

Philanthropy Strengthens Democracy

Background and Opportunity:

In April 2014, Philanthropy Northwest, in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, published "[Philanthropy and the Renewal of Democracy: Is it Time to Step up our Game?](#)". This monograph, authored by Daniel Kemmis, examines the vital connection between philanthropy's work to build a better society and the condition of our democracy. Proceeding from a conceptual framework that links philanthropy's enduring obligation to the common good with our current democratic challenges, Kemmis makes clear the pressing need and the growing opportunity for philanthropy to embark upon a substantially more deliberate and concerted effort to help restore the health and vitality of our democracy.

We believe:

- The health of our democracy is failing, demonstrated by extraordinary levels of polarization and partisanship, declining levels of civic engagement and voter turnout, and unprecedented gridlock
- A vibrant democracy is possible, with timely, sound public decisions that reflect the will of knowledgeable, engaged citizens
- Most philanthropic missions rely on a supportive public sector and functioning democracy. The current state of our democracy undermines successful philanthropic efforts
- The philanthropic sector is becoming more aware of the value of public policy advocacy while at the same time realizing that a dysfunctional body politic is too often unresponsive to advocacy efforts
- The historic approach whereby philanthropy demonstrates solutions that are then scaled by government has become less effective
- Philanthropy Northwest should take a leadership role in advancing a *nonpartisan* philanthropic response to this challenge. Based on its demonstrated regional and national leadership in public policy and democracy, PNW has a unique opportunity to advance this work across the philanthropic sector

Our Goal:

A fully functional public sector supported by a concerted philanthropic effort to restore the health and vitality of our democracy

Democracy Strengthening Activities:

The good news is that there are many current philanthropic efforts that strengthen democracy, some unintentionally and some with a laser focus. We've sketched a continuum of activities below to give a general idea of the many avenues for philanthropic participation. A more detailed [map](#) of the systems involved in democracy, developed by the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative, also suggests the very broad array of potential democracy-building activities for foundations. The Foundation Center [reports](#) over \$2 billion in investments in democracy work from 2011 to 2014.



Approach

While investments in democracy are already broad and deep, we believe there is currently an opportunity (if not an obligation) to increase philanthropic awareness of, and investments in, democracy strengthening activities. The Philanthropy Strengthens Democracy project will provide tailored support to individuals and foundations seeking to “step up their game” in contributing to the restoration of our democracy. We intend to co-create the most effective programmatic approach with partners from the philanthropic sector, as well as academia, business and the public sector. Examples of potential activities we are considering:

- Compiling research on the range of democracy strengthening philanthropic efforts now underway.
- Clarifying how diverse types of investments strengthen democracy, and presenting this in an accessible format – allowing people to make clear determinations of how their work already fits in, and how it might be modified to more directly address democracy
- Identifying leaders and best practices to inform our on-the-ground efforts. Building and supporting a community of practice that brings experienced practitioners together with motivated philanthropic leaders
- Building out a suite of programmatic offerings to meet foundations and people where they are, with tailored support that speeds their evolution along the continuum of actions that revitalize civil society, build civic capacity and revitalize democracy. These could include a toolkit with rationale and logic models, best practices, webinars, convenings, direct assistance, and network building

We will begin this effort with a convening in Spring of 2015, inviting regional and national leaders to participate in co-creating a larger effort over a longer term. We invite you to join this exciting and crucial effort to help rebuild democracy.