

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Democracy
&
Civic Life

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracy funding is one of the areas of philanthropy that is harder to delineate clearly. Support for democracy-related efforts are tough to track, in part because of definitional challenges. Democracy means different things to different funders and nonprofits. Whatever the definition, it invariably cuts across many issues, none of which are sufficiently captured by the IRS or data aggregators (like Candid).

This State of American Philanthropy brief looks at private funding of nonprofit work on four dimensions of democracy:

1. Elections.
2. Civic participation.
3. Government performance.
4. Media access and disinformation.

This brief focuses on grantmaking for democratic functioning in the United States and draws on data, media coverage and interviews with experts in the field. However democracy funding is ultimately defined, or who is doing the giving, only a very small fraction—we estimate less than half of 1%—of institutional giving (foundation grants, corporate giving and other private funding sources) flows to nonprofits and campaigns doing the extremely hard work of making sure we have a government by and for the people.

These are the main themes this brief explores:

Who's Giving

- Most giving to democracy and elections is from private foundations – both independent and those tied to living donors—as well as pooled funds and funding intermediaries (which are often a mix of individual and foundation funding).
- Major individual donors—both through their foundations and on their own – have stepped forward in big ways in recent years, which can raise controversy, however beneficent the donor's intentions.
- Corporate giving is mostly tied to volunteer and civil service rather than actions or efforts that could be construed as “political.”
- Community foundations, too, have been a source of funding for democracy-related causes, particularly local civic engagement programs, as well as through the donor-advised funds they manage.

Who's Getting

- The largest number of grants and gifts go to grassroots community organizing groups focused on registering and mobilizing voters—a form of civic participation with explicit links to government action—but the recipients of the largest institutional grantmaking tend to be national organizations building networks of organizations and activists.

- Organizations that work to bridge divides and build social cohesion—civics education nonprofits (working with youth both in schools and outside of them), organizations building community power, and volunteer engagement and service-learning-focused organizations—are less directly tied to politics or elections, and are frequent recipients of philanthropic resources .

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- Civic engagement, also often called civic participation, is by far the biggest area of democracy-related funding – and often includes get-out-the-vote, voter registration and voter education efforts.
- Voting rights, election administration, campaign finance, felon disenfranchisement, and redistricting receive varying levels of interest from different types of funders depending on their goals and donor ideologies: Liberal funders and organizations often support efforts to expand access, turnout and ease of voting, while conservative funders often direct their funds to “voter integrity,” which have the effect of making it harder for certain types of people to register and vote.
- Government performance is another issue in democracy-related funding, which is often associated with the “watchdog” role of the independent sector. This area also includes certain collaborative efforts by philanthropy in partnership with the government (like providing discretionary dollars and technical assistance to improve public sector systems or build their capacity.)
- Democracy funding is also linked to access to media and information, which in recent years has focused on the ubiquity of social media and associated misinformation, but takes other forms as well (See also: Inside Philanthropy’s SAP brief on Giving for Journalism and Public Media).

Equity in the Sector

- Whether it was the work of expanding the franchise to women and people of color, fighting for equal treatment under the law for LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalized populations, or the process of trying to engage newly arrived immigrants into American civic life, issues of equity have long been at the core of democracy-focused organizations working on the ground.
- More funders have sought to support BIPOC-led organizations building cross-movement alliances; however, larger national democracy-focused organizations are often white-led.
- While the space is still vastly underfunded, an [unprecedented surge](#) in racial justice activism opened up new avenues for organizations driving engagement and fighting suppression at the polls in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. Funders have been stepping up, too, not with the amount of resources advocates say they need, but certainly in much larger numbers and with updated strategies.

Fundraising Now

- Although the typical pattern of democracy funding is that it rises and falls with the election cycle, there have been some encouraging signs that philanthropic support for nonprofits in this space is continuing at high levels in 2021.
- Priority issues attracting the most funder attention in 2021 include safe and accessible elections, litigation around voting restrictions and passing the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the For The People Act to protect the freedom of all citizens to vote across all 50 states.

Funding to democracy-focused nonprofits tends to ebb and flow in periods just before and after major elections, with too few funders focused on investing in long-term aims. There are exceptions, to be sure, but given the scale of problems in American democracy – including the lack of trust in both government and our elections, wild and vast conspiracy theories that have twisted American understanding of basic norms and facts, and the growing intensity of voter suppression laws – more funding is needed.

Introduction

The framers of the U.S. Constitution formed a representative democracy, a system of government that bases its legitimacy on participation of “the people,” but only indirectly. Tomes have been written about the “Great American Experiment,” what democracy means and how it can be improved. And activists on the ground have their own disparate ideas.

Recent history raises more fundamental questions about what needs to be done to safeguard American democracy, not from external threats, but from itself. The vulnerabilities of democracy have been on full display, testing the country’s ability to hold free, fair and secure elections, combat misinformation and conspiracy, and push back against government overreach and autocracy. Such concerns are reflected in recent polling that shows fewer than 1 in 5 Americans believe democracy is “working well” or “extremely well.” While public opinion is an ever-moving target, trust in government and media have been eroding for years, sentiments that span the political spectrum.

The 2020 presidential election—boiling over with false claims of voting fraud and a violent attempt to overturn the results of the election (aka the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol)—was in some ways a dark culmination of democratic dysfunction. It came on the heels of a presidential term that was not only bitterly partisan, but marked by a series of xenophobic, nationalistic and anti-democratic crusades perpetrated by the government. The administration openly flouted many democratic norms, launched vicious attacks on a free press, used the powers of the presidency for personal and political gain, and regularly stoked

widely debunked conspiracy theories and division across the country.

But cracks in America’s democratic foundations existed long before the Trump era. Vast wealth disparities, racism and racial inequality, persistent threats to the rule of law, the breakdown of traditional media, and voter suppression are trends exacerbated, not created, in the Trump era. Even with former President Trump out of power, Republican lawmakers in state houses across the country are continuing to enact measures that make it significantly harder for more people to register and vote.

The state of American democracy is not all gloom and doom. Women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people, immigrants and other groups of people who have fought back against institutionalized and cultural inequality are developing new ways of mobilizing — and the movements organizing them are receiving more charitable dollars than ever.

Their actions sparked vast popular support for power-building and determined engagement, including the Women’s March, the largest single-day protest in U.S. history, and the organization of Black Lives Matter, a sustained, decentralized movement that has brought global attention to incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence against people of color. This engagement has manifested in new and important ways, including the highest voter turnout in American history, resulting in new, more diverse faces gaining political power for the first time, in 2018 and again in 2020. Powered by the digital revolution, the U.S. is also experiencing further democratization of information (for better and for worse), which has opened access to

information to more people, more quickly than ever before.

For its part, philanthropy, which has long tiptoed in and around democracy-related causes, usually before or after an election, has stepped up in important ways, as this State of American Philanthropy brief describes. Only time will tell whether philanthropy's contributions will significantly affect the long-term societal trends donors seek to address.

Here, we look at four dimensions of democracy: elections, civic participation, government performance, and media access and disinformation, drawing on both data and interviews with experts in the field. In each area, we try to draw out who gives, who gets, and what seems to be happening as the field of democracy funding evolves.

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

While philanthropy has long funded democracy-related causes, the issue has tended to wax and wane in importance. After the contested 2000 presidential election, which was ultimately decided by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Bush v. Gore*), some foundations began to take a harder look at America's patchwork quilt of election laws and how to get more voters registered and turning up at the polls. Interest subsided somewhat during the Obama years, despite several democratic inflection points, including another supreme court decision, *Citizens United*, which turbocharged the outsized influence that corporate money plays in American politics. Following Trump's election in 2016, another wave of philanthropic interest from institutional and individual donors formed around a broad range of democracy-related causes, including protections of civil liberties, voting rights, voter registration, mobilization efforts, and shoring up other government watchdog groups.

Democracy—and the nonprofits working to improve it—may be getting more attention today from philanthropy than before, but it remains unclear if foundation dollars are increasing enough to meet its ongoing challenges. According to a [special database](#) developed by Candid, *Foundation Funding: U.S. Democracy*, from 2011-2018, more than “57,000 democracy-related grants were made by more than 6,000 foundations totaling \$5.1 billion.” While this amount may sound impressive, it represents just 1.5% of all grantmaking by U.S. foundations over that period. Candid's database and accompanying resources also take a broad view of democracy, including “campaigns, elections and voting”; “civic participation”; “government/civil liberties”; and “media” in their data, which may

Top 12 Democracy & Civic Life Funders 2014 - 2018¹

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
Ford Foundation	\$384.57M
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	\$96.88M
Foundation to Promote Open Society	\$90.95M
Carnegie Corporation of New York	\$85.90M
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	\$84.77M
Silicon Valley Community Foundation	\$79.01M
New Venture Fund	\$69.54M
James Irvine Foundation	\$68.29M
Arnold Ventures	\$68.24M
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation	\$68.02M
The Democracy Fund	\$61.38M
NEO Philanthropy	\$59.24M

Source: Candid

overstate the prominence of philanthropy funding for democratic functioning.

This brief integrates into its analysis the most recent available Candid data in the period between 2014-2018. That data, with somewhat narrower definitions of civic participation, government performance, elections and media access and disinformation, seems to suggest far fewer dollars from institutional philanthropy flowing to what we think of as democracy funding. Over that five-year period, we estimate about \$1.4 billion, or about \$280 million a year, went toward democracy-related causes. By comparison, foundations gave \$74.3 billion to causes other than democracy in 2019 alone (\$280 million for democracy would be about a third of 1% of total giving).

In a recent post, Stephen Heintz, president and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, emphasized what he saw as the consequences of this inaction: “The stunning indifference of American foundations to democracy is self-defeating in more ways than one. Not only do funders lose a chance to advance their goals by failing to back effective government adequately; funders’ inattention to democracy may undermine philanthropy’s very legitimacy.”

But who are the funders giving to democracy-bolstering causes, and what motivates them to give?

As with many areas of philanthropy, the biggest institutional funders we can track that focus on democracy-related efforts are private independent foundations. Among the 12 biggest givers in the five-year analysis of Candid data (2014-2018), three-quarters were private foundations (the exceptions being Silicon Valley Community Foundation, New Venture Fund, Democracy Fund and NEO Philanthropy). Funding types in the list of the top 100 givers were more diverse: 65% independent foundations, 9% community foundations, 7% operating foundations, 7% nonprofit intermediary funders, 6% donor-advised funds and 5% corporate givers.

Top 5 Funding Priorities: Democracy & Civic Life 2014 - 2018 ²	
Subject	Amount Funded
Democracy	\$67.40M
Public Integrity	\$396.09M
Elections	\$220.27M
Voter Education	\$136.73M
Digital Divide	\$45.83M

Source: Candid

Institutional giving to democracy-related nonprofits and causes is concentrated at the top, but mostly because of the significant role that the Ford Foundation plays, and the relatively modest giving by other funders compared to other issues. Ford is the second-largest foundation in the country (by assets), and it has a long history of democracy work, far ahead of the field. It alone gave nearly four times as much as the Hewlett Foundation, No. 2 on the list, and another stalwart democracy funder.

Other long-time funders of democracy-building efforts are the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the W.K. Kellogg, James Irvine and John S. and James L. Knight foundations. Prominent left-leaning foundations that support democracy-related work include the Foundation to Promote Open Society, and several intermediary organizations and funds, including the New Venture Fund, NEO Philanthropy and Pierre Omidyar’s Democracy Fund. Another new funder to democracy-related work near the top of the list is the Arnold Foundation, now reorganized as the LLC Arnold Ventures, whose founding donors, Laura and John Arnold, have increasingly tilted toward progressive causes. The list also includes the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which manages some of the largest donor-advised funds in the world, in addition to its own discretionary giving to civic participation efforts in the Bay Area and beyond.

It is not just private foundations and pooled funds that give to strengthening democratic organizations and causes. The largest and most news-generating single democracy gift in the recent past is from Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, whose \$300 million commitment to promote safe and reliable voting directed resources to election

offices nationwide. The couple later pledged another \$100 million to that effort, bringing their personal giving to parity with the federal government’s entire election outlay. Chan and Zuckerberg’s gift represents something largely unprecedented in American philanthropy: massive, nation-spanning non-government support for election administration. Another prominent individual donor, MacKenzie Scott, gave \$72 million in no-strings gifts to what she termed “functional democracy,” which included organizations like Campaign Legal Center, Center for Election Innovation and Research and other pooled voter registration and get-out-the-vote organizations.

By Inside Philanthropy’s calculation, among the largest 65 independent foundations in the top 100, at least 40% involved a living donor or a family member of the founder. This suggests major donors are playing a significant role in democracy funding. Ideological interests are reflected mostly on the left, but also include a few on the right. For example, the network of six private foundations supported by the Koch brothers have backed a broad range of causes under the umbrella of democracy work, mostly with a focus on free-market-oriented think tanks, research groups and educational

organizations, conservative-leaning journalism, and voter mobilization efforts.

Community foundations also play an important “local” role in democracy-linked funding, particularly the larger community foundations. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation, for instance, recently jump-started a \$10 million initiative to support Latino leaders and organizations in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties with a focus on civic engagement and community leadership. Other large, regionally focused community foundations, like the California Community Foundation and the New York Community Trust, have also given generously to democracy organizations, including voting rights organizations like FairVote and journalism-focused watchdogs like the Marshall Project.

Corporate foundations and corporate giving are typically not active givers to nonprofits or causes that could be construed in any way as political or controversial. As such, much of the democracy-linked funding by corporate philanthropy focuses on larger concepts of civic engagement, community leadership and volunteerism. Grants from corporate philanthropy also tend to be quite small.

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Grantmakers	Grants Awarded	Recipients
2014	\$712.59M	2,991	9,974	3,733
2015	\$680.98M	3,792	14,833	3,880
2016	\$789.46M	4,222	17,952	4,461
2017	\$975.26M	4,663	16,683	5,535
2018	\$1.20B	7,259	31,847	12,427

Source: Candid

Who's Getting

While there are some sizable national democracy-focused nonprofits, most organizations working on democracy-related efforts are relatively small. According to one recent article, [roughly two-thirds](#) operate on budgets of \$2.5 million or less. A substantial part of democracy-related work happens at the grassroots-level organizing, building and mobilizing communities.

Many democracy-focused organizations are chapter-based, like Common Cause, which in aggregate received more than 1,000 grants from 240 grantmakers totaling more than \$30 million over the five years of Candid data we analyzed. Other large grassroots organizations commonly funded from 2014 to 2018 for democracy-related work were: [Unidos](#), formerly National Council of La Raza, a civil rights and civic engagement organization with over 300 community-based affiliate organizations focused on immigration, the economy, health and housing; and the [Center for Popular Democracy](#), a community-based building effort that leverages its 53 affiliates, alliances and progressive unions to strengthen “capacity for a pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda.”

Yet, funding for intermediaries like [NEO Philanthropy](#), which received more than \$200 million in grants over the five-year period for democracy-related causes, and [New Venture Fund](#), which received \$55.9 million, are real standouts. NEO Philanthropy and New Venture Fund have created pooled funds and also help to incubate startup organizations, acting as both recipients and funders for democracy-related work. The intermediaries received funding from some of the largest endowed foundations in the country, including Ford, Carnegie, MacArthur and newer

foundations like the JPB Foundation and Arnold Ventures, for various causes, including funding collaboratives focused on civic engagement, immigration rights, election reform, voter registration and mobilization.

Top 10 Democracy & Civic Life Grant Recipients 2014 - 2018 ²

Recipient	Dollar Value of Grants Received
NEO Philanthropy	\$209.12M
UnidosUS	\$89.43M
Center for Popular Democracy	\$72.22M
William J. Brennan, Jr. Center for Justice	\$68.42M
New Venture Fund	\$55.84M
Demos	\$47.02M
Movement Strategy Center	\$45.91M
National Governors Association Center for Best Practices	\$34.53M
FWD.us	\$31.62M
Advancement Project	\$31.22M

Source: Candid

Beyond those focused on voter education, registration and mobilization, another large category is the set of nonprofits that focus explicitly on election law and policy advocacy efforts. Two of the biggest beneficiaries from 2014-2018 were Demos, which focuses on racial justice, democratic reform and economic justice; and [Brennan Center for Justice](#), a nonpartisan law and policy organization focused on protecting constitutional democracy. In essence, both organizations protect voters from the onslaught of suppression tactics before, during and after every election. Similarly focused organizations are the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law and the ACLU, as

well as specific demographic-focused groups like the NAACP, MALDEF, PRLDEF and others.

There aren't as many equivalent organizations on the right; these funders tend to push "voting/election integrity" legislation that has the effect of limiting voter access (particularly that of BIPOC communities), but there are several influential conservative think tanks. For instance, the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute, Judicial Watch, the American Enterprise Institute and some other right-leaning media and policy shops have long sought to promote state-sanctioned photo identification requirements and "cleaning" of voter rolls to prevent in-person voter fraud, which ample evidence suggests only makes it more difficult for eligible voters to register, cast ballots, and have their ballots counted. Despite their negative impact on the franchise, this funding also resides in the "democracy" category of grantmaking.

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

The biggest area of funding, according to our analysis, is civic participation, also commonly referred to as civic engagement. Like democracy, definitions of these terms vary. However, at their core, civic participation/engagement relates to efforts that promote the engagement of individuals with a community, whether that is through political or non-political means. This can take many shapes. It almost always includes providing civic education, particularly to youth inside and outside of school, to ensure the country has an active and informed citizenry that understands how government and civil society function. It also includes efforts to promote volunteering, community service and develop leadership skills beneficial to civil society, especially nonprofits.

Civic engagement is often associated with more "political" activities, particularly voter registration drives, get-out-the-vote efforts and programs that increase diversity among candidates running for elected office (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ individuals, ethnic and religious minorities, and young people). Even so, they must remain nonpartisan—these organizations, programs and initiatives aren't about particular candidates, or a singular political party, but rather seek to activate eligible citizens to exercise their constitutional rights. Nonetheless, they may, and do, work to activate specific populations of interest to political parties.

The less political organizations and groups—like AmeriCorps and other national service and civic education initiatives—are ripe for government investment through large federal programs, but remain vastly underfunded. Philanthropy and businesses have sometimes driven these efforts by giving generously to leadership development, civic education programs and volunteerism. Groups like CivXNow, a project of iCivics, a coalition of 100 organizations focused on improving the nation's K-12 in-school and out-of-school civic education programs, has gained significant momentum. While a few efforts happen at the national level, they are often funded at the local and regional levels, with funding directed to local, regional or chapter-based organizations on the ground.

Key funders include Ford, Carnegie, Hewlett, The JPB Foundation, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, as well as smaller foundations like the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. Recipients over the five-year period included many of those that dominated the top 10 list: NEO Philanthropy, Center for Popular Democracy, UnidosUS, Voter Registration

Project and New Venture Fund, as well as organizations like the Obama Foundation, Center for Community Change, Points of Light, and State Voices, which seeks to engage people in the policymaking process at the community level, and organizations like the League of Women Voters, which offer citizens a platform for self-directed citizen engagement.



“Civic engagement can help funders achieve their philanthropic goals, whether that’s health equity outcomes, environment practices, immigration, education. Civic engagement is about how folks show up; it goes beyond just voting.”

—Kristin Purdy, former executive director, Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation

Another critical aspect of democracy funding, one that is often hard to separate from the more politically oriented civic education work, relates to elections. This represented about a quarter of all the democracy-related giving we examined. In theory, funding for the administration and oversight of ensuring free and fair elections should fall squarely on the government. In practice, the nation’s patchwork quilt of elections laws and procedures are funded largely by state and local government with significant variation in levels of investment and, increasingly, vastly different orientations toward maximizing voter participation.

Ostensibly a nonpartisan issue, election administration has always been highly politicized. In recent history, it has become even more so. While Democratic lawmakers push toward greater access to the franchise, expanding voter rights and

encouraging investments in election administration, Republican lawmakers continue to push for measures that limit voter eligibility in the name of “election integrity,” most recently moving to repeal or scale back mail-in and early voting (particularly in Black and brown communities). Even without any active efforts to undermine the elections, federal election administration itself remains paltry (around \$425 million in the most recent [2020] fiscal appropriations bill).³

Philanthropy has provided significant support for efforts that increase access to voting, including laws that make it easier for eligible constituents to register and participate in local, state and national elections. This includes the promotion of laws including early voting, universal voting centers (where ballots are not thrown out because they were cast at the wrong polling place), mail-in voting, absentee voting and provisional voting, as well as election day registration, universal voter registration and election day holidays. It also includes efforts to protect voters from “dirty tricks” and voter intimidation tactics that have plagued American elections for nearly a century, including voter purges, electioneering, on-site voter intimidation and overzealous poll watchers. Other election-adjacent focuses include campaign finance reform and the influence of so-called dark money on politics, redistricting reform and efforts to ensure a timely and accurate census.

Key funders of election-related reforms include Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan, Arnold Ventures, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Ford Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, the Democracy Fund, Bauman Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Major recipients of awards in this category include NEO Philanthropy,

Demos, the Voter Participation Center, the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, Advancement Project, the Brennan Center for Justice, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the NAACP.

In the realm of government performance (IP’s term) and “public integrity” (what Candid calls this issue), philanthropy has often supported organizations that use a variety of efforts to ensure government is functioning as it should and/or being held to account. We estimate this area comprises about one-quarter of democracy-related funding. Philanthropy has an interest in ensuring that public agencies and systems like schools, criminal justice, foster care and social services are delivering on their promises. The precise nature of philanthropic approaches can vary considerably, including providing the government with discretionary dollars for technical assistance or public outreach, ongoing, collaborative efforts to improve leadership in city, state and federal government

(e.g., by promoting bi-partisanship) and the co-creation of “strategic partnership” offices where philanthropy and government work in tandem to address particular issues. This includes efforts like Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Cities of Service model, which has been funding “chief service officers” in cities across the country, combining government performance improvements with civic engagement.

Government performance also often includes groups that serve as government watchdogs, and the protection of civil rights and or upholding the rule of law, like the ACLU and Advancement Project. Key Funders for this type of work have included the Ford Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Arnold Ventures and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Key recipients include organizations like the ACLU, MALDEF, NAACP, the BiPartisan Policy Center, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Institute for Justice, and the Center for Responsive Politics.

Top Funding Priorities: Democracy and Civic Life 2014-2018 ²

Funding Priority	Amount Funded 2014-2018	Average/Annual Funding	Percent
Civic Participation (Democracy)	\$670.40M	\$138.08M	43.05%
Government Performance (Public Integrity)	\$396.09M	\$79.22M	25.43%
Elections	\$393.00M	\$78.60M	25.24%
General	\$220.27M	\$44.05M	—
Voter Education and Registration	\$136.73M	\$27.35M	—
Election Regulation	\$15.40M	\$3.08M	—
Campaign Finance	\$20.60M	\$4.12M	—
Media Access and Disinformation	\$97.79M	\$19.56M	6.28%
Media Democracy	\$39.44M	\$7.89M	—
Net Neutrality	\$12.52M	\$2.50M	—
Digital Divide	\$45.83M	\$9.17M	—
Total	\$1.53B	\$311M	\$1.53B

Source: Candid

The final category for our analysis was funding for organizations focused on media access/disinformation, an area where philanthropy has an opportunity to invest in efforts to ensure information is accessible and available to citizens—including issues of net neutrality and the digital divide — and more recently, holding media, particularly social media, accountable for ensuring it provides accurate information. Key funders include the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The California Endowment, and the Silicon Valley Community Foundation. Key recipients include: Issue One, ProPublica, Common Sense Media, Electronic Frontier Foundation and others.

The Big Issues and Beyond


One of the biggest issues in democracy-related work is a boom-and-bust funding cycle that has made longer-term, democracy-focused movement building difficult. Funder interest in democratic causes waxes and wanes, often as a direct response to, or in anticipation of, a major election. Some of the most concentrated actions followed the contested 2000 presidential election (Bush/Gore), which shed light on the country's under-resourced and highly localized election systems. However, funders soon moved on to shinier objects. After the election of the nation's first African American president, philanthropic interest in democracy-related funding seemed to cool even further, as funders were lulled into a false sense of security, even amidst a series of substantial defeats around campaign finance (e.g., Citizens United), an acceleration of media consolidation and a continuation of efforts by conservatives to make it more difficult for people to vote.

There was, of course, another spike in giving to democracy-focused groups and causes following the

election of President Donald Trump in 2016. Giving to civil liberties groups—like the ACLU, NAACP and MALDEF —reached all-time highs. So, too, did giving to nonprofits focused on investigative journalism and the media. The evidence suggesting foreign actors weaponized social media to influence the 2016 election, along with subsequent executive overreach (including the curtailment of immigrant rights, stacking the judicial bench with conservative appointments, and wanton attempts to manipulate the 2020 Census) had the effect of significantly increasing funder interest in democracy grantmaking among donors big and small, new and old.

Coalition Spotlight

CivXNow

A PROJECT OF ICIVICS 

CivXNow is a growing coalition of over 170 organizations supporting efforts to “fuel our constitutional democracy through K-12 civic education.” With support from the Robert R. McCormick and Hewlett foundations, as well as, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, CivixNow aims to broaden civics education focusing on the K-12 level. Through its work, it hopes to increase opportunities for students to put what they learn about politics, law, American history and other closely related subjects, into practice.

Since 2018, considerable evidence suggests funding has continued with an even bigger boom in the run-up to the 2020 election around voter registration and mobilization to turn out new (or infrequent) voters and to ensure people could vote safely and easily, an effort that was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many suggest those funding efforts were important not just in getting more

folks to the polls than ever before, but in helping to spark new power-building initiatives in historically marginalized communities.

Another big issue is how best to debunk the myth of voter fraud, which was turbocharged by Trump's pre-emptive and post-facto claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen by millions of illegally cast ballots, nefarious election officials and voting machines pre-programmed to deliver a victory to Joe Biden. Despite lacking evidence supporting these claims, conservative activists, lawmakers and political operatives across the country have further propagated the myth to substantiate policies that make it more difficult for otherwise eligible voters to register and vote.

The most prominent solution in search of the non-existing problem of voter fraud is state-sanctioned photo ID. What seems a reasonably mundane requirement has been shown to have disproportionate effects on low-income communities of color, whose voters are far less likely to have the requisite identification. To fight the promotion of these laws, funders have been supporting groups that can tackle the issue both in the courtroom, through legal advocacy, and in the court of public opinion.

While elections consume most of the oxygen in the room for democracy funders, there are many other issues that are immediately adjacent. Perhaps most closely associated are the increasing calls for philanthropy to direct its resources not to generalized "civic" activities, but more specifically to direct funding to organizations led by and aiming to activate communities with the least amount of power. Efforts to increase the power, voice and leadership of BIPOC groups, as well as women, immigrants LGBTQ+ people, low-income

workers and other groups are taken up in more detail in the Perspectives on Equity section below. But the funder question of how much to invest in the institutional apparatuses that could produce greater cross-movement building continues to be posed by many progressive funders. While there is a general recognition and increasing awareness of intersectionality and how people in different groups are affected by issues like climate change, gender bias, etc., the movements still often function in separate silos, compromising their potential effectiveness.

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"Shifting the power for funding elections, drawing districts, and determining the rules of our democracy out of the hands of partisan politicians, wealthy special interests, and ideologues and into the hands of the people through impartial commissions, small-dollar donor laws, and automatic voter registration [is trending]."

—Nonprofit communications director, Washington, DC

The decline of legacy media and "serious journalism," along with the rise of mis/disinformation in social media, are huge issues for funders of democracy. (See more on this issue in IP's State of American Philanthropy brief "Giving for Journalism and Public Media"). Social media in particular is a double-edged sword. For civic engagement organizations, social media provides spectacular new opportunities and tools for reaching some populations. But the digital divide, access to broadband and challenges of reaching an increasingly fractured population present other major barriers for these organizations. While hashtag campaigns are increasingly inseparable from classic protest movement strategies on the ground and in the streets, it is unclear what tactics are really working and what deserves more funding.

In a related stream of conversations, civic organizations and funders continue to debate the level of attention and resources to direct toward national/federal-level organizing and policy change and how much to concentrate on state, local and individual change models. While this quandary is playing out in a dramatic way in the 2021 controversies around voting rights, it has just as much relevance to minimum wage and labor rights issues, racial justice and criminal justice reform, and drug decriminalization efforts, to name a few.

Funder Spotlight

Jacob & Valeria Langeloth Foundation

Just prior to the 2020 election, the Langeloth Foundation board voted to commit \$20 million from its \$88 million endowment to support efforts that “significantly increase funding in civic participation to achieve long-term structurally changes through an actively engaged electorate,” as well as, rapid response grants to provide for the immediate needs of communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

One of the most interesting issues arising for funders focused on democracy is how to respond to increasing critiques from the left and the right of capitalism and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of billionaires. Money has always shaped U.S. democracy, but the Citizens United decision, increasing use of 501(c)(4)s to hide donor involvement in electioneering, and increasing involvement of billionaires in every aspect of grassroots movement building (whether it is the Mercers on the right or Soros on the left), Americans are growing angrier about billionaires shaping their daily lives. In progressive philanthropy, many point toward participatory

grantmaking initiatives as the future of the field. But very few dollars are actually distributed that way, and the number of massive family foundations that have handed over majority control to outsiders is slim.

One perennial, overarching issue for funders of democracy is the need for better civics education—not just in schools, but among adults of all ages and political persuasions. The American electorate has a lot of feelings about issues that affect their lives, but often don’t understand how they can contribute to forcing change at the individual, local, state and federal levels. In order to make lasting change on most challenging social issues that funders of democracy care about, change must be pursued at all levels. And yet most Americans continue to voice their opinions only through presidential elections every four years. A great deal of the work of grassroots organizing aims at helping people make change in their communities and their states, where change can take root and build nationally. Nonetheless, many funders still pursue the shiny objects of federal policy changes and national elections. One notable exception is the massive amount of funder dollars spent supporting “get-out-the-count” efforts for the 2020 Census and the follow-on attention to redistricting. There seems to be growing recognition among civic organizations and democracy funders of the existential nature of fair district maps, but perhaps not the level of funding commensurate with that understanding.

Funder Strategies and Trends

The philanthropic sector uses a variety of grantmaking and non-grantmaking strategies in the democracy-related space, including leveraging their power as convenors. Funder strategies include: (1) legal advocacy: election reform and voter policy; (2) technocratic support: election systems,

administration, and government performance; (3) GOTV: voter registration, education and mobilization; (4) data and communication: misinformation, citizenship and government performance. These grantmaking strategies intersect with key issue areas, but do not always line up neatly in the grants data.

Funding Legal Work and Policy Advocacy

Legal advocacy is often both the first and last line of defense for philanthropy-linked democracy work. Funder interest in support for such organizations stems from their capacity to effectively litigate voter protections, wherever and whenever they arise. The State Infrastructure Fund, which is one of NEO Philanthropy's biggest collaborative funds, channeled money to legal advocates working jurisdiction by jurisdiction to counter disenfranchisement in advance of the 2020 presidential election. In the wake of a series of laws passed in 2021 in Georgia, Texas and elsewhere, which seek to curtail opportunities for voting, such strategies are more important than ever.

Legal advocacy organizations include some big national names like the ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, Lawyers Committee Under the Law and others, as well as groups with a specific focus on election protection like the [Campaign Legal Center](#). Other stalwart national policy-focused organizations include Demos and the Brennan Center for Justice, which combine think

tank and litigation strategies. Liberal and progressive grantmakers like Ford, the Sandler Foundation, the Democracy Fund, OSF and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund lead those organizations' funder rosters. In some cases, as with the [Campaign Legal Center](#), those supporters include names outside the progressive camp, like Arnold Ventures.

In the 2020 election, through individual and institutional giving, philanthropy provided hundreds of millions of new dollars to nonprofits nationwide to advocate for important ballot access reforms, recruit over 700,000 new poll workers, support drastically underfunded election administrators, fight voter suppression and combat election-related misinformation.

Supporting Technocratic Solutions

These funding strategies focus on elections systems, administration, and government performance. The philanthropic sector has traditionally been less involved in backing actual nuts-and-bolts election infrastructure, preferring to leave all that to government budgets. But in 2020, massive donations, most notably from [Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan](#), have been deployed to supplement the \$400 million that the CARES Act allocated to help elections officials face the virus. It remains unclear whether such gifts will remain an anomaly or whether, in the wake of election-linked challenges, funders will step up their efforts by offering more direct support for technocratic fixes around voter registration and administration.



“The stunning indifference of American foundations to democracy is self-defeating in more ways than one. Not only do funders lose a chance to advance their goals by failing to back effective government adequately; funders’ inattention to democracy may undermine philanthropy’s very legitimacy.”

—Stephen Heintz, president and CEO, Rockefeller Brothers Fund

By contrast, there are far more ample examples of funders supporting public sector efforts to improve government performance. In preparation for the 2020 census, for example, in California, foundations like the California Endowment, Ballmer Group, and the California Community, Weingart, James Irvine, and Libra foundations raised millions to expand and deepen census outreach efforts in hard-to-reach communities. As another example, the Hewlett Foundation, which created the Madison Initiative in 2014, authorized hundreds of millions to reduce partisanship and polarization. The Madison Initiative focused not only on how we elect and select leadership but also how legislatures and policymakers operate. Others, like the Bauman Foundation, have been at the forefront of redistricting reform and partisan gerrymandering.

Building People Power at the Polls

These strategies fund voter registration, education and mobilization. Philanthropy is prohibited from playing partisan politics, but there is quite a bit it can do to empower voters to exercise the franchise—and feel motivated to do it. In 2020, some of that work centered on [efforts to counteract the effects of COVID-19](#) on turnout, either by securing in-person election infrastructure or by boosting vote-by-mail initiatives. The vast number of Americans who submitted mail ballots speaks to the success of that latter effort. With support from established civic participation funders like Ford and the Democracy Fund, advocacy groups like the National Vote at Home Coalition, Common Cause and the League of Women Voters have been pushing states to implement and expand mail voting since the COVID crisis began.

While the data is hard to follow, there has been a significant upswing in democracy and election-

related c3 funding since 2016. Much of that has been driven by funding for get-out-the-vote efforts and other work often aligned with the ideological left, where donors are growing savvy to the effects of the political realm on their other charitable priorities. But donor activity has been on the rise across the spectrum, bringing fresh resources to the [many levers c3 funders can pull](#) to influence and shape elections.

That also includes funding to conservative groups working in the democracy arena. However, increased liberal and progressive spending tends to be easier to track because more foundations and collaborative entities fund this work on the left, whereas the right relies mostly on individual donors. Also, some of the biggest influxes of new c3 funding in the democracy space have involved progressive-oriented voter engagement.

More billionaires and foundations, especially right-leaning donors, but increasingly those from the left, are supporting democracy-related activities via 501(c)(4) organizations. Nonprofits that are designated c4 in the IRS code are “civic leagues or organizations not organized for profit but operated exclusively for the promotion of social welfare”; but unlike c3 nonprofits, they may engage in unlimited legislative advocacy and some partisan political-campaign activity, as long as the latter is not their “primary” purpose or activity. Donations to c4 groups are not tax-deductible (and not counted toward a private foundation’s 5% payout)—but nonprofits organized as c4s do not have to report their donors to the Federal Election Commission (FEC), except for certain contributions raised for independent-expenditure campaigns. This is why donations through c4s are often referred to as “dark money.” According to Abby Levine, director of the Bolder Advocacy program at

Alliance for Justice, many funders are [now adding c4 funding](#) to their toolkits in order to move policy agendas forward.

Combating Disinformation Through Data and Communications Initiatives

Potent misinformation campaigns have become a significant threat to democracy in recent years, whether directed by foreign provocateurs, domestic media, and especially those conducted through ever-expanding social networks. While not the focus of this SAP report, philanthropy's efforts to bolster local news and investigative journalism, led by funders like the Knight Foundation and the Lenfest Institute, are one part of that story. Knight is also [backing ongoing research](#) to determine how technology is transforming society and civic institutions. Grantees there include the Center for an Informed Public at the University of Washington and Stanford's Cyber Policy Center, both of which aim to curtail the spread of misinformation. Outside the journalism and policy

contexts, Knight launched a \$50 million initiative to better understand how technology is transforming our democracy.

Some major philanthropic strategies popular in other funding areas do not seem to be gaining traction in the democracy-building sphere, including impact investing, philanthropic "big bets"/competitions, and public-private partnerships. But other strategic trends are significant to the growth of democracy-focused work, such as use of intermediaries, participatory grantmaking (on a small but growing scale), grassroots and cross-movement building and centering racial justice.

Perspectives on Equity

Whether it was the work of expanding the franchise to women and people of color, fighting for equal treatment under the law for LGBTQ+ communities and other marginalized populations, or the process of engaging newly arrived immigrants into American civic life, issues of equity have long been at the core of democracy-focused organizations working on the ground. In fact, the field of democracy funding has always heavily centered racial equity issues, with key funders in this area giving support to voter registration and mobilization work focused on people of color over the decades, as well as long-standing support for litigation to enforce the Voting Rights Act or fully implement the National Voter Registration Act in ways that would have a significant impact on access, particularly to persons of color.

While the space is still vastly underfunded, an [unprecedented surge](#) in racial justice activism in 2020 opened up new avenues for organizations working to drive engagement and fight suppression at the polls in the run-up to the

Coalition Spotlight

DEMOCRACY FRONTLINES FUND

MONEY TO MEET THIS MOMENT

Democracy Frontlines Fund aims to "leverage millions of new dollars to fund Black-led organizers fighting for free and fair elections and working to defund prisons and police." The fund is supported by philanthropic newcomers like the Someland Foundation and Tao Rising, and legacy funders such as the Hewlett and MacArthur foundations. It is providing \$36 million over three years in general operating support grants to 10 Black-led regrantors and national organizations. Grantees include Black Voters Matter, Southern Power Fund, and Blackbird, among others.

presidential election. Funders have been stepping up, too. Not as much as some advocates might prefer, but certainly in much larger numbers and with updated strategies. Nonetheless, this area of philanthropy has not been immune to criticism about the race and gender of those who control the direction of resources, and whether the strategies employed truly aim to disrupt overarching power dynamics and the capitalist system that is designed to keep large portions of the governed poor and malleable.

Increasing support for BIPOC-led movement organizations is beginning to yield dividends. Activities like civic engagement and voter education have proved to be crucial in the organizing context; for example, early philanthropic support for Stacey Abrams' New Georgia Project helped it build up its infrastructure year upon year, and eventually, to turn out more voters in Georgia than ever before. Other grassroots justice organizers, like the [Democracy Frontlines Fund](#), which is funded by the likes of Libra, MacArthur, Hewlett, Sobrato Philanthropies and the Schmidt Family Foundation, are more explicitly focused on racial justice organizing, with an emphasis on building civic power.

Engaging and getting voters registered and to the polls, regardless of political affiliation, should be par for the course for philanthropy. Unfortunately, many laws advanced in the name of election integrity, including photo identification requirements for all eligible voters, laws that disenfranchise formerly incarcerated voters, and new laws in places like Georgia that bar outside groups from distributing water to voters waiting in line, disproportionately disadvantage people of color, who are less likely to have a state-sponsored

photo ID, more likely to have to wait in line, and more likely to have been involved with the judicial system. Of course, inequities extend beyond just BIPOC and include women, the LGBTQ+ community, religious and ethnic minorities and even youth, who are often pushed out of public decision-making processes, including public office.

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"[There is a] deeper interest in democracy issues now that it is apparent that the country does not have a particularly thriving democracy at all, and things won't 'just take care of themselves' in the end."

—Foundation professional, United States

Suffice to say there are more than enough remaining issues around inequity to go around. The major funder affinity groups dedicated to democracy-building have taken on racial equity as the central framing for their work and have increased discussion of intersectional identities, leading more funders to direct funds to deepen cross-movement building infrastructure. The programmatic and executive leadership of private funding institutions supporting democracy work is also increasingly populated by BIPOC, women and LGBTQ+ people, but at the very top—the billionaires ultimately in control—little has changed.

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private foundations are the largest segment of funders of democracy-focused nonprofits, and the largest ones on the list tend to be legacy foundations many decades old with professionalized, majority non-family boards.

The biggest independent private foundation supporting democracy-related causes (both in the U.S. and abroad) is the Ford Foundation, by far. Ford's civic engagement program focuses squarely on those who have been systematically excluded from government participation and tries to put those individuals and leaders at the center of efforts to reform and protect democracy processes. It does this through a mix of funding through grassroots, policy and advocacy, including its well-regarded (and recently renewed) BUILD grants, which provides unrestricted, multi-year funding to organizations that fit within its portfolio of support and are often largely led by BIPOC, LGBTQI individuals and those with disabilities. With an annual budget of \$23 million (not including the \$90 million annual budget of BUILD) significant recipients are well-known organizations like Demos, the NAACP, the Center for Popular Democracy, Color of Change, and the Advancement Project, as well as intermediaries, including NEO Philanthropy, New Venture Fund and others.

Other prominent private foundation funders supporting democracy-related work include Carnegie, Hewlett, Kellogg, Irvine (at the state level), and the Knight Foundation (in the realm of local journalism). Carnegie's democracy program

support has often emphasized immigration integration and civil rights and citizenship, providing support to a host of organizations and pooled funds like NEO Philanthropy's Four Freedoms Fund, Unbound Philanthropy, Immigrant Legal Resource Center, and State Voices.

As part of its U.S. Democracy Program, Hewlett has focused on efforts to strengthen congress as an institution (the government performance focus) as well provide support to organizations that improve campaign finance election processes and combat digital disinformation, including grants to the Social Science Research Council, and Issue One, with a focus on citizen journalism.

The Kellogg Foundation, which is predominantly known for its programming focused on youth, and which doesn't have an explicit focus on democracy as part of its core programs, does provide extensive funding to organizations working in the space, particularly those linked to its Equitable Communities program through giving to organizations like Unidos, Demos, Advancement Project, and One Voice, Inc., among others. Other prominent private foundations dedicating significant resources to democracy nonprofits include the James Irvine Foundation, which focuses its dollars on good governance issues in California, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which is not only a lynchpin funder of journalism, but also of issues linked to media and misinformation.

Another small but powerful, long-time funder of democracy-related work is Rockefeller Brothers Fund. In 2020, RBF committed to a payout increase of \$48 million over five years in an effort to seize what RBF President Stephen Heintz called "a hinge moment in history." The foundation has

earmarked a portion of those funds to grow its U.S. democracy practice, which began in 2002 and has since evolved to embrace a movement lens that acknowledges liberal democracy’s interdependence with racial justice and economic inclusion. The success of those strategies in bringing voters to the polls in places like Georgia and elsewhere in 2020 will likely spur on that trend. Another example is the smaller Langeloth Foundation, whose unprecedented democracy commitment now encompasses 20% of its assets; and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, which has focused significant funding toward civic education efforts in Chicago and beyond, as well as independent journalism, and creating “more responsive systems of government.”



Funder Spotlight FORDFOUNDATION

Ford’s Civic Engagement and Government program supports organizations fighting inequality in the U.S. and abroad. In the U.S., Ford supports efforts combatting partisan gerrymandering, roll purging, strict voter ID laws, and polling site closures. It awards Civic Engagement and Government grants to grassroots, policy, and advocacy organizations led by BIPOC, women, people with disabilities, youth and the LGBTQ+ community.

One private foundation that has a smaller endowment than the top givers but a large impact on the field is the Bauman Foundation, which has been a primary organizer of the nationwide Census 2020 get-out-the-count funder effort, as well as the current Fair Representation in Redistricting funder collaborative. The foundation is dedicated to preserving the “values of a true democratic society.” It generally provides general operating

support rather than project-specific support, and it values collaboration and policy advocacy. Its current funding priorities are economic justice, government and corporate accountability, and civic engagement. Its grants for government and corporate accountability support “efforts to promote an open, responsive government.” Past grantees include Center for Popular Democracy, Center for American Progress, and Center for Progressive Reform.

The Nathan Cummings Foundation is a smaller legacy foundation whose democracy-focused funding is inextricably linked to its Racial and Economic Justice grantmaking, which works to “reverse generations of concentrated wealth and racialized power and patriarchy to get to the root causes of inequality and inequity.”

The foundation’s [Corporate and Political Accountability](#) grantmaking works to “decrease concentrated corporate power and limit corporate influence in our political system.” It currently prioritizes organizations that address inequality and climate change by advocating for increased transparency, focusing on antitrust laws and competition policy to decrease the concentration of power, working to mitigate corporate influence on politicians and regulatory agencies, and “challenging the dominance of the consumer welfare theory.” Past grantees include the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, Open Markets Institute, and First Peoples Investment Engagement Program.

Massachusetts-based Solidago Foundation was founded in 1944 by Joseph Rosenmiller, who earned his wealth from a chain of radio stations. He sold his stake in the radio business, and with his son David, established the foundation, which devotes

funding to righting the social injustices of the world. While Solidago supports a few large international rights organizations, the majority of grants are commonly awarded to small and grassroots organizations. Citing a “cluster approach” to funding, the foundation funds grantees that are “[o]ften part of a network or collaboration of organizations that work effectively together.” Some of its 2020 and 2021 grantees include Instituto Lab, New Georgia Project, One Arizona, and People’s Action Institute.

The Washington, D.C.-based Wallace Global Fund makes grants to “like-minded groups concerned with key trends that threaten global security, such as the rise of corporatocracy, ecological collapse, women’s rights, government oppression, and the imbalance of power between government organizations and NGOs.” Its democracy and civic engagement funding promotes voting rights and combats corporate influence in politics across the United States and around the world through an approach based on social movements and media. It takes a mission investing approach to its grantmaking, conducting related funding across a variety of programs; in particular, Strengthening Democracy, Net Neutrality, Protecting and Expanding the Right to Vote, and New Media Driving New Advocacy.

Corporate Giving

While corporate funders aren’t often seen in the headlines for their democracy work, they have long been critical community-based funders to more traditional forms of civic engagement, particularly around volunteer engagement and recruitment. Unfortunately for grant seekers, funding is often limited or nonexistent these days, or is focused on programs that connect their employees to volunteer services, which can be valuable, but quite

different from grant dollars (e.g., Points of Light). Nonetheless, corporate giving accounts for approximately 7% of giving for the broad field of democracy-focused nonprofits, so there are possibilities for fundraisers.

Intermediary Spotlight UNIDOSUS

UnidosUS is a civil rights and civic engagement organization with over 300 community-based affiliate organizations. It is the largest Latino civil rights organization in the country. The organization's Voting and Political Empowerment program supports voter registration and accessibility policies for all Americans, particularly groups who have been historically underrepresented. Some of UnidosUs’ biggest supporters over the years have been the Ford, Gates, and Kellogg foundations.

One of the most prominent and unapologetically social-justice-oriented funders of democracy nonprofits is The Ben & Jerry’s Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Vermont-based ice cream company. It was established in 1985 with a gift of stock from one of its namesakes, Ben Cohen. The other namesake, Jerry Greenfield, was named president of the foundation—a position he still holds. It supports grassroots activism and community organizing for social and environmental justice around the country. It operates through its four main programs: Community Action Team, Economic Justice, Capacity Building, and Grassroots Organizing for Social Change.

Some may find it interesting (or ironic) that Walmart makes grants that get categorized in the democracy category. The Walmart Foundation is the philanthropic arm of Walmart Corporation,

working nationally and locally to “make a positive impact in the communities we serve” by providing grants to “thousands of organizations that share our mission.” Walmart supports work and employment issues through its Sustainability and Community program areas. Worker Dignity grants serve to “strengthen the demand for responsible labor practices, invest in data and transparency, enhance worker and community voices and support strong policy and regulation” throughout Walmart’s supply chain; its Diversity, Equity & Inclusion grants address “systemic inequities of underrepresented groups,” particularly “barriers that prevent them from overcoming social and environmental challenges in the communities where they live and work.”

Corporate Funder Spotlight



The Ben & Jerry’s Foundation centers its grantmaking on social justice issues. Focusing on Black communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color, it aims to “dismantle oppressive and discriminatory systems toward a more just and inclusive world.” The foundation offers one year general operating support grants of up to \$30,000 to grassroots organizations across the States. Past grantees include 350 New Hampshire, Awood Center, and BAY-Peace.

The giant media conglomerate Comcast also offers democracy-related grantmaking. This Philadelphia-based funder supports digital literacy, community service and future leaders programs in the city and throughout its other service areas. In recent years, the Comcast Foundation has been a noted supporter of Latino causes in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Overall, the foundation’s top priority is diversity-

oriented programs that address its three key giving areas. For example, Comcast has worked recently with local Latino groups like Aspira, Esperanza and Congreso. It has also partnered with the Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project in California to boost civic engagement and leadership experience.

Democracy-focused organizations seeking corporate funding may find occasional opportunities where missions align, but for the most part, corporate support is a challenging avenue to pursue.

Community Foundations

Community foundations are important funders in the democracy space, both for grantmaking at the local level and, in many cases, as managers of donor-advised funds that distribute considerable funds to large national organizations focused on democracy. Many community foundations have explicit civic engagement programs, both as grantmakers and convenors.

For instance, the California Community Foundation, which has expressly developed grantmaking programs around civic engagement, has been focusing its efforts on building BIPOC-led organizational capacity and making sure those leaders are at various decision-making tables in the region. Other community foundations providing generous support to democracy-related causes include the Foundation for the Carolinas, the Oregon Community Foundation and the San Francisco Community Foundation.

The most prominent community foundation doing democracy-related work in our analysis is also the largest. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) was among the top funders of democracy-related causes from 2014–2018. One of its most

significant gifts was for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (\$50 million), which focuses on digital privacy and free speech; it's not the kind of democracy work one generally thinks of alongside community engagement projects, but it is an extremely popular nonprofit, especially among the Silicon Valley crowd. Other beneficiaries of grants from SVCF to democracy-related nonprofits included FWD.US, the Obama Foundation, Common Sense Media and two other frequent grantees: NEO Philanthropy, and Center for Popular Democracy.

While community foundations often manage donor-advised funds that may be funding grassroots community organizing and get-out-the-vote efforts at the behest of known or unknown donors, an issue we discuss in the Major Donors section below, they are also critical community funders, so providing grants to spur engagement in the community makes a lot of sense.

Major Donors

Major individual donors, whether through a family foundation or some other giving vehicle, have become significant funders of democracy-related work. However, the ease of identifying which donor makes grants to what democracy-related causes, and to what degree, varies. Also, a great number of the “new money” donors to democracy nonprofits are tech and finance titans, many of whom are being roundly criticized in the media for their corporations' roles in exacerbating anti-democratic trends and deepening economic inequality.

Foundations with living donors, like Pierre Omidyar's Democracy Fund, Open Society Institute, Arnold Ventures and others, make their giving to democracy-related causes reasonably clear. For example, the [Democracy Fund](#) focuses

exclusively on American democracy and has, since 2014, given more than \$150 million in grants, according to its website, to “strengthen our democracy through the pursuit of a vibrant and diverse public square, free and fair elections, effective and accountable government, and a just and inclusive society.” Omidyar also runs the Democracy Fund Voice, a nonpartisan 501(c)(4) organization, which works to “ensure that our political system is responsive to the public and able to meet the greatest challenges facing our nation.”

Major Donor Spotlight Audrey Cappell

Audrey Cappell is the daughter of hedge fund billionaire James Simons. In 2011, she brought together a group of women to establish Foundation for a Just Society. The goal of FJS is to advance human rights for marginalized women, girls, and LGBTQI people around the world. In the U.S., FJS focuses its grantmaking in the Southeast, supporting organizations that “elevate intersectional antiracist feminist activism and leadership, LGBTQ+ organizing, and cross-issue advocacy and activism.”

Like the Democracy Fund, Open Society Institute, which is expressly tied to the Soros family, is quite transparent in its views about the state of American democracy and the need to shore up civil society in the U.S., just as it's made the case for decades in former Soviet bloc nations. OSI, which has long funded U.S. racial justice work and reforms to policing and criminal justice systems, reports on its website an annual “democracy budget” for American democracy work in 2020 of \$52 million. Notably, the foundation has focused democracy efforts on other parts of the world, but more recently, has ramped up efforts in the United States, as American democracy has seemed ever more tenuous.

In addition to giving through Chan Zuckerberg, LLC, which has both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) (Chan Zuckerberg Advocacy) arms, the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, and his wife, Priscilla Chan, provided nearly \$200 million to the CARES Act’s dedication of resources for election security to help 2020 election officials ensure a smooth process. So far, it appears this contribution was a one-off donation, made in the midst of a pandemic; however, considering the heavy criticism levied against Facebook and its influence on democracy, it’s possible there is more to come.

MacKenzie Scott, too, has directed major funds toward democracy. In 2020, she pledged \$72 million in philanthropic funding toward “functional democracy,” as she put it. That includes a gift to the Center for Election Innovation and Research, one of the two nonprofits Zuckerberg and Chan tapped to distribute money to local jurisdictions, as well as Common Cause, the Voter Engagement Fund and many others.

A less well-known giver who has recently played a significant role—including some honorable mentions for funding voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts in Georgia—is the Foundation for a Just Society (FJS), the giving vehicle of Audrey Cappell, daughter of hedge fund billionaire James Simons. The foundation has provided significant funding to places like ProGeorgia, Southerners on New Ground and GLAHR. Owing to its emphasis on gender and LGBTQ+ justice, FJS also backs the work of other progressive organizations operating in Georgia, including the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the Racial Justice Action Center.

The largest donor-advised fund management organizations in the world, including Fidelity, Vanguard and Schwab Charitable, are listed as

fundors to democracy-related causes. Donor-advised funds from the community foundations have also played a role. For example, a good amount of 501(c)(3) money has flowed into places like the New Georgia Project from community funders like the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, reflecting interest in the emergent battleground state among smaller donors, as well as donors moving money through DAFs. That doesn’t just apply to donors in Georgia itself – the Silicon Valley Community Foundation is another notable source of these donations.

Other DAF money has flowed to funding intermediaries and re-granting nonprofits like the New Venture Fund, which is managed by Arabella Advisors, one of the most prominent philanthropic advisory firms in the country, as well as The Democracy Alliance, which it says is the “the largest network of donors dedicated to democracy work.” Both have a special affinity for the progressive movement.

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“I think the concentration of philanthropy and civic engagement in the hands of the elite few is extremely dangerous right now. I think leading philanthropic organizations need to look at the role they play in perpetuating social and economic divisions.”

—PSO professional, Gaithersburg, Maryland

At the Democracy Alliance, which was founded in 2005, funders and philanthropic advisors gather twice a year to learn about issues and organizations and the infrastructure necessary to “advance a progressive agenda for America.” The Democracy Alliance provides donors with resources and gives them guidance about where and why to invest in every aspect of democracy-related work, including

policymaking, organizing grassroots communities and “winning state and national issues.” Democracy Alliance touts on its website that it marshals as much as \$80 million per year. However, here again, it is a mix of issue-focused campaign work and broader democracy concerns.

Other huge living donor foundations that are key democracy funders are JPB Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies and Emerson Collective. JPB, the passion project of Barbara Picower, makes grants for democracy work to “increase the voice and power of people in poverty” by broadening the “civic engagement and voting rights” of traditionally disenfranchised communities. It also supports democracy-related work by “protecting the rights and full participation of immigrants in society.” Previous grantees include the Center for American Progress, Center for Community Change and Innovation Network. The Emerson Collective, the giving vehicle of Laurene Powell Jobs, makes grants in a variety of program areas that cross democracy-building themes, including Equity & Justice, Immigration and Media & Journalism, and has recently been supporting efforts around redistricting.



Founded by Stacey Abrams in 2014, the New Georgia Project represents what it refers to as the “New American Majority,” which consists of people of color, those aged 18 to 29, and unmarried women. As of 2019, its Voter Registration program registered nearly 500,000 voters across the state. Supporters of the project include NEO Philanthropy, Open Society Policy Center, and the JPB and Ford foundations.

Mike Bloomberg’s giving has a number of initiatives in its Government Innovation program area that work to “promote public sector innovation capacity and spread proven and promising solutions among cities worldwide.” That includes The Mayors Challenge, a competition that promotes “next-generation solutions that have the potential to transform the way city halls work and improve the lives of citizens”; Cities of Service, a network of local governments that “leverages citizen service as a tool to drive public sector innovation and achieve measurable impact on pressing local challenges”; and What Works Cities, which provides cities and mayors with “robust technical support, access to expertise, and peer-to-peer learning” in order to “better use data and evidence to engage the public,” “improve services” and “evaluate progress.”

Intermediaries & Associations

Infrastructure groups and multi-funder efforts abound in the democracy space. Since 2016, left-leaning funders in particular have come together in new and often innovative ways to address what they see as one of American democracy’s key failings: the active and passive disenfranchisement of certain groups, especially communities of color.

Funders Committee for Civic Participation (FCCP) and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) are the two main infrastructure groups. Media Impact Funders, with its extensive work with funders supporting democracy-building public information efforts, might also be considered a PSO serving democracy-focused funders. While FCCP tends toward elections and community-organizing approaches, PACE takes a more expansive view of democracy work, including learning programs and initiatives around civic education and bridging partisan divides.

“Since the pandemic shifted all of our worlds... we have seen funders come together and pool resources like never before,” said Kristin Purdy of FCCP. “This type of coordination of resources among funders can result in fewer redundancies, more dollars in the field, and more successful outcomes than would be possible had every grantmaker acted alone.”

Pooled funds to support voter registration, get-out-the-vote funds and get-out-the-count for Census 2020 have been central to the movement of democracy work in the past few years. [Many new pooled funds and collaboratives](#) sprang up in the wake of the 2016 election. NEO Philanthropy’s State Infrastructure Fund (which predates 2016), New Venture Fund’s Voter Engagement Fund and Resilient Democracy’s 501(c)(3) pooled fund are among the biggest. NEO, formerly Public Interests Projects, has become a stalwart progressive funding intermediary and has played a key role in the incubation and growth of pooled funding focused on democracy-related work. Its State Infrastructure Fund focuses on increasing civic participation and advancing voting rights among people of color and other historically underrepresented communities and raised more than \$45 million in 2019/2020 alone. Another one of its pooled funds, the Four Freedoms Fund, focuses on immigration rights, and has been a favorite of Carnegie, Unbound Philanthropy, Ford Foundation and others.

The New Venture Fund, which is a fiscal sponsorship platform for mostly progressive grantmaking initiatives, also hosts a few important 501(c)(3) pooled funds for election protection and voter engagement. They include the Safe Voting Fund, which helped educate policymakers on safe voting practices during a pandemic and implement them at ground level, and the Voter Engagement Fund, which aims to boost voter participation

among underrepresented people. Also housed at the New Venture Fund is the Trusted Elections Fund, which supports election crisis planning and banks rapid-response money; it was set to be deployed in the event of disruptions like foreign interference, violence on or after Election Day, or problems arising from a disputed result.

Intermediary Spotlight



NEO Philanthropy has been committed to social justice and human rights for the past 30 years and helps bridge the gap between democracy focused funders and boots-on-the-ground organizations. More than just a relationship facilitator, NEO Philanthropy also provides capacity-building support through leadership development, field building, fundraising, communications, and risk management.

Funder coordination has taken other forms, as well. [One for Democracy](#), for instance, got its start when an informal circle of donors started talking about the gap between the size of their existing democracy commitments and the urgency they felt around this year’s election. They ended up [organizing a kind of Giving Pledge for democracy](#) in which participants promise to dedicate at least 1% of their assets to election protection and voter engagement this year. The effort realized more than \$63 million, with a portion of that money distributed through One for Democracy’s dedicated 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) funds.

The [Democracy Funders Network \(DFN\)](#), started in 2018, seeks to provide another space for donors to build relationships and learn together outside of the

more partisan-leaning funder network. They created a pooled fund called the Election Integrity Fund.

Yet another new site for funder collaboration is [Unite America](#) and its Unite America Fund. Also formed in 2018, Unite America began as the Centrist Project, the brainchild of Economics Professor Charles Wheelan. The original idea was to combat extreme polarization by promoting independent candidacies. Unite America later shifted its strategy to electoral reform, while still decrying the “two-party doom loop.” One of its bigger backers is Kathryn Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch’s liberal daughter-in-law. The group apparently has dozens of other major donors and plans to disburse \$100 million by 2023.

Another organization operating a pooled fund, Resilient Democracy, is also taking on democracy challenges, in this case, tackling the digital divide. Founded in 2018, Resilient Democracy saw the number of its funders triple in 2020. Technology lies close to the heart of what the Resilient Democracy Fund wants to achieve, but not in the clinical, top-down sense we’ve come to associate with “modern” data-driven political campaigns. Instead, the organization is trying to engage voters outside traditional channels, in part by supporting tech-savvy relational organizing. That’s a fancy term for the oldest form of political organizing in the book: empowering people to engage their own networks—usually family and friends—and thus cut through the noise.

Collaborative entities like pooled funds and funder networks can help the field overcome its non-election-year droughts by providing steadier support to election protection and voter engagement work. In that sense, these new funds

are following in the footsteps of the State Infrastructure Fund at NEO Philanthropy, which has been funding voting rights litigation and grassroots engagement since 2010.

Collaboratives also help donors and foundations overcome the skittishness that has long accompanied anything smelling vaguely of politics. After all, funding together reduces the perceived risk that might accompany major solo giving. That’s the dynamic that contributed to the Democracy Frontlines Fund’s [recent success](#) in recruiting several new heavyweight donors to Black-led movement funding.

Pooled Fund Spotlight



The Resilient Democracy Fund is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) that encourages civic engagement through its targeted grantmaking. It currently supports a number of democracy-related initiatives, including tech-enabled relational organizing, building and scaling digital outreach capacity through text messaging and tech savvy ways to drive and increase Census participation to ensure inclusive redistricting in the near future.

Fundraising Now

The historic events of the past several years have alerted many donors to the need to protect democracy on an ongoing basis. Although the typical pattern of democracy funding rises and falls with the election cycle, which will be hard to break, there have been some encouraging signs of steadier donor commitment.

For the League of Women Voters, the post-presidential election period produced no decline in funding at all. In fact, its fundraising has increased, according to Cecilia Calvo, chief development officer. The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that educates the public, advocates for major policy issues, and encourages citizen participation in elections and government.

Calvo attributes the organization's current fundraising success to a combination of factors, particularly the perceived fragility of democracy in the United States. "First the primaries, then COVID, the Capitol event, the Senate runoff in Georgia, the bad voting bills, it's been some year," Calvo said, noting that the nonprofit's existing donors really dug deep and many new donors came on board.

With the 2021 introduction of 350 bills affecting voting rights in 47 states since November, donors are truly concerned about deliberate barriers to voting. "Insert a global pandemic into a series of remarkable events in the past year and it affected everything," she said. The league maintained continuous support from its regular donors, and staff said they were delighted to see so many new donors—whose primary interest might be hunger, healthcare or the environment—come on board to protect the freedom to vote.

"There are a lot of heroes in this story," Calvo said, pointing out that foundations stepped up by eliminating some of the more time-consuming elements of grant application processes so organizations could get the money they urgently needed. Shortened proposals, phone interviews instead of in-person meetings, and timing flexibility represented a major shift in the way foundations do business, she said.

The years between federal elections are usually quieter, but not this year, Calvo noted. Priority issues right now include safe and acceptable elections, possible litigation around voting restrictions and passing the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the For The People Act to protect the freedom of all citizens to vote across all 50 states.

Demos, a progressive nonprofit whose mission is to use research, litigation and partnerships with grassroots organizations to ensure a democracy and economy rooted in racial equity, has, over the decades, been highly successful with private foundations. (Editor's note: Inside Philanthropy publisher David Callahan was a co-founder of Demos.) It also sees no slowdown in donor interest in giving for democracy. Leading issues at Demos include same-day voter registration, the expansion of the Supreme Court to 13 members, political status for D.C. and the territories, and support for corporations challenging recent restrictive voter legislation in Georgia.

It saw a significant rise in donations due to a confluence of events in 2020—the pandemic, the presidential election and the controversy over voting rights in multiple states. "There was a real shift among donors and foundations," said David Alexander, director of development, noting that

many donors lifted restrictions on gifts, designating them as general support or pledging multi-year funding. Many new gifts were from first-time contributors or people not traditionally affiliated with Demos.

The big question now for Alexander: Will that renewed interest and what he characterized as a “huge” spike in grants stick because the threat remains? Or will there be a pause as donors take time to assess and reflect?

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“I think the philanthropic sector needs to buttress civic society. Unfortunately, there is not enough private sector philanthropy to address the grand challenges of our time. Philanthropy can help safeguard the institutions that bind the country together as a people.”

—Philanthropy serving organization professional,
Gaithersburg, MD

Alexander cited the need for “economic democracy” in philanthropy, business and the rest of society, moving beyond simple policy changes to fundamentally shifting how BIPOC, workers and jobless people relate to corporations and government. He pointed to the need for nonprofits that can provide guidance to larger foundations on diversity and inclusion by bringing in people who are closer to recipient communities.

Common Cause is another nonpartisan nonprofit whose mission focuses on creating a democracy that works for everyone, not just the wealthy or special interests. It supports ethics and accountability in government and keeps a close watch on voting and elections, money and influence, and gerrymandering and representation.

“Fundraising was pretty much at a standstill from mid-March when the pandemic hit until mid-June,” said LaShanda Jackson, vice president of development. Jackson attributed the pause to the general uncertainty and economic repercussions of the virus, and to a feeling that it was inappropriate at the time to fundraise for anything other than health and human services.

Then, with the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the civic unrest that followed, “The whole world seemed to come out of its pandemic haze, and with that, began a philanthropic wave of generosity,” Jackson said. “Not just treasure, but time and talent,” she noted, pointing out the exponential growth in fundraising and volunteerism that followed those historic events.

Jackson said fundraising has remained steady since the presidential election and continued through mid-2021 at all giving levels. The work that seems to resonate most with donors includes voting rights, election rights and redistricting. She also noted a rise in legacy giving, which she attributed to founding Common Cause members who grew up during the Vietnam War and the Nixon impeachment. “They see parallels to today and are inspired to do what they can to protect voting rights and elections,” Jackson said.

Fundraising has been strong, especially major and mid-level gifts, with 6,000 new members joining Common Cause in the last five months. Like other nonprofits, Common Cause has had to reimagine face-to-face events and replace them with virtual offerings. Jackson said she expects a hybrid version to take the organization forward. Foundation giving is also strong, she added.

The group of fundraisers for democracy-focused nonprofits IP spoke to, admittedly a small sample, indicates that 2021 is likely to be another big year for this field, although these exceptional fundraisers may not represent the larger field of smaller grass-roots organizations still scrambling for funding, even as the pressure in many states intensifies. How long will philanthropy's renewed focus will last, and what it will mean to voters, is one important question. Another is: How much of philanthropy's theoretical interest in democracy will be transformed into actual demographic distribution of resources to a wide swath of activities and communities on the ground?

Fundraiser Spotlight



Founded in 1920, the League of Women Voters began as a “mighty political experiment” to help 20 million women “carry out their new responsibilities as voters.” In 1993, its grassroots campaign to reform voter registration resulted in the passage of the National Voter Registration Act. More recently, in response to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that partisan gerrymandering cannot be solved by the federal judicial system, the league launched People Powered Fair Maps to help create fair and transparent redistricting and eliminate partisan and racial gerrymandering across all 50 states.

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

The big question for democracy-focused nonprofits is: What comes next? How can or should philanthropy respond, and will it sustain these efforts rather than following the boom and bust of the election cycle?

“Democracy is a process as much as it is an outcome, so it’s really imperative that we get out of the two- to four-year election-related funding cycle model. There will always be short-term challenges, and those shouldn’t be ignored, but we also need to figure out the balance — addressing short-term threats and still doing the long game,” says PACE’s Kristen Campbell.

In the near term, funders and infrastructure groups don’t see dollars dropping off as quickly as they have in the past. This is, in part, driven by the aftermath of the 2020 election. Waves of restrictive voting laws are being introduced in conservative states to make it harder for people to register and vote, which is compelling philanthropy to step forward to fund the voting rights groups working to protect voting rights and access to the franchise.

Other hot-button issues, which we often think of as areas ripe for philanthropic action, like campaign finance reform and redistricting, remain chronically underfunded. Campaign finance reform, which is in many ways at the heart of many of the problems our democracy faces, received a paltry \$21 million over the five years of data IP examined. Similarly, redistricting reform to prevent partisan gerrymandering received only about \$25 million over seven years examined in a [Candid analysis](#).

Those working in the democracy space see growing opportunity. “Many funders that hadn’t thought of themselves as ‘democracy funders’ previously have been spurred on by their involvement in collaborative efforts in the run-up to the Census, including the importance of redistricting and creating fairer apportionment processes. We see them now talking more and more about some of the fundamentals of America’s democracy,” says Kristin Purdy of Funder’s Committee for Civic Participation.

Examples of similarly pooled funding around voter registration and mobilization have shown that such efforts are—at their core—really about power-building in communities. Hopefully, this growing realization leads to longer funding cycles and less restrictive funding, much like what the Ford Foundation is doing through its Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) initiative to raise up the voices of marginalized communities; others, like the California Endowment, have done similar work.

Others see the need for whole new approaches to bridge the extreme partisan gaps in the country, which, as the 2020 insurrection at the Capitol suggests, have reached unprecedented heights. This extends beyond finding common ground, which assumes two sides wanting the same thing, toward efforts to turn down the temperature on some of the most damaging rhetoric.

Resources for Democracy and Civic Life Funding

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Websites & Individual Pages with Key Information: (alpha by Name of Org) Name of Organization, Page of Relevance [hyperlink]

[AmeriCorps](#)

[Arnold Ventures](#)

[Bauman Foundation](#)

[Bloomberg Philanthropies](#)

[Brennan Center for Justice](#)

[California Community Foundation](#)

[Campaign Legal Center](#)

[Carnegie Corporation of New York](#)

[CivX Now](#)

[Common Cause](#)

[Democracy Fund](#)

[Democracy Funders Network](#)

[Demos](#)

[Ford Foundation](#)

[Foundation to Promote Open Society](#)

[Funders' Committee for Civic Participation](#)

[Hewlett Foundation](#)

[James Irvine Foundation](#)

[John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#)

League of Women Voters

NEO Philanthropy

New Venture Fund

Philanthropy for Active Engagement: PACE

Points of Light

Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Resilient Democracy

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Unidos

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Kristen Campbell, CEO, PACE

LaShanda Jackson, vice president of development, Common Cause

Kristin Purdy, former executive director, Funders' Committee for Civic Participation

¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding, funding by higher education institutions and major donor advised funds (DAFs.)

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

³ Even after evidence arose of significant election security failures and misinformation campaigns aimed at our elections from foreign adversaries in 2016 elections, the Elections Assistance Commission (EAC), a bipartisan and independent body that helps to support state elections, cut from a high of \$18 million in 2010 to just \$8 million in 2019.

METHODOLOGY NOTES:

As mentioned in the introduction to this brief, philanthropy plays an important – if uneasy – role in American democracy. Yet, determining just what is or isn’t “democracy funding” can also be a tricky proposition. In Candid’s definition, democracy funding includes grants related to elections and public integrity, as well as a broader definition of democracy that includes grants to organizations working to promote civil rights, civic participation and issue-based voter organizing and advocacy. We take a slightly more circumscribed approach to what we consider democracy funding, pulling out where possible the issue-based campaign work such as efforts focused on reproductive rights, gun safety, and the environment, since a vast swath of what the nonprofit advocacy world does could be considered— in one way or another— democracy work.

We also include another related area of funding, media access and online disinformation, with a focus on open data, while trying not to delve too deeply into issues of journalism. Candid’s definition of democracy includes grants supporting “constitutional protections of rights such as liberty and equality, promotion of openness and integrity in democratic institutions, and wider and more meaningful participation by all.” Candid’s definition of public integrity is “transparency in the public sphere, including anti-corruption efforts, curtailment of influence-peddling, and good government reforms.” We refer to this as “government performance.”

For most of SAP’s briefs, we have used Candid data of top funders and grantees as a starting point for conversation. We did that for this brief, too, but several funders and grantees on Candid’s top 10 lists were focused specifically on single issues that we felt belonged more squarely in grantmaking for those topics. So highly informed researchers of Candid data may see reproductive rights organizing funders like Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation in Candid data of top “Democracy” funders or environmental organizations like the League of Conservation Voters on their top “Democracy” grantees; we have limited this brief to an exploration of funding and nonprofits working across numerous issues to help broad swaths of Americans in the democratic process.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. If you have comments or information you’d like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.