within that jail. In Wisconsin, because of the dedication of young people at Leaders Igniting Transformation to fight the school-to-prison and deportation pipeline, young Black and Brown students can attend school safely in Milwaukee.

The youth movement knows how to organize people. Now, we need philanthropy to organize money to deliver bold resources to match our energy, so that together we can build power to delivery victories. Investing in youth organizations to run 501(c4) programming will allow us to have the power necessary to motivate voters, and drive unprecedented turnout in November, and far beyond. This funding must be sustained year to year and not just in major election years, to ensure young people have a voice in shaping public policy that directly impacts their lives.

The Alliance supports a growing network of the best youth electoral and issue organizing groups in the country. We are in 18 states, supporting 20 groups that have been building trust and power in the communities for years – and in some places over a decade. The combined power of our network is astounding. When an Alliance organization registers a young person to vote, those young people turn out on average at least 10+ more than 10pts higher than the state average. We are able to achieve that because we don't stop at voter registration, we organize before and after voter registration to ensure young people's voices are heard at the ballot box. We all win when young people are organized, but it takes organized money to make that happen.

Persuasion and mobilization are important. There is no mobilization without early persuasion of young voters to participate in elections. And that requires c4 funding. Young people mobilized year-round by Leaders Igniting Transformation, MOVE Texas, and New Era Colorado were 26% more likely to vote than those who were only contacted in the final days and weeks before the 2020 election. It is local youth-led political homes organize youth daily, not just for elections, but a full spectrum of activities that combines leadership development, advocacy, and civic engagement. To produce these kinds of results, our groups need investment now , especially c4 investment, to be sustained for years to come. Not just as an afterthought in September.

But this is more than just about elections. This is about movement change. For young people's vision about their community to become reality, they must be resourced. Groups that led historic youth turnout in 2020 are struggling to raise resources to keep staff on board, invest in growing team skills, adjust program, and scale to new communities in an environment where newly passed voter suppression laws, gerrymandering, and lack of federal action set up crippling barriers to grassroots organizing.

Young people continue to lead some of the most transformative work in our country, whether they are fighting to save our planet, demanding livable wages, or ensuring our communities are thriving, safe, and healthy. We challenge philanthropy to think bigger and bolder in how it supports groups in building long-term power, infrastructure, and sustaining year-round civic engagement organizations to get the desired outcomes we want in our communities. Investing political activity dollars in youth organizing now will aid groups in laying the groundwork for what is to come in 2024 and beyond.

Dakota Hall is the Executive Director of Alliance for Youth Action and Alliance for Youth Organizing, a national network of local organizations that works with young people to engage in our democracy as voters, organizers, and leaders. In 2017, Dakota founded an organization named Leaders Igniting Transformation ("LIT") to help Black and Brown youth in Milwaukee achieve social, racial, and economic justice. Under Dakota's leadership, LIT successfully advocated to remove the Milwaukee Police Department from the Milwaukee Public Schools and ended the use of metal detectors on campuses and suspensions for children in elementary school.

On engagement and building power

By Carolina Mejías Rivera and Alejandro Silva Díaz

CAROLINA:

I was raised by a single mother with limited resources and a father who was absent because of drug addiction. I grew up in a poor neighborhood and went to public school. While I had good grades in High School and a fair PAA (SAT equivalent) score, my teachers and high school counselors told me that I should go to a 2-year college, despite wanting to attend the University of Puerto Rico.

My mother didn't have (and to this day has never had) a car, so driving to get counsel from the admissions office was not an option. So one day I hopped on a "*pisicorre*" – a low-cost public van that takes a few passengers between counties in Puerto Rico – and arrived at the University. There I learned how to apply, which is how I eventually got accepted into the UPR.

Once I started college, I learned that my level of education did not compare to others who came from private schools. I had to read and study twice as much as my peers, which limited my time to perform other daily tasks. To make ends meet, I had to work in the work-study program and teach at soccer clinics at multiple clubs in the metropolitan area.

So, it was not surprising that by my last year of college I was on track to graduate to become a frontline employee. While I had always been interested in cooperativism, community organizing and recreation, and I took courses on those topics, I hadn't really had the time to engage in any of those. Most of my peers who have ended up in leadership positions studied and worked hard, but they also joined student club boards, interned at places related to their field of study, and even helped out in political campaigns.

Carolina Mejías Rivera

Alejandro Silva Diaz

When people ask me about building power, my first question is always, "Building power for whom?"

ALEJANDRO:

I had been active as the President of my university's Puerto Rican Student Association, and I had joined a few of my friends to help coordinate their Cuban American Student Association conference. I knew that I wanted to be involved in social causes in Puerto Rico, but I wasn't sure how.

That's when I learned about Mentes Puertorriqueñas en Acción, and joined a coordinating committee for our first summer program. About 20 peers would join over the summer to learn about social causes, and how we could engage to advance them. This was more than an exploratory project, though: we quickly learned that we were preparing the future leaders of all of the causes we supported.

Three years in, I met Carolina at the University of Puerto Rico. I invited her to join the group and our summer internship program. And while she did, she was different from the rest of the group: her background, her perspective on topics we discussed and priorities were different.

A few years later, Carolina and I went to a convening of organizations that worked with youth. The purpose was to establish strategies for youth to be considered on important issues because they were seen as a disregarded community. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation we brought up an observation: I didn't feel that I was left out and unheard because I was young. Yet, we understood how someone like Carolina had to work three or four times harder than I did to be listened to: as a black woman from a poor neighborhood, certainly I had more influence than she did on power spaces.

This conversation was very important to define our future strategies going forward from that point on. Because even if we were building power for youth, we still bear the important question: who were we building power for?

AN ASSESSMENT OF POWER BUILDING

Civic engagement in itself is a way to build power. When people volunteer, organize and participate, they are learning, networking and entering circles that will eventually lead them to leadership and decision-making positions.

Most people are interested in participating in social causes, but many don't engage due to lack of information: 49% of Americans say they do not know enough about the issues to get involved in social causes or campaigns, and 42% of youth claim they don't know where to start.

In the process of building the next generation of leaders, structures must be created so that young people from poorly represented backgrounds can join organizing movements in the nonprofit, private and public sectors, unions, and boards of directors, among other spaces.

In this process it's inevitable that people who are on track to occupy leadership positions will do so. They will probably do so without any type of intervention. In such, the end goal is not to replace them, but it's vital to train them to have an understanding of the importance of diversity, and becoming facilitators for the populations who aren't represented in power structures.

Our leadership development funnel has three stages:

- Insertion: We insert young people with a high level of social consciousness in projects to channel their aspirations to be change agents.
- Engagement: Keeping the community active at events, projects and working groups sharpens their skills and ensures they stay relevant to current important issues.
- Positioning: As participants develop into high-impact leaders they begin occupying decision-making positions, joining boards of directors, publishing new work, and founding social enterprises.

To achieve this, at MPA we have defined three pillars in our change agents training:

- Awareness: To foster the ability to have a rational and deep understanding of the problems that afflict communities, as well as the opportunities that exist to solve the challenges faced.
- Empathy: Ability to bridge understandings from a human perspective of how social problems are affecting different groups of community stakeholders.
- Effectiveness: The leader's ability to carry out the vision of change that they have to transform their cause towards a just, supportive and participatory society.

WHAT CAN PHILANTHROPY DO?

One big change philanthropy can make right away is organizing a civic engagement philanthropic sector. When a nonprofit organization seeks funding, there are high-level topics like education, environment, and health that are always present. In some cases, "community organizing" and "strengthening democracy" are the closest field of focus available.

Organizing a civic engagement sector will allow for organizations to define strongly around that topic, as well as to build knowledge of where we're at and what we need to advance. Nonprofits and communities will find support to mature their initiatives, and we'll come closer to building a collaborative ecosystem of civic engagement initiatives.

Philanthropy has been moving in the past few years towards becoming more inclusive and embracing diversity. We must say this has made a huge difference, but it's still in diapers. It is important that funders take into account the systemic challenges social cause leaders face that may not be part of today's evaluation processes. Sometimes the largest corporate nonprofits will write the best proposals, but how can philanthropy support leaders who come from backgrounds of poverty, racial, ethnic and gender diversity, lack of access to education, inaccessibility to quality transportation, and social class stereotypes, among others?

Solving systemic challenges takes time, but we can't do so without investing in leaders who didn't have the privilege of being part of the traditional leaders' development track. This does not mean we should discard one population for another, but philanthropy can balance the diversity gap in leadership positions by entrusting diverse leaders who may not have the complete experience but will ultimately shake the tree and bring change forward.

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Binary thinking, category mistakes, and building power

By Tim Wallace

A few months ago, I was advised by a program officer at a national foundation to be careful when describing Legal Aid Justice Center because we might get pigeonholed as a direct service provider. They said that national foundations typically aren't interested in funding direct services. They want to fund system change. This advice was prompted by my simply mentioning that we do direct services *in addition* to system change via community organizing, policy advocacy, impact litigation, and communications.

On one level, I get it. Direct services vs. system change is a useful binary, especially as progressive philanthropy has had to communicate its increasing focus on the root causes of injustice. But taken too rigidly, that binary can be dangerously reductive in ways that work against the goal of getting more resources and power into the hands of directly impacted communities.

> *The measure of political power is not in the number of politicians you help elect, it's in whether or not those politicians actually act on your community's behalf.*

This essay explores that central claim by examining how that binary has operated and continues to operate to shift accountability for system change work away from the people most directly impacted by oppression. Keeping to the theme of this issue, it'll end with a reflection on what this means for how we understand civic engagement and some suggestions for concrete steps philanthropic institutions can take to place accountability for the work where it belongs, with directly impacted communities and not with traditional centers of wealth and power.

THE TRADITIONAL USE OF THE BINARY

Traditionally, philanthropy has used the binary of direct services vs. system change explicitly to deny resources for system change. Foundations would say they don't fund "advocacy" or they only fund "direct services." The U.S. tax code reinforces this exclusionary use of the binary with its prohibition on foundations giving funds for lobbying.

Where accountability comes into play is in the natural consequence of funders saying they will fund one thing but not another, which is that organizations tend to specialize in one or the other. This is especially driven by philanthropists who say outright that they won't support organizations that do system change in any way.

What results is the ivory tower of policy advocacy. Because their organizations do system change work and NOT direct services, the people doing system change work end up a step removed from the people who have daily, personally accountable relationships with directly impacted persons.

THE LEGAL AID EXAMPLE

This weaponization of the binary has been particularly devastating in the legal advocacy space.

The federal Legal Services Corporation (LSC) is the single largest funder of civil legal services in the country. They fund a nationwide network of legal aid organizations such that every city and county in the United States is covered by an LSC-funded legal aid. Prior to 1996, those organizations were free to do both direct individual services and system change work.

Tim Wallace

That changed in 1996 when, as part of welfare reform, Congress put in place a "super restriction" on LSC-funded legal aid programs. Essentially overnight, federally funded legal aids were prohibited from lobbying at the federal, state, or local level, employing community organizers, filing class-action lawsuits, engaging in voter registration, or representing undocumented people3 or people who are incarcerated. And it isn't just that they can't use federal dollars to do these things. Any organization that takes a dime of funding from LSC cannot spend any of their money on those activities, no matter the source of the funds.

In response to the new super restriction, many legal aid programs split into two programs, one federally funded to do direct services and the other giving up LSC money to do systems change. Some programs, like ours at Legal Aid Justice Center, sought private funding in order to continue doing both. Many others, particularly in communities that didn't have as much access to private funds, just stopped doing the systems change work entirely.

Sheba Williams at NoLef Turns Expungement Rally

So federal enforcement of the binary resulted in a massive loss of local system change capacity and helped ensure that in many places, the lawyers working to help individuals survive systems of oppression were artificially separated from the lawyers directly fighting those same systems.

BUT WHAT ABOUT TODAY?

The binary of direct services vs. system change has been weaponized by those who oppose progressive system change resulting in that system change work being less connected to and less accountable to directly impacted individuals and communities. But what does that have to do with the way that progressive foundations are using the binary today? Aren't they just trying to correct for that divestment of system change advocacy?

Absolutely they are. But using that binary not only to justify changing their priorities but also in a rigid sense to divide non-profits into one or the other kind, risks perpetuating the ways that the binary functions to separate those working against oppression from those most proximate to it.

Allow me to introduce you to Sheba Williams. Sheba is exactly the kind of person that progressive funders are looking for and exactly the kind of person that advocacy organizations should be accountable to. She is a Black woman with lived experience of the kind of oppression she organizes to address. She is politically savvy and absolutely at the center of criminal system reform efforts in Virginia. But if you had to fit the non-profit she founded and leads, Nolef Turns (www.nolefturns.org), into the binary in order to determine whether it was a fit for your priorities, it would be direct services.

Nolef Turns's mission is to reduce recidivism by supporting and advocating alongside those with court and justice involvement. When we talked about this article, Sheba said to me, "the advocacy comes last for our organization, which is 'interesting.' The direct service is what really made it abundantly clear that we needed to participate in the advocacy."

For directly impacted leaders like Sheba, their advocacy would not happen but for the direct services, and the impact of the advocacy on individuals' need for direct services is the ultimate measure of the advocacy's success. This makes perfect sense, because she is directly and personally accountable to the people on whose behalf she advocates.

Put another way, Sheba's identity as an advocate and her effectiveness as an advocate are inseparable from her role providing material support to individuals in her community. So when national funders, as one did this past year, insist on Sheba spending their grant on advocacy and not on direct services, they are committing a category mistake. Sheba's advocacy is inseparable from the direct services she provides.

SO WHAT SHOULD PHILANTHROPY DO DIFFERENTLY?

1) Look within the ranks of direct service organizations for ones whose leaders are directly impacted themselves and who view their work through a systems lens. Find leaders, like Sheba, whose work both mitigates the harm of oppressive systems and strategically informs transformative change. When you find them, give them substantial, unrestricted, multi-year grants so they can sustain their operations, allowing them space and stability to engage in advocacy.

2) If you're serious about investing in historically divested communities, stop asking them, "How will you sustain this work long-term?" You are the newcomer, not them, and you can afford the risk.

3) Do ask all of your potential grantees, "Who are you accountable to and in what ways?" Give them enough space to be as specific and individual as possible, and if they don't have robust and intentional structures in place to center their accountability within directly impacted individuals and communities, be wary.

4) Examine your own practices for ways that you shift accountability away from communities and towards yourself. For example, the more your RFPs resemble contracts that state exactly what goals and tactics will be employed, the more the staff funded

by the grant will feel they have to adhere to what was written even if what community is asking for has changed and even if you tell them you will be flexible. Ask them instead, "What are your goals and tactics at the moment? How and why might they change?"

5) Be wary of rigid binaries. For example...

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT VS. ADVOCACY:

In certain contexts, civic engagement vs advocacy can be another category mistake. The goal of civic engagement cannot simply be to get more sympathetic politicians elected. The measure of political power is not in the number of politicians you help elect, it's in whether or not those politicians actually act on your community's behalf. To build political power, you must be able to do more than elect politicians, you must be able to influence those politicians and hold them accountable to your community between elections as well.

If progressive philanthropy holds too rigidly to the binary of civic engagement vs. advocacy, then like in direct services vs. system change, they risk shifting accountability and power away from communities facing oppression. The end goal is NOT to build power for a particular political party. The end goal is to dismantle systems of oppression and build a better world for everyone.

In both binaries, it cannot be either/or. It must be both/and.

Tim Wallace is the Development Director of the Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC), headquartered in Charlottesville, Virginia. LAJC's mission is to partner with communities and clients to achieve racial, social, and economic justice by dismantling systems that create and perpetuate poverty. To accomplish our mission, we integrate individual legal representation, community organizing, policy advocacy, group & class litigation, and communications into multifaceted campaigns to accomplish community goals. We are committed to building and living within systems of accountability to individuals and communities directly impacted by oppression. More at www.justice4all.org.

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Give more, save more: The new calculus

By Laleh Ispahani

Like many of you, I've had the privilege of supporting civic engagement for more than a decade, in my case with the Open Society Foundations. Our mission is to build vibrant and inclusive societies across the globe, grounded in respect for human rights for and democratic accountability to all people. Across continents, cultures, and kinds of movements, there has been one constant: the need to invest consistently in civil society, citizen engagement, and the power to hold government and other actors accountable. This foundational truth has rarely been timelier and more essential than in the face of rising authoritarianism, extremist violence, and disinformation.

We have all borne witness these past two years of American democracy and rule of law straining to the breaking point. Observing this period not just as a philanthropic leader but also as a Muslim-American immigrant, I would argue that philanthropy's collective investments in civil society and civic engagement, particularly in marginalized communities, saved our democracy and the rule of law at its weakest moment. We saw record levels of voter participation, even from communities facing systematic threats and disinformation. We saw mayors respond to community demands to make cities a laboratory and safe space to organize and vote.

The efforts to distort democracy were deliberate and systematic, and the forces trying to impose minoritarian rule have only gained steam since the failed attempted coup of 2021. These include voter suppression, gerrymandering, the kleptocratic impact of *Citizens United* from within, and the rapid erosion of local and investigative reporting. These forces exacerbate the pre-existing injustice of the electoral college and a Senate that ranks as the least-representative legislative body among all democracies, with a minority of Americans having 82 votes in the Senate, while a majority are represented by only 18 votes today.

While one part of our old approach – the focus on civil society and civic engagement – proved prescient, another part required a change of thinking in light of these threats. For too long, we approached the threats to our democracy on an issue-by-issue basis. Today, we organize to build power or, more accurately, to help marginalized communities and multi-racial, pro-democracy alliances build enough power to forge and protect an inclusive, functional, and resilient democracy. This shift is not because, say, police reform or juvenile justice are not still important to us. Quite the opposite. It is learning the lesson over time that the best way to advance reforms is by ensuring that impacted communities have enough power to shape the policies that shape their lives.

THE EVOLUTION BEGAN WITH AN EXPANDED DEFINITION OF "GIVING"

In 2015, we started thinking about funding civic engagement in the lead up to what we knew would be important elections in 2020. We wanted to look beyond the next election cycle to the structural components protecting or suffocating our democracy. Working with foundation peers, we started to focus not just on battles but the war for our democracy.

We Built Power With Trust: In 2015, we launched Project 2020 to build the civic power needed to reduce these growing distortions. Our operating theory was simple: giving *more* – more deference, more flexibility, more funding and over more years – would lead to greater impact. We committed to larger grants and more flexible funding (in our case, both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) funds). We also adjusted our giving to prioritize BIPOC-led local organizations, leaders, campaigns, and coalitions, extending them the trust that had long been due them, but that had rarely been offered. And we gave more to groups led by and serving communities of color, which have historically received far fewer resources.

Laleh Ispahani

We Prioritized Structural Fixes: A commitment to long-term power is complementary to – and is providing a stronger foundation for – our cyclical support for nonpartisan electoral work, voter protection, issue campaigns, and leadership pipelines. As we did the year-in, year-out funding, we simultaneously paid attention to the longer-term elements of building civic and political power. We provided early money to a Bauman Foundation-led effort to ensure a full count in the 2020 Census and joined partners to fund census work after the

count had ended, even in the face of political threats. We also supported – and continue to support – a parallel, multi-donor initiative to ensure fair representation in redistricting. And we made these investments in promising but traditionally under-resourced places -- the South and Southwest, and in particular Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina.

> *When we elevated our efforts to address structural racism and structural barriers to democracy, we began planning for worst case scenarios. Now we call most of those worst fears the norm.*

We Targeted States with Shifting Demographics: While federal policy dominates headlines, state policy often plays a more dominant role in shaping the schools, roads, criminal codes, and civil rights of most Americans. In Arizona, we built on efforts by Unbound Philanthropy, Carnegie Corporation, and the Four Freedoms Fund, which, a decade earlier, had a vision for the state premised on the strength of its young, mostly of-color, and often undocumented leaders who fought tirelessly against xenophobic legislation and elected leadership. We also benefited from the partnership of in-state donor "tables" established by the Committee on States network, such as Put NC First and the Georgia Alliance for Progress—groups that strove to build lasting civic engagement infrastructure despite politically motivated efforts to undermine their work. And we collaborated deeply with a set of institutional funders including the Ford Foundation, the Civic Participation Action Fund, and the Mary Reynolds Babcock and Sapelo Foundations.

We Invested in New Leaders: Project 2020 helped strengthen a range of leaders and organizations who were – and are – playing a critical role in building independent political power in their communities. They facilitated record-breaking voter turnout in the 2020 U.S. elections – particularly among voters of color, who indisputably helped reshape the map in states like Arizona and Georgia – despite an unprecedented assault on our democracy and the complications of a deadly pandemic. Moreover, the work of those organizations and their leaders led to more reflective and accountable elected representation – leaders responsive to the needs of their communities, people of color, and in many cases former activists and organizers who could push forward-looking policy. This work was strongly abetted by non-partisan leadership pipelines such as LEAD NC and Instituto in Arizona; constituency-focused groups like New American Leaders; and groups like re:power, Local Progress, and State Innovation Exchange, whose Progressive Governance Academy is supporting progressive leaders once in office. (Of course, getting there is only part of the puzzle.)

BUILDING FROM THERE

Since then, we've built upon the lessons of Project 2020. In 2017, we committed more than $20M annually through 2025, to an additional set of states, with a new set of flexible grants to community-of-color led organizations, complemented by ballot measure support.

And in 2020, as we launched the new Open Society-U.S. to address the convergence of demographic, technological and economic and cultural disruptions, we initiated a 10-year strategy to build a pro-democracy, multi-racial majority in the U.S., an open society alliance fully committed to inclusive democracy, with enough political, economic, and cultural power to govern. This decade-long effort has already included $350 million in five-year, flexible grants to groups rooted in communities central to building accountable influence. This includes over $350 million in investments in and across communities of color, with concentration in key regions crucial to building this pro-reform governing majority. We intend these commitments to be not only "gamechangers" for movement groups and core components of progressive infrastructure, but also long-term commitments to this multi-racial alliance. The true north here is to show that inclusive democracies can deliver public goods and equal justice for all.

FROM STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY TO SAVING IT

When we elevated our efforts to address structural racism and structural barriers to democracy, we began planning for worst case scenarios. Now we call most of those worst fears the norm. Our efforts and cooperation have had to scale accordingly. Amid an existential crisis in our democracy, most understand that the stakes are as high as ever.

In 2020, OSF (Open Society Foundation) worked to align donors around a priority set of needs between the pandemic's outbreak and the November elections, raising millions from fellow donors to help meet those needs. The focus was on ensuring that every voter had access to a safe voting option, that polling places were sufficiently staffed, and that states were otherwise prepared for an historic election. These donors played a part in seeing the successful transfer of power and (narrow) avoidance of a constitutional crisis in January of 2021.

Far from deterred by the failed coup attempt of January 6th, the anti-democratic are doubling down. Opponents of a multi-racial, pro-democracy majority are ramping up their

attacks through disinformation, laws to limit voting, and compromising the process by which votes are counted and results are confirmed. The risk of an actual stolen election – or political violence – is real, as the congressional select committee investigating the events of Jan. 6 reminds us every day.

To meet these challenges, Open Society is again teaming up with leading foundations and donors to align funds across critical areas of work over the next 30 months. We believe this is necessary, if not sufficient, to protect the integrity of our election process and ensure diverse, equitable participation through the 2024 elections and a peaceful continuation or transition in 2025 – the hallmark of a democracy. Priorities include protecting the right to vote; building, bolstering, and expanding the electorate; countering anti-majoritarian media and mis-/disinformation; and preparing for and responding to high-risk threats and crises.

We hope others will join us and our partners in this work, and more broadly, by investing more in civic engagement – more grants, more deference to local knowledge, and more commitment. We cannot give less when markets cause endowment returns to dip, or political pressure and intimidation mount. As fatalistic as these times can make us, the truth is that we have won against incredible odds when we show up early, big, and together. The threats and opportunities ahead require nothing less.

Laleh Ispahani is co-director of Open Society-U.S., helping to oversee the grant making, advocacy, and administrative work in the three Open Society-U.S. offices in New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.

Select Publications

The Threat of Crisis Pregnancy Centers to the Future of Abortion Access
July 2022

Even before the official ruling in Dobbs V. Women's Health Organization overturned Roe v Wade, a world where pregnant people have no national legal right to abortion seemed inevitable due to anti-abortion majority on the Supreme Court. Of course, many advocates on the ground have noted that abortion access has never been a reality for those who need it most and NCRP research has shown how a world without Roe has been the de facto norm for many, especially during the pandemic.

UNPACKING PHILANTHROPY Episode 1: Can Philanthropy Help Save Democracy? (TRANSCRIPT)
January 2022

Over the past 15 years while I've been lucky enough to lead the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, I've written scores of opinion pieces that have been published in various sector and mainstream press outlets. I know that many of you have resonated with some of those pieces and perhaps have been infuriated by others.

Well, now it's time to see if this old dog can learn some new tricks.

We're launching this video series, Unpacking Philanthropy, to communicate with NCRP's members, followers, allies – and adversaries – in new ways.

visit: www.ncrp.org/publications

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