

Worldview

Comparing Public Funding Of The Arts In The United States And Europe

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Al Behrman/AP Photo

Eliminating arts funding has been part of many U.S. presidents' budget proposals, but never came to pass. In 1990, activists covered paintings in the Taft Museum in Cincinnati with black shrouds, arguing that if there were no National Endowment for the Arts these works would not be in the museum.



President Donald Trump released a budget proposal last month that would eliminate all government agencies that support arts and culture in the U.S.

On the April 4 episode of WBEZ's Worldview, I spoke about the history of the National Endowment for the Arts and its significance given the current threats to defund it. Rachel Bovard of the Heritage Foundation was brought on to give the case against the NEA.

Among other things, Bovard cited conservative theater writer David Marcus to say that NEA funding for the arts was only propping up art that had no audience. She also

criticized the NEA for being unaccountable, and measuring the success of programs like its “creative peacemaking” grants via fuzzy concepts like “vibrancy.”

I have transcribed the the part of the program where host Jerome McDonnell allowed me to respond:

MCDONNELL: Do you have any response? Do you have any thoughts on the effectiveness of the NEA?

DAVIS: Yeah, well, I think Rachel’s job is to produce anti-government talking points, and that’s what she has produced. [David] Marcus talks about how the audience for theater is declining—which is true, though that doesn’t necessarily mean you shouldn’t fund it. But the NEA is very self-conscious about funding a broad and diverse list of things, including things like children’s summer camps for the arts in Oklahoma and southern music festivals in West Virginia. That’s why 23 Senators including two Republicans signed a letter saying they’d like to keep the NEA.

She [Bovard] talks about ArtPlace—which is a program about trying to help declining communities to think about their cultural assets—and about the lack of metrics, which is something that people really are in a lot of anguish over, and that people talk about a lot. But it’s actually a really new program. It’s actually an example of how the NEA has tried to change itself in order to be more relevant to broader kinds of communities. The term “creative placemaking,” which it [the NEA] invented, comes from 2011. That’s a pretty short amount of time to talk about something as complex as figuring out how to weave arts funding into a conversation about transforming rural communities and disadvantaged places, which I think is a really noble goal.

When she says—just one last thing—that the arts went on before the NEA and will continue after, well, I sort of agree with that. Culture is a pretty big term. But on the other hand, people cared about the environment before there was an EPA too. In a country as culturally divided as this one there are new cases, our country is more complex, and it responds to new challenges. One of those challenges is that we are a massively unequal country, because of some of the kinds of policies that the Heritage Foundation has pushed. We’ve become incredibly regionally divided, and there is a very good case to try to figure out how to redistribute cultural funds to the kinds of places that are overlooked, and that’s one of the things that the NEA does.

MCDONNELL I was surprised when I read that the state that the NEA grants to in dollars-per-person, they’re the low population places: Vermont, Rhode Island, Alaska, South Dakota, Montana, North Dakota, Minnesota... It doesn’t equate with where the people are necessarily.

DAVIS: There’s actually a study from Southern Methodist University that looked at how the NEA distributes its funds and found that it is “remarkably geographically indifferent,” as in it is very broadly distributed. That’s actually part of the NEA’s

mandate. Like I said before, that is very different from charitable giving, which is ruthlessly concentrated—and increasingly so—around places that have benefited from the economy in the last 20 or 30 years as inequality has spiked.

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The full program can be heard here:

<https://www.wbez.org/shows/worldview/comparing-public-funding-of-the-arts-in-the-united-states-and-europe/4e7472cd-93f4-486b-89b9-7a2fc02650fb>