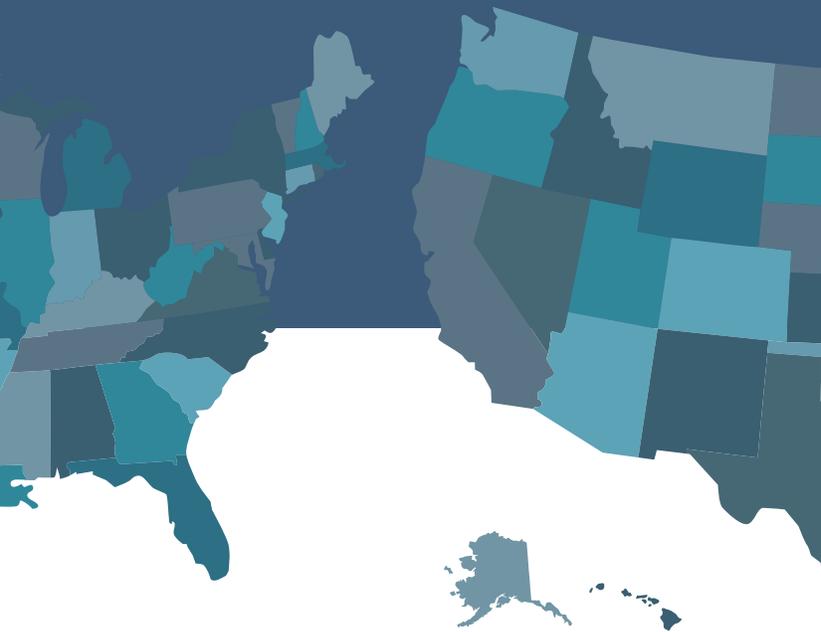


OUR DIVIDED NATION:

Is There a Role for Philanthropy
in Renewing Democracy?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Americans' views of government have shifted from healthy skepticism to crippling cynicism in recent years. People are frustrated by the ineffectiveness of Congress, harshly critical of elected officials, and deeply worried about the divisive tone of public discourse. Many worry that the United States is no longer living up—or even aspiring—to the core ideals on which the nation was founded.

The challenges facing American democracy raise difficult questions for philanthropy. Has the foundation world done everything it can to shore up democratic values and aspirations, or has it been pursuing its own ideas of the public good and, as some critics maintain, turning a blind eye to the gathering storm? To what extent can philanthropy's efforts to strengthen communities and rebuild public trust be effective in the face of stiff headwinds? How can it be more responsive to the needs of a democratic society? And what role does the public play, if any, in defining the priorities of grantmaking organizations?

Beginning the Conversation

In late May 2018, the Council on Foundations and the Kettering Foundation convened a two-day symposium to wrestle with these questions. The symposium brought together a group of prominent foundation leaders working at the national, state, and community levels to explore how philanthropy can narrow the gap

between people and institutions, strengthen public engagement, build civic capacity, and generally bolster democratic norms and practices in the United States.

The exchange was framed around the problem of divisiveness and whether there is a role for philanthropy in addressing the deepening cleavages in American society. Pluralism has always been a hallmark of the American experiment, but today there are growing concerns that our differences are tearing us apart. Many see the nation reverting to a kind of tribalism that not only threatens our social cohesion but also undermines key aspects of our democratic system.

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The divisions are not new, but they are being exacerbated in new ways. There are forces at work today that are systematically inflaming tensions and breeding confusion and doubt. Chief among these are powerful social media platforms and cable news outlets that seize on conflict and weaponize information for profit or political advantage.

One of the effects of this new culture of division and doubt is that we are losing the common narratives about who we are as a people. We know what divides us, but we are no longer sure what binds us together. The fault lines make it more difficult to address our common problems, but they also present opportunities for exploring the deeper issues facing many Americans today, including long-term financial insecurity, anxiety over the pace of technological change, and the loss of a sense of control over their future. While divisiveness complicates the picture, it can also serve as a point of entry for getting below the waterline of partisanship.

Divisiveness is intertwined with a constellation of challenges facing American democracy. These include:

- the decline of public confidence in newspapers, schools, churches, the police, and other democratic institutions;
- the pervasive loss of social capital and the breakdown of constructive dialogue in US communities;

- the impact of new technologies, perhaps especially their tendency to spread misinformation, inflame tensions, and create filter bubbles and echo chambers that polarize rather than bring us together; and
- deepening income inequality, a problem that raises tough questions about the *raison d'être* of philanthropy and challenges its credibility as an institution—one that purports to serve the public interest but is often perceived as a special interest group more preoccupied with protecting its own privilege than in protecting the common good.

Community-Building and Civic Engagement

Democracy-building starts with the local community, and there is no shortage of philanthropic initiatives going on across the country aimed at nurturing vibrant and robust communities. Successful community-building efforts share a number of common features. They create public spaces—contexts in which people can sort each other out across the barriers of social difference and begin to discover common interests. They cultivate democratic skills and capacities and nurture civic leadership. And they assist communities with ideas, access, networking, and other resources that go beyond financial support.

Unfortunately, a number of common practices and methodologies in the grantmaking community often stand in the way of effective democracy-building. While many grantmakers underscore the importance of “civic engagement,” the phrase has come to mean so much in general that it often ceases to mean anything in particular. Worse, it sometimes encompasses practices that have a host of unintended consequences, such as discouraging community participation and deepening public mistrust of leaders and institutions.

One of the common pitfalls of civic engagement is prescribing solutions instead of building capacity. There is still a widespread tendency in the foundation world to approach the challenges of democracy as if they were technical problems that could be solved by science, expertise, and technological intervention. But too often, in an effort to develop solutions that can be taken to scale, grantmakers ignore people at the local level.

Another pitfall is measuring the wrong kinds of outcomes. It’s one of the ironies of philanthropy that though it’s accountable to nobody, at least in the traditional sense—it has no money to raise, no products to sell, no elections to win—it’s inordinately focused on metrics and accountability. Yet the work of building strong and healthy communities

emphasizes civic practices like bringing people together, building trust, and deliberating about shared concerns. These activities are difficult, if not impossible, to measure with the accountability systems favored by many foundations. Metrics may work against the very outcomes the programs are designed to promote.

A Challenge for Philanthropy

In their mission statements, foundations often stress the importance of advancing democracy and serving the common good. Yet there is no real consensus in the field about what this means in the context of a divided public or how it is to be achieved. One of the challenges facing philanthropy today is to figure out what kind of democracy it wants to support and how best to go about doing that. The place to begin, perhaps, is to articulate what democracy means and how best to champion and defend its essential values, norms, and practices.



The Kettering Foundation (KF) is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.



COUNCIL *on* FOUNDATIONS

An active philanthropic network, the Council on Foundations (www.cof.org), founded in 1949, is a nonprofit leadership association of grantmaking foundations and corporations. It provides the opportunity, leadership, and tools needed by philanthropic organizations to expand, enhance, and sustain their ability to advance the common good. With members from all foundation types and sizes, the council empowers professionals in philanthropy to meet today's toughest challenges and advances a culture of charitable giving in the US and globally.