

CONVENINGS OF CIVIC LEADERS TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY

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](#).

One of the “Bright Spots” featured in Philanthropy Northwest’s Democracy Lens highlights the role of philanthropically-supported nonprofit organizations in creating and maintaining a strong civic culture in Montana. As such, it was natural for Philanthropy Northwest to partner with two of its members, the [Montana Nonprofit Association](#) and the [Kettering Foundation](#), to identify more precisely the opportunities for further strengthening this crucial feature of democracy in the state. In 2019, this deliberate partnership expanded to include a couple of other long-time contributors to the health of Montana’s democracy: [Leadership Montana](#) and [Humanities Montana](#).



Identifying Opportunities for Enhancing Civic Culture

With a grant from the Bernard Rose Family Fund at the [Billings Community Foundation](#) and support from Humanities Montana and Leadership Montana, this consortium of organizations convened civic leaders and philanthropists from across Montana in January 2019. Expertly facilitated by [Deb Halliday](#), this day-long colloquium centered on the question: “How can we work together to strengthen Montana’s civic culture?” The participants prioritized key “critical shifts from where we are now to where we’d like to be,” and then workgroups generated concrete ideas for advancing the priority shifts. Here are some of the most notable results of that work:

- Play to our strength at the local level by making sure that all our communities have ready access to all the local government tools and resources available to them to solve problems.
- Balance the role of political parties in our governing processes with an organized and influential civic sector.



- Launch a statewide “third space” initiative to engage diverse people on historically divisive issues to find common ground and collaborate.
- Work toward re-ordering priorities, for example by developing an index of well-being that would measure how well we are doing in enabling all people to participate in and contribute to civil society.
- Work together to build greater trust in news and information by nurturing legitimate, accountable, unbiased and responsible avenues of information.

Supporting Problem-Solvers in the Public Sector

While organizers continue to pursue all of the above avenues, the second priority got a jumpstart from former legislators in attendance at this convening. Eager to take advantage of the fact that Montana’s biennial legislature was then in session, a bipartisan group of six former legislators invited a similarly bipartisan handful of incumbent legislators for an open-ended discussion to consider how they might work together to “improve Montana’s capacity to govern itself.”

As it turned out, that discussion began with a description of a just-announced grant from the [Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation](#)’s AMB West Philanthropies that will enable Leadership Montana to conduct a series of retreats for incumbent legislators over the next two years for training in collaborative, problem-solving leadership techniques. With some Leadership Montana alumni among the former and current legislators in the room, this philanthropically supported opportunity to reach more legislators with collaborative training was welcome news.

In addition to fostering leadership training, the conversation explored other opportunities for philanthropy to strengthen democracy in Montana. A common observation by the former and current legislators was the fact that representatives who are genuinely motivated to devise workable solutions to the state’s most pressing problems too often find themselves operating in a context that is dominated by ideology and partisanship. Responsiveness to these forces is almost always more strongly rewarded than pursuit of the common good. Exercising their own collaborative problem solving, these legislators explored the idea of an organized group of able and committed civic leaders who could begin to balance the weight of partisanship and ideology by taking specific concerted steps. These steps could include:

- Helping to recruit legislative candidates (or running for office themselves);
- Offering to be involved in orienting new legislators;
- Maintaining and publicizing a “solutions scorecard” to rank legislative performance;
- Creating a genuinely bipartisan or nonpartisan policy development center;
- Using the upcoming 50th anniversary of the 1972 Montana constitution to stimulate conversations around Montana about how well its citizens are doing at governing themselves, and what realistic opportunities they might have to improve their democracy.

These ideas all highlight the potential role of vibrant, capable citizenship in providing

acounterweight to the damaging effects of excessive partisanship and ideological polarization. In other words, the path leads back to where we began: with the fact that, by investing in a great variety of nonprofit organizations, philanthropy has nurtured the very qualities that we expect our democratic system to exemplify. Hundreds of grantee nonprofits have been quietly and diligently recruiting board members and staff from every walk of life and every segment of society who in turn have been collaboratively solving a range of local problems, often scaling up to providing leadership in arenas where the political system has failed to muster the necessary political will. Perhaps above all, this support of the nonprofit sector has had the effect of leaving community members with the justifiable impression that their opinions, their commitments and their skills really do matter. Now many of them are eager to explore how they can work with willing philanthropic partners to leverage the strength that philanthropy has already contributed to their state's civil society

Key Takeaways

- Bringing civic and philanthropic leaders together in a collaborative space can inspire an expanded range of opportunities to effectively strengthen democratic culture.
- Creating settings for government leaders to converse in a problem-solving atmosphere that minimizes partisanship can bring the pursuit of the common good to the forefront of policymaking.