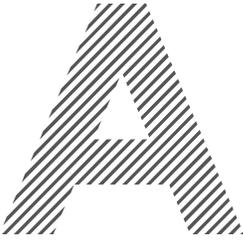


# **Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the Twenty-First Century**

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At the time of this writing, the United States is being buffeted by three staggering events, any one of which would be enough to destabilize our society: a fast-spreading pandemic, a severe economic recession caused by the pandemic, and a nationwide resurgence of the civil rights movement, with its urgent demands for social justice. All three have brought about serious threats to our democracy and have exposed long-festering inequalities caused by ingrained racism.

Even before these events, we had been retreating to our respective tribal corners amid deep-seated polarization. Some would say that our current form of government no longer serves its purpose and that a representative democracy no longer works in our pluralistic society. As head of the California Community Foundation (CCF) in Los Angeles County, and a member of the philanthropic community, I could not disagree more strongly. Yes, we have issues that will challenge us. But as someone who works in the community, I am convinced we can face this crisis and create a society that lives up to the ideals enumerated in our Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution's Bill of Rights.

But first, we must acknowledge that these founding documents were inspirational and not even reflective of the society of the time in which they were conceived. After all, a number of the nation's Founding Fathers owned slaves, the voices of free African Americans and Native Americans did not count, and women were excluded from political participation. In the beginning, the privilege of participating in our nascent democracy was limited to white male landowners.

Although we have made progress by amending the Constitution and enacting laws to keep up with the huge changes since its enactment at the Constitutional Convention of 1789, we are far from fully realizing the rights enshrined in that document. Living up to the revolutionary ideals of the eighteenth century has not been easy. We fought a civil war to free enslaved people, the right to vote for women was not won until the early twentieth century, and it was not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that we began to make small, incremental progress toward becoming an inclusive society. The struggle to obtain equal rights for all is ongoing.

So, why am I feeling optimistic about our future despite a crisis fueled by our hardening political differences? Today, we better understand the misperception that we were a homogenous society at our founding or have ever been so since. I believe that we now possess the maturity and understand the necessity for redefining what it is to be an American and, at the same time, strive to make our system of government better serve our national interests. Americans have shown themselves to be good at coming through great difficulties in better shape than before. As the cliché goes, "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste." This one must be tackled head-on. While the present circumstances seem dire, we are in that pivotal moment. Workable solutions are within our grasp if we have the courage to make the necessary changes that will allow our democratic system to function better for all.

Three years ago, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences created a task force to examine the health of our democracy and to make recommendations for reforms essential to ensuring

the future of our democratic institutions. The task force is composed of over thirty members, representing all segments of our society. It convened on multiple occasions to discuss the state of our national polity and conferred with constitutional scholars, political experts, and historians. But most importantly, its members embarked on a national tour to meet with a cross-section of everyday Americans and listen to their views on where we are as a nation and where we should be headed. The result is the report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.<sup>1</sup>

I was a member of the task force. We talked with and listened to people for over two years and, although our members came at the issues from every conceivable perspective, we reached unanimous consensus on thirty-one recommendations for systemic change. That was not an easy task. But the fact that we were unanimous underscores our willingness to compromise, incorporate divergent viewpoints, and expand our thinking for the common good.

The recommendations cluster into six areas: 1) promoting equality and amplifying voices and representation to make our political institutions and practices more inclusive and accessible; 2) empowering voters and encouraging them to take responsibility for the common good by actively engaging in the process of governance; 3) ensuring the responsiveness of our political institutions to convince people that our elected officials are directly accountable to them; 4) invigorating and expanding civil society to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to engage, that people understand that political participation is not limited to just voting, and that all of us, especially young people and immigrants, know that we have a role to play by volunteering and engaging to bridge differences; 5) reinvigorating our civic infrastructure to support a common purpose so that the experience of being an American is not narrowly defined by race, ethnicity, gender, age, or class, but rather a universally shared ideal that must be reaffirmed in order to hold us together as a nation; and 6) creating a culture of commitment to living in a democratic society.

We are at a moment when some may feel overwhelmed or paralyzed by the multiple challenges we face. But it is during these difficult moments when individuals open up to the possibilities of transformational shifts. The task force report provides a blueprint for instituting structural changes to reinvigorate our democracy. This report is not the byproduct of a group of ivory tower intellectuals coming together to dream up their own version of how best to reform our democratic structures. It is, in large part, the result of holding more than fifty listening sessions with people from all over the United States, conversations with thousands of individuals from every walk of life who talked about what unites us, what tears us apart, and what our nation must do to modernize our constitutional framework.

The report has been well received and now the hard work of dealing with today's crisis of confidence in our democracy begins. In particular, how do we spread the word? How do we implement the multifold recommendations? One way is through community foundations such as ours. A community foundation has unique knowledge of local needs and broad relationships with nonprofits and other local organizations. With histories spanning one hundred years or more, community foundations are well trusted and have the expertise to lead stakeholder alignments.

Moreover, since we are seen as neutral brokers with track records of lending community support, we can help unify people around common objectives.

I am ready to begin implementing the task force recommendations. I live in the perfect laboratory for reaffirming our democratic form of government. Los Angeles County is one of the most diverse areas in the world. Its residents range from traditional Europeans and Latinos to immigrants from every part of the world. Over one hundred languages are spoken here, and the richness of the world is reflected in its distinct communities. Travel to the town of Artesia, one of the eighty-eight municipalities in the county, and you find yourself in Little India; journey just west of downtown LA and, within a mile, you have traversed neighborhoods of people from Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Korea. Drive into the San Gabriel Valley and you find many people from China and other parts of Asia. The areas surrounding UCLA and out in the San Fernando Valley are Iranian communities. Glendale has the largest number of Armenians outside of Armenia. Everyone is familiar with the cultural richness of the African American and Latino neighborhoods of LA. Altogether, it is a diverse population living, working, and navigating differences, yet united by the yearning of its people to live in a free democratic society.

I do not want to paint too rosy a picture. Our progress in the matter of living together in peace has been hard won. We have suffered through terrible times of civil unrest that severely affected African Americans, such as the 1965 Watts riots and the civil unrest in 1992 following the police beating of Rodney King. During World War II, soldiers and white residents went into Mexican neighborhoods and beat up residents and destroyed property. The Japanese community has not forgotten the loss of their homes and businesses after being herded into internment camps during that war. But from those incidents and others, we learned that we are stronger when we form common goals and respect community differences.

Living among Los Angeles County's ten million people is a large immigrant community. Most of these immigrants are legal residents, but their numbers also include up to a million undocumented persons. It is our immigrant population that provides the focus for our work in implementing the task force recommendations. Most immigrants, like myself, came to this country to pursue dreams of a better life for themselves and their families. Many fled from repressive governments, seeking to live in a society without political restraints. Others sought freedom to create a business. Some came to study in our premier universities and stayed to enrich our country with their knowledge and drive. Today, despite all our problems, people continue to want to migrate to this country. The desire to live in a free and democratic country continues to be a strong pull.

But we cannot assume that our newly arrived immigrants understand all the responsibilities of living in a free and open society. This is our challenge and our opportunity. At the California Community Foundation, we invest in the development of immigrant civic muscle. We have learned that engagement does not come naturally to many immigrants. For the most part, these are people who have made personal commitments to live, work, and grow themselves and their families in this country. While many struggle to get by, they are not going away.

It is not easy to adapt to new ways of doing things, especially for people coming from vastly different backgrounds and cultures. We know that arriving immigrants initially interact with three main institutions (aside from their employers): schools, religious establishments, and local government. We work with these institutions to acquaint immigrants, but this is just a first step; it requires a greater commitment and investment than we are making. Many states, such as New York and California, devoted large public and private resources to immigrant resettlement programs at the beginning of the twentieth century when our shores were flooded with European immigrants. We can do it again, for all immigrants. We must if we expect our democratic institutions to retain vibrancy.

In addition to resettlement and adaptation, legal citizenship is an imperative. Becoming a US citizen opens the possibilities for stability, economic advancement, and civic participation. Immigrants are eligible to become citizens following five years of residency. This is easier said than done, of course. The citizenship process requires immigrants to learn English, take civics lessons, and understand our complicated systems of government.

While this process is arduous, it is essential. It is a key to the continuing vitality of our democracy. But it must be appreciated that immigrants often cannot do it alone. This is the simple reason that, for example, hundreds of thousands of people in Los Angeles County from every corner of the planet have not crossed over the citizenship barrier. But it can be and has been done by millions of others. Anyone who has witnessed a naturalization ceremony has seen in the eyes of those new American citizens a joy and hope beyond description and a profound desire to be part of their new country.

At CCF, many of our donors have recognized that the naturalization process is the perfect way to reinvigorate our democracy. Several years ago, CCF embarked on a massive citizenship effort and, within a year, we helped naturalize over 30,000 people. That push was a success, but only a start. We undertook this focused effort with an appreciation that naturalization means more than political participation. Equally important are the economic benefits. Within five years of becoming a citizen, a newly naturalized person's economic condition improves by over 15 percent. Citizenship also opens paths to many occupations and professions limited to citizens. Thus, becoming a citizen not only benefits an individual, but it strengthens the entire community by adding to its collective economic well-being.

We are planning to mobilize resources for another large-scale citizenship drive for the 800,000 legal residents of Los Angeles County who are eligible for it. We recognize the reasons many do not seek citizenship. The process is very expensive, slow, and bureaucratic. Moreover, fear is a daunting factor. In the current climate of national anti-immigrant fervor, immigrants are not eager to make themselves known to government officials. On top of that, many recent immigrants come from countries where democracy is not practiced, where volunteerism is not the norm, and participation in civic life is discouraged or frowned upon.

So, there are many good reasons that many immigrants would prefer to stay under the radar at this time. But there also are strong reasons for encouraging and facilitating naturalization of our

immigrant population, particularly at this moment when we have a population ready and willing to engage if the means are made available. Thus, the task force recommendation to inspire a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy could not come at a better time.

In my prior job, as head of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), I worked to develop programs that encouraged immigrant parents to engage with their children's schools. We understood that education is a high priority for immigrants. So, we started with the premise that immigrants paid taxes that supported schools and, therefore, engaging with the schools was a natural and important starting place. We impressed upon recent immigrants the importance of engaging with teachers and schools, particularly at the elementary level. A parental leadership program gave them the tools necessary to approach schools and to assist their children in bettering their educational opportunities. The program was a success. Progress was incremental, but we were able to build partnerships between parents and local schools that improved the education of many students.

With the success of this program, we went on to develop a leadership program for adults that prepared them to serve on nonprofit and public sector boards. I have heard from many of those people since then. As one of them said, "You may not remember me, but I was a parent who participated in your program years ago. I began participating in the programs at my child's school and then took that experience to become active in the PTA." Others have told me that they took the training a step further and ran for a school board—something, they explain, that would have been inconceivable had they not been through our program.

Thus, parent education programs work and can have huge civic participation benefits. Philanthropy needs to expand funding for these programs if for no other reason than to expand the capacity of civil society organizations to build bridges across lines of differences. At CCF, our education portfolio funds nonprofit organizations that are working with parents in these ways. We partner with educational leaders to reinforce the importance of engaging parents in the education of their children.

We have recently had an election in which some of the task force recommendations have come into play. In California, through legislation actively pursued by our Secretary of State, all voters received a ballot to vote by mail. Many were automatically registered to vote when they applied for or renewed their driver's licenses. We must be committed to making it as easy as possible for people to exercise their right to vote since it plays such an important role in ensuring participation in our democratic system of government.

For this reason, the task force report makes some additional recommendations, such as aligning state and local elections with our national elections in the hope of increasing voter turnout. The report further recommends scheduling presidential elections on Veteran's Day, already a federal holiday in November when people can go to the polls. This particular holiday makes symbolic sense as well, since on this day we commemorate the sacrifices our military forces have made to secure our freedom. Advocating for such a simple and commonsense change is a practical innovation in

which philanthropy, and specifically community foundations, can play an important role.

We are a diverse country that is becoming more diverse all the time. Certainly, our conversation over more than two hundred years about who is an American will continue. I reflect upon this virtually every time someone asks me that common question, “Where are you from?” I can well imagine the reaction of some to my answers of “I’m from Los Angeles” or “I’m from California,” especially when I travel outside of LA. “Hmm,” they think, as they look at my non-European complexion, “she doesn’t look like she comes from here.” To those people, I do not look like what an American is “supposed” to look like. I may be an immigrant from Mexico, but I am American through and through. Pasadena is my hood. Los Angeles is my stomping ground. California is my state. And the United States of America is my country. The sooner we change the misperception of what an American is supposed to look like, the easier it will be for all of us to live together in our complex American society. The notion that people of different races, religions, and backgrounds will just “go back to where they came from” or retreat to enclaves of “people like themselves” is long over in our heterogeneous society. We must all embrace our larger selves as Americans.

Our challenges in reinvigorating the democratic ideals so many Americans believe in are many. Having worked at the national level, I understand that some of the task force recommendations will require national action. Promoting systemic change for the entire country is challenging. But many of the recommendations can be implemented at the local level. And it is here that community foundations can play a starring role. Their local community is not only where people feel more connected and personally involved, it also is where the possibility of change may not seem so overwhelming. It is surprising how many things can be achieved where people are familiar with their neighbors, have built a variety of relationships with fellow residents, and know on whom they can rely to get things done. Time and time again, we have seen that no matter where people come from or how they look, they can be united by a common desire to ensure safe neighborhoods, good public utilities, and improved schools. As Americans, our common interests and mutual reliance often stand out as more important than the political differences that divide so many of us today.

Community foundations are an integral part of these communities. They are intended to represent, reflect, and work to improve the communities in which they serve. Can they serve any higher civic calling?

Antonia Hernández is president and CEO of California Community Foundation (CCF), one of Southern California's largest and most active philanthropic organizations, which holds assets of more than \$1.7 billion. During her tenure, CCF has granted nearly \$2 billion, with a focus on health, housing, education, and immigration programs. Previously, Hernández was president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF).

## Notes

1. *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020).