

How Can Philanthropy Strengthen Democracy? (And What About the Other Way Around?)

DISCOVERY SYNTHESIS

A group of leaders have come together to create Democracy Northwest, a project to explore what philanthropy can do to strengthen democracy. Through an initial convening, two focus groups, sessions at the Philanthropy Northwest annual conference and other conversations, participants are broadening the conversation, sharing strategies to strengthen democracy, and using democratic practices to strengthen philanthropy in turn. This discovery process generated a range of ideas to further explore and develop. In the action phase of the project, participants will identify the most promising ideas and support further inquiry, create programs, tools, and participate in communities of practice to support them. This document summarizes the main ideas that emerged through the Discovery Phase.

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PREFACE

In the context of the deep wounds to the body politic that have accompanied the entire course of the 2016 election, we are hearing more and more philanthropists saying, in effect, “American democracy is in crisis, and the field of philanthropy has an obligation to do all it can to respond.”

In a post-election webinar with two dozen Philanthropy Northwest members, for example, we heard from many participants deep concern about what the election might mean in particular for people of color, people with disabilities, and immigrants and refugees. Even before the voting had begun, there had been very troubling signs of deepening polarization and alienation on both ends of the ideological spectrum, raising the prospect that no matter who won the presidential election, our democracy was likely to emerge more wounded than ever from the contest. That long process of decline, now sharply accentuated by the surprising results of the election, has produced a widespread determination to respond effectively with whatever human, intellectual or financial resources philanthropy can bring to bear.

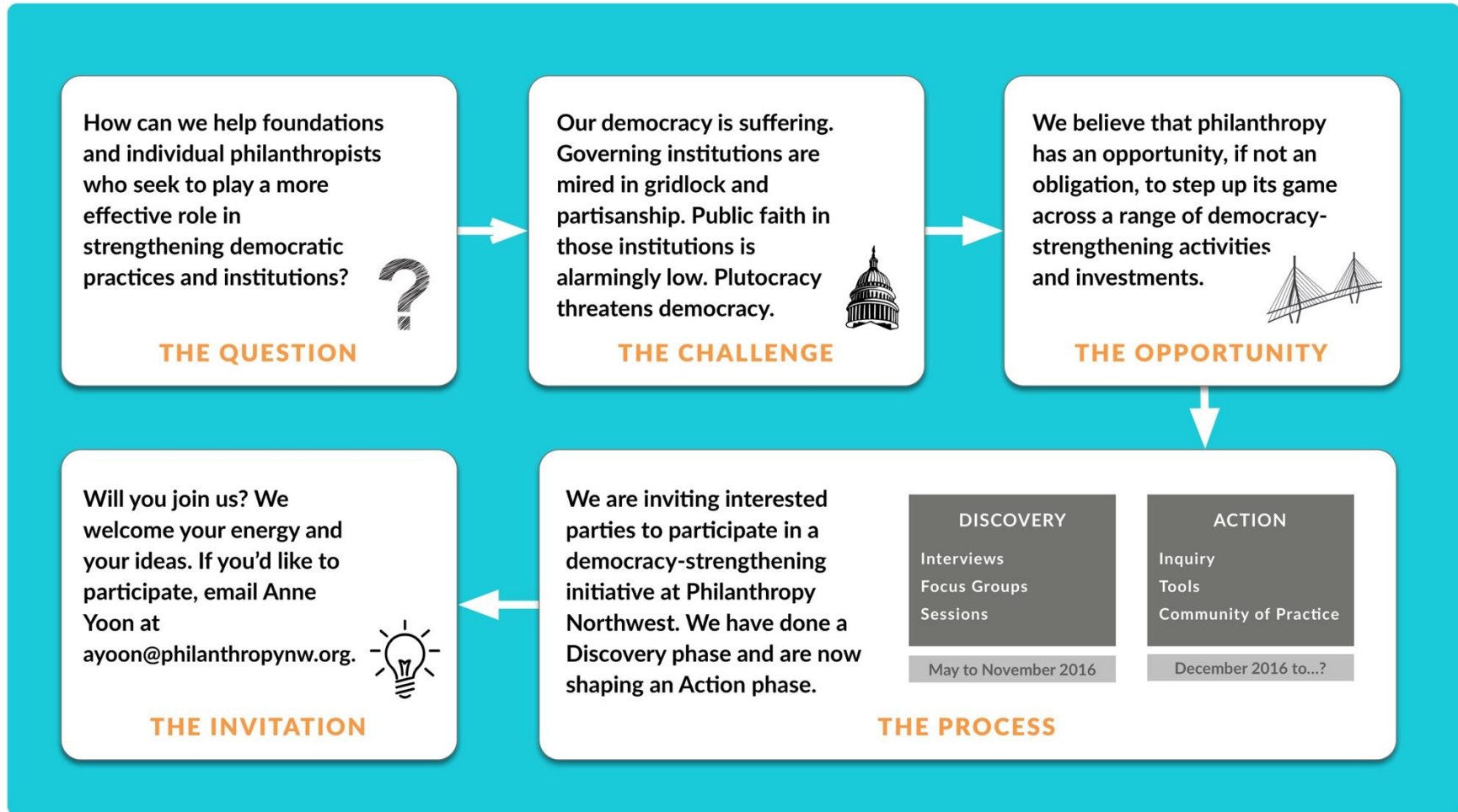
There are clearly many reasons to be concerned about the way we are governing ourselves, which means that there are many legitimate responses both within and outside philanthropy. At least in our region, a number of philanthropists had been exploring that range of responses well before the 2016 election, not in an effort to find the single best solution (which almost certainly does not exist) but to create new opportunities to share experiences, insights and aspirations and, through that sharing, to enable the field at large to “step up its game” in responding to the growing list of problems facing our democracy.

In fact, one of the most widely recognized of those problems is a declining capacity within our society to hear what our neighbors are saying, feeling, fearing, hoping. Philanthropists cannot realistically hope to address this or any other problem in our democratic culture unless we cultivate that kind of active, attentive, responsive listening with our own philanthropic colleagues. From the beginning, those involved with creating Democracy Northwest have tried to provide platforms for that kind of generative, peer-learning conversation. This synthesis reports on one phase of that effort. Now, building on this foundation, we ask you to help us take it to the next level, to meet a new level of challenge.

Daniel Kemmis

On behalf of the Democracy Northwest team

PROJECT OVERVIEW



PROCESS AND PARTICIPANTS SO FAR

The process that led to the formation of Democracy Northwest was originally sparked by “Stepping Up Our Game,” a March 2015 convening in Seattle co-sponsored by Philanthropy Northwest and the Seattle City Club and co-headlined by Daniel Stid of the Hewlett Foundation and Daniel Kemmis, a fellow of the Kettering Foundation and former Philanthropy Northwest board member. More than 100 people participated. See the end of this document for a map of that convening.¹

Democracy Northwest has proceeded in two phases.

The Discovery Phase went from May 2016 through November 2016. It involved:

- Funding and guidance by The Boeing Company, Kettering Foundation, Kirkpatrick Family Foundation and Satterberg Foundation.
- A series of conversations among a core set of players
- Two focus groups of foundation leaders
- A plenary session at Philanthropy Northwest’s 2016 annual conference in Missoula
- A pop-up session—i.e. voted on by participants—at the same conference
- Reflection on what emerged, including this synthesis document

The Action Phase began in December 2016. Although that action is still being shaped, it will likely be centered on:

- Broadening the conversation
- Informing that conversation with research
- Developing tools for philanthropy practitioners
- Supporting a community of practice of interested practitioners for collaborative work and learning

Participants in the activities so far have included the following:

Aaron Robinson, Seattle Foundation

Alice Ito, Seattle Foundation

Amber Knox, Champion Foundation

Antony Chiang, Empire Health Foundation

Bill Thorndike, Northwest Health Foundation Board Member

Chuck Fulton, Sherwood Trust

Danielle Garbe, Sherwood Trust

David Bley, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

Huong Vu, Boeing

Jock Edwards, Sherwood Trust

Karla Miller, Northwest Area Foundation

Kathleen Pierce, Kirkpatrick Family Foundation

Kathy Small, Sherwood Trust

Lara Iglitzin, Henry M. Jackson Foundation

Lisa Galaites, Philanthropy Northwest

Luz Vegas Marquis, Marguerite Casey Foundation

Mauri Ingram, Whatcom Community Foundation

Michele Frix, Seattle Foundation

Pamela Jons, Whatcom Community Foundation

Peter Pennekamp, Community Democracy Workshop

Punkey Adams, Sherwood Trust

Sara Brannman, Champion Foundation

Steve Moore, M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust

Susan Anderson, The Ciri Foundation

Tony Mestres, Seattle Foundation

¹ Don Andre, formerly of the Champion Foundation, was instrumental in organizing this convening, and indeed in generating Democracy Northwest.

EMERGING THEMES

- 1 Philanthropy's long-term mission isn't possible without a healthy democracy.
- 2 Philanthropy can strengthen democracy and democracy can strengthen philanthropy.
- 3 This project is relevant to the work of many foundations, not only those with dedicated democracy-related programs.
- 4 We need to learn from bright spots at the local level, where people are planting the seeds of democracy's renewal.
- 5 Philanthropy's effort to strengthen democracy and its effort to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion are mutually dependent.
- 6 An effort to strengthen democracy needs to scan and better understand the current landscape for trends, challenges, and solutions.
- 7 An effort to strengthen democracy needs to focus on a set of key challenges to democracy and develop and share strategies to address them.
- 8 We need to focus on two dimensions of our democracy: institutions and norms.
- 9 Whatever avenue we pursue, we need to talk about what holds back philanthropy practitioners and organizations from doing democracy work.
- 10 Philanthropy has a range of ways it strengthens democracy, from more intentional to less intentional.

DISCOVERY FINDINGS

A Shared Commitment

Participants share a commitment to help organized philanthropy to clarify and strengthen its role in democracy, and there is high support for organizing a conversation in the field to do this, focused on the *why, what, how, who* and *where* of this work.

A Sense of Urgency

As we mentioned in the preface to this document, the November election has amplified the sense of urgency for philanthropy to become more focused on democracy-strengthening work. Even before the election itself, though, participants cited a wide range of reasons for their interest in strengthening democracy, including:

- The need for greater equity in the system, a value mentioned by many but interpreted in different ways
- Fair and equal access to the process
- The need for better voter registration and more voter participation
- A lack of civil discourse
- Engagement of people of color in the process
- Disparate power levels and the influence of money in the process
- An interest in boosting the “grassroots democratic capacity” of communities

Opportunities to Broaden the Conversation

Participants universally supported the need to continue and broaden the conversation itself, an ongoing inquiry into how philanthropy can better understand and strengthen its roles supporting democracy. There is every reason to believe that the election has strengthened and deepened this consensus. Even before the election, participants in these conversations recognized various obstacles that stand in the way of democracy work in the field, including a limited view of the ways that foundations can contribute to civic health, a wariness and in some cases misunderstanding of rules governing foundation advocacy, and a resistance to the conversation itself. “Often it’s ‘Why should I care about democracy?’ I’m in philanthropy,” said one participant. Ultimately, participants envisioned a broadened conversation resulting in greater intentionality, coordination, nimbleness and effectiveness in philanthropy’s democracy strategies and practices.

Beyond their overall push to broaden the conversation, participants wanted the Democracy Northwest initiative to focus its near-term efforts on the following:

- Shape new ways to frame democracy work within philanthropy. “We need a different, less complex way of delivering the message,” said one participant.
- Explore how democracy-strengthening work is understood among those in philanthropy, starting with members of Philanthropy Northwest.
- Do a state of the landscape scan in the six states that Philanthropy Northwest covers, tracking data on democratic institutions and process and focusing on bright spots in democratic reforms, initiatives and innovations, especially in the social sector.

“We’re not having the conversation.”

“We need to lean into our values.”

“Often it’s ‘Why should I care about democracy? I’m in philanthropy.’”

“We need to raise the issue in the field.”

“We need to talk to ourselves.”

Opportunities to Strengthen Democracy

Participants explored where they would most like to see philanthropy focus its democracy-strengthening efforts. While we would expect some change in this list now that the election is over, that conversation will benefit immeasurably from the fact that dozens of specific opportunities were identified in these pre-election discussions. Those opportunities can be grouped in five overall areas of democracy work:

- Advocacy
- Citizen engagement
- Deliberation and dialogue
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Institutional reform

Specific opportunities identified by participants included the following:

- Connect **local, regional and national philanthropy efforts** to strengthen democracy.
- Develop **leaders at the local level** for school boards, city councils, county commissions, etc.
- Develop ways to increase **civic engagement**.
- Develop ways to **overcome barriers to voting**, including registration and redistricting.
- Establish a **long-term focus** for democracy work, “beyond election years.”
- Expand our definition, understanding, **funding and use of advocacy**.
- Explore and improve **how we evaluate democracy-related grants** and generally assess progress and success in this work.
- Explore **truth and reconciliation processes** in communities.
- Explore **ways to decrease polarization**, with philanthropy as a potential “safe space for different views.”
- Focus on **leadership development**, especially candidates in communities of color running for elected office.
- Have a real **conversation about race**.
- Identify, learn from and **celebrate local expressions of democracy**, new ways of working, and unusual alliances and collaborations. “What characteristics are at play that might make democracy more alive locally than at the federal level?”

- Identify and learn from **local examples**, including community problem-solving and local reforms. “What are the bright spots in local leadership?”
- Improve **voter information and understanding**, including voter guides and use of social media.
- Increase **community input and access**.
- Move beyond “vague and feel-good initiatives” and find ways to **make a difference on individual issues**.
- Review **municipal charters** and increase participation in **city-county long-term plans**.
- Spend time developing a clear understanding and **framing of problems and solutions**.
- Understanding **how citizens receive information**, especially the role of the news media “in a post-factual society.”

“Who gets to belong to democracy? Who’s inside and who’s outside? What does it mean to belong to a democracy?”

“We need to build democratic capacity from the bottom up through the system.”

“Local is better and more vibrant right now. What characteristics are at play locally?”

“The DNA of democracy is in small, local settings. Small is powerful.”

“Philanthropy is working on many projects to strengthen democracy, but doing it idiosyncratically.”

Opportunities to Use Democratic Practices to Make Philanthropy More Effective

In addition to exploring how philanthropy can strengthen democracy, participants in the Discovery sessions recognized that democracy can strengthen philanthropy in turn. One participant observed that there are two groupings of philanthropies—those that have dedicated programs on democracy (what he termed “democracy as end”) and the much larger portion of funders that don’t have such programs but could still use democracy-related strategies to improve their overall effectiveness (what he termed “democracy as means”). “We need to more explicitly introduce democratic practices as essential to effective philanthropy.” These ideas resonated with participants. Framed in this way, democracy work matters to the entire field of philanthropy, not just those with dedicated programs.

A bigger, related point arose: the idea that strengthening democracy might be considered mission-critical for the entire project of organized philanthropy. “If the conditions of democracy and democratic practice are not present, can philanthropy be successful in solving problems like homelessness, education, etc.,” said a participant. Those enabling conditions are social capital and civil society, which research shows are critical factors in building high-functioning communities and addressing social ills. In short, the question is: Can philanthropy achieve its goals without a functioning democracy?

More specifically, participants identified these three opportunities to inject more democracy into philanthropy:

- Improve organized philanthropy’s collaboration with the nonprofit community in democracy work. “We set ourselves apart from the world we want to influence.” “We need to look inside, at how we deal with grantees.”
- Find ways to empower communities and “get out of the way.”
- Ensure diverse voices are engaged in the democracy work of foundations. “Build voice and representation into the DNA of our work.”

“We should think about democracy not only as an institution but also as a practice.”

“We foundations should reflect on why a strong democracy might matter as we pursue our defined philanthropic goals.”

“We need to be doing our work more democratically!”

WHAT WE PLAN TO DO NEXT

During the action phase, Democracy Northwest will continue to focus on broadening the conversation, convening and exploring the intersection between democracy and philanthropy, and encouraging civil discourse. Democracy Northwest will curate regular programming, publish analysis and research, and convene.

Action phase goals:

- informing that conversation with research: analyzing the current shape of democracy in the region, collecting examples of “bright spots” in democratic reforms, initiatives and innovations.
- developing tools for philanthropy practitioners: develop ways to articulate the importance of democracy within philanthropy.
- supporting a community of practice: convening interested practitioners for collaborative work and learning.

Participants have identified three priority areas for the project’s Action Phase:

Area 1: Broaden the Inquiry

The goal of this work will be spark, inform and support conversation among an expanding group of interested philanthropy leaders in the Pacific Northwest about the *why, what, how, who* and *where* of democracy work in philanthropy.

Activities might include:

- Develop and host convenings
- Conduct research and analysis of the current shape of democracy in the region
- Identify and share bright spots in democratic reforms, initiatives, and innovations

Area 2: Develop Tools

The goal of this work will be to develop tools for philanthropy practitioners to help them learn about and develop strategies to strengthen democracy; use democratic practices to strengthen their overall work; and champion the importance of democracy work within philanthropy.

Activities might include:

- A menu of democracy strengthening practices that philanthropists are already supporting, or that others might choose to support
- A glossary or map of key terms or concepts falling under the broad umbrella of “democracy,” with emphasis on how these features of democracy can relate to, supplement or (sometimes) contradict one another.
- Resource guides exploring best practices, highlighting lessons from effective investments

Area 3: Support a Community of Practice

The goal of this work will be to organize and support a community of practice among practitioners interested in collaborative learning and work.

Activities might include:

- Identify interested participants
- Shape a schedule and program for the coming year
- Hold work sessions
- Develop a small set of pilot projects
- Share learning with others in the field

APPENDIX: MAP OF MARCH 2015 CONVENING

Stepping Up Our Game

March 25, 2015 Convening in Seattle



The convening focused on this **big question**: *How can the social sector (foundations and nonprofits) strengthen democracy?*

Participants each identified **the challenge facing democracy** that they would like to see the social sector address. Responses fell into five top categories: (1) low participation; (2) high polarization; (3) disparities in access; (4) the role of money; (5) informing citizens.

"The number one fantasy in politics is total victory."

"We need to experiment with co-governance in institutions."

Using Stid's matrix of possible **ways the social sector can support democracy**, participants picked the intersection of level and issue that most interests them, as represented by the dots below. They then gathered in groups according to these interests and discussed what can be done.

	FEDERAL	STATE	LOCAL
CIVIC PARTICIPATION	•		••
CIVIC INFORMATION		••	•••
ELECTORAL RULES			
MONEY IN POLITICS/POLICY	•••		
BIPARTISAN PROBLEM-SOLVING	••••••••	•••	•••
GOVERNMENTAL PERFORMANCE	•		•



Is it time to step up our game? Daniel Kemmis framed the session with ideas from his monograph, available on the Philanthropy Northwest website (philanthropynw.org), as well as his soon-to-be-published book, *Citizens Uniting*.



On the wall was a **continuum of democracy-strengthening activities** that Kemmis raises in his monograph.

"Democracy is about listening."



Daniel Stid walked participants through the context, goals, framework and strategies of the **Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative**, a \$50 million effort to strengthen representative democracy in the U.S. (See hewlett.org)



Stid introduced an interactive online **systems map** on democracy in the U.S. today. (See hewlett.org/blog "The Madison Initiative's View of the World, Version 1.0")

"We need to get to agreement that there *is* a problem."

"It's time to counter the vending machine model of democracy."

Participants identified these **ideas to explore and support**:

- Nonpartisan organizing & framing
- Solutions-based reporting
- Show local impact of federal \$
- Train legislators in negotiation
- Sister-city model for organizations
- Enhance role of local journalism
- Connect people to issues
- Cross-partisan conversations
- Bridge social divide across parties
- Link legislators, state & federal



Participants expressed near-unanimous interest in moving ahead with a **regional effort by the social sector** to strengthen democracy.