

THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY IN MONTANA'S CIVIC CULTURE

As a part of our Democracy Lens tools, for each state in our region, we report a data snapshot and case studies (called Bright Spots) about philanthropy's role in democracy. You can access all these data and Bright Spots on the [Democracy Northwest webpage](#).

In his classic work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville identified one crucial contributor to the strength of American democracy: the tendency of people in this country to form what he called “voluntary associations” to accomplish a great variety of social objectives. “Thus the most democratic country on the face of the earth,” he wrote, “is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires and have applied this new science to the greatest number of purposes.”

Tocqueville was both impressed and a little amused by the breathtaking range of these associations. But when he turned to their impact on American democracy, he was all business. “In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science,” he wrote, and “the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress of that one.”¹

We are now so accustomed to this feature of American life that we are likely to take it for granted, and to overlook the role it still plays in keeping our democracy viable. When we think about the weaknesses and wounds that afflict our body politic, we think (for good reason) about the excessive role of money or of partisanship in our political and governing institutions. When we try to imagine how we might heal our democracy, we are more likely to think about increasing voter turnout, recruiting better candidates or improving our advocacy skills long before we think about strengthening the nonprofit sector in general. In fact, though, Tocqueville's incisive observations about the democratic role of this part of our society is as relevant as ever, and maybe even more so, given the challenges our democracy now faces.

If this is true, then there are two further implications that we want to highlight here. The first is that the philanthropic sector obviously has a crucial role to play, since philanthropy in all forms



– from individual charitable contributions through the largest of foundations – must continue to provide the resources that enable nonprofit organizations to play this or any other role in our society. The second observation is that this kind of philanthropic support has already made Montana a bright spot on the map. Let’s look at that first.

Building Strong Civic Infrastructure in Montana

In 2016, Andrew Littlefield undertook some research for the nonprofit service network “WeDidIt” to determine which states had the highest number of nonprofit organizations per capita. He found that Vermont led the list, with one NGO for every 160 residents of the state – twice the national average of one nonprofit for every 320 Americans. Second on the list, though, was Montana, with one nonprofit for every 207 Montanans. The Pacific Northwest made a very strong showing overall, with Wyoming in fifth place, Alaska in seventh and Oregon thirteenth.² If we combine this rather intriguing data with Tocqueville’s observations about the crucial role of “voluntary associations” in democracy, what might it tell us about Montana, the Northwest, and the potential for strengthening democracy by a more focused philanthropic attention to this phenomenon?

Why Does This Matter to Democracy?

First, why should we think that there is still any connection between the creation, care and nurture of nonprofit associations on the one hand and the vitality of democracy on the other? The answer is that democracy is fundamentally about the people determining among themselves the basic conditions of their own lives. No matter what institutions we put in place, no matter who we elect to office, no matter what policies they adopt, if most people do not have a sense of their own capacity to make a difference, democracy in that core sense simply cannot thrive. That is precisely why Tocqueville made the connection between Americans’ passion for association and their capacity for democracy. It is still as true today as it was in his era that the experience of people within their chosen organizations is crucial to their sense of agency. This is true for the simple reason that every one of those organizations pursues a mission, and the people who staff and govern those nonprofits become over time extremely skilled at exploiting every opportunity to realize that mission. In other words, they become skilled at democracy.

These citizens also work hard to elect the best people they can find to fill governing positions, but when they see so many of their larger political and governing institutions falling short of their individual standards of effectiveness, they naturally ask what more they can do than try to elect the best people to office? In particular, how can that Tocquevillean musculature of their associational activity be brought to bear on these larger problems of democracy? Let’s assume that it’s operating fairly well locally: can it be scaled up one order of magnitude to make a difference at a state level? If Montana is already a bright spot in these terms – if we already have some unusual amount of civic horsepower available, how might it be brought to bear more effectively at larger scales?

Building Civic Infrastructure in Montana

We already have some very promising civic infrastructure at the statewide scale, none of which would have been conceivable without philanthropic support. Here are just a few examples of strong nodes in that network:

- Montana Nonprofit Association
- Montana Community Foundation
- Leadership Montana
- One Montana
- Burton K. Wheeler Center for the Exploration of Montana Issues
- Humanities Montana
- Non-Profit Key Industry Network – a component of the Governor’s Main Street Montana Project

What if all these organizations – or any number of them – taking account of their democratic potency – were simply to ask themselves what concrete steps they might take, separately or together, to help heal or strengthen the Montana body politic of which they already constitute a very substantial element? And what if they asked the most enlightened of their philanthropic partners to help them explore this possibility? If Montana is already a bright spot in terms of nonprofit vitality, why not leverage this strength to help revitalize our democracy?

Key Takeaways

- Supporting specific mission-driven work by grantees in almost any arena, from social services to conservation, can strengthen civil society and political culture by nurturing substantial problem-solving skills.
- Creating a strong nonprofit network contributes to the civic culture of a community or state, and this side-effect can be substantially leveraged by more deliberate investment in developing collaborative problem-solving and advocacy skills.
- Investing in statewide civic infrastructure like nonprofit associations, statewide leadership development or resources for civic dialogue can further enhance the democratic resource represented by a vibrant nonprofit sector.

Endnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, “On the Use That the Americans Make of Association in Civil Life,” in *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 489-492, <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/805328.html>.
2. Andrew Littlefield, “This State Has the Most Nonprofits Per Person,” WeDidIt, March 21, 2016, <http://blog.wedid.it/this-state-has-the-most-nonprofits-per-pers>