

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



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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.

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

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South and Southwest, and in particular Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina.

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.

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