

Election 2020: Democracy Funders React to a Historic Contest

by Philip Rojc, November 13, 2020

In her victory speech as vice president-elect of the United States, Kamala Harris invoked some of the last words of late civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis. “‘Democracy is not a state. It is an act.’ And what he meant was that America’s democracy is not guaranteed. It is only as strong as our willingness to fight for it, to guard it and never take it for granted.”

Philanthropy as a sector has long been deeply ambivalent about that act of democracy. Speaking the lofty language of civil society, or more recently, of “measurable impact,” funders have long neglected the processes and institutions that ensure the people have a say in how they’re governed. Nor have most funders fully reckoned with the undemocratic nature of philanthropic giving itself, which [some argue](#) can only be justified if philanthropy throws its weight behind democratic practice.

Nevertheless, we’ve been living through a renaissance in philanthropic attention to democracy issues, driven first and foremost by progressive grantmakers’ conviction that healing democracy means getting more resources into the hands of organizers. The Trump presidency, with all its setbacks for social justice and assaults on democratic norms, has spurred on that work. And now, the election of Biden and Harris—and more importantly, the manner of their election—has justified many progressive funders’ belief in the effectiveness and moral rectitude of their efforts.

In comments to Inside Philanthropy, leaders from some of the sector’s top democracy funders sounded off on the election process, which defied predictions of widespread chaos and violence. They praised grantees and other partners for boosting turnout, especially in swing states like Georgia and Arizona, where typically underrepresented voters made their voices heard.

But they also evinced deep uncertainty about the health of American democracy. They pointed not only to the current administration's efforts to shred norms around a peaceful transition of power, but also to philanthropic funders' tendency to pull back on democracy funding when elections end, undermining the people power they just helped build.

"We must remember that democracy is not merely the measure of how many people participate in elections," said Marguerite Casey Foundation President Carmen Rojas and Group Health Foundation President Nichole June Maher in a joint statement. "It is also the measure of how many people participate in shaping the decisions those elected leaders make when the election is long over."

Foundations and other 501(c)(3) funders will go down in history as having played a part in an election process that went smoother than many feared this year. When the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the spring, democracy funders got busy funding efforts to [virus-proof the vote](#), even in the absence of federal support beyond a paltry \$400 million via the CARES Act. Nonpartisan funders [can play a variety of roles to secure and improve the election process](#), and each of those arenas received increased support.

"Philanthropic donors really stepped up for this election cycle," said Joe Goldman, president of the Democracy Fund. "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."

Maria Torres-Springer, vice president of U.S. Programs at the Ford Foundation, was also upbeat about grantee effectiveness. "In the face of COVID-19 and underfunded electoral systems, [grantees] were prepared and mobilized quickly to continue to ensure our democratic systems were stable—encouraging more than 600,000 Americans to volunteer as poll workers and recruiting more than 47,000 lawyers who were on call to assist voters in need," she said.

Those are impressive numbers. They reflect the sheer organizing heft that the nonprofit sector—funders and grantees alike—can bring to bear on a nation-spanning challenge. Against the odds, that work paid off through Election Day. "With the coordinated efforts of community-based nonprofit voting rights and election protection groups, there were few reports of voter intimidation and much shorter lines on Election Day compared to the primaries," said Geri Mannion, director of the Carnegie Corporation's U.S. Democracy program. "We saw that advocacy and organizing worked, particularly at the state and local level," she went on.

For many democracy funders, those successes rest squarely on the shoulders of voter engagement groups, many of them modestly funded, that organized tirelessly in communities of color. “The historic levels of participation and turnout are a testament to the brilliance of Black women-led organizations in Georgia, and Arizona’s historic wins are a reflection of deep, long-term investments in Latinx and Native-led organizations,” said Dimple Abichandani, executive director of the General Service Foundation. “Arizona and Georgia are two examples of what happens when funders invest in leaders of color and support long-term power building and organizing.”

Crystal Hayling, executive director of the Libra Foundation, put it bluntly. “It’s the plain truth that Black voters rescued our democracy in 2020,” she said. “Through the courageous work of organizations on the front lines, voters took back their power. The dirty tricks of voter suppression were overwhelmed by people being informed and determined to exercise their rights.” Hayling has spearheaded recent efforts to deepen the flow of resources from big philanthropy to ground-level Black-led groups. One donor organizing project led by Libra, [the Democracy Frontlines Fund](#), has ushered deep-pocketed newcomers into racial justice organizing and exemplifies the strong ties progressive funders see between empowering people of color and securing democracy.

Way to Win, an umbrella organization that includes the c3 donor organizing effort Way to Rise, has been working at that intersection since liberal hopes were dashed four years ago. [Recent voter engagement funding through Way to Rise](#) drew on support from a range of philanthropies to back BIPOC-led voter engagement in key states. Nicole Boucher, vice president of Way to Win and Senior Advisor to Way to Rise, sees the election results as a kind of vindication.

“Voters of color and young people turned out in record numbers and are still showing up to protect our democracy and ensure the will of the people prevails,” Boucher said. “While pundits and the public watch in awe as Arizona and Georgia make headlines, organizations like Arizona Center for Empowerment in Arizona and New Georgia Project are seeing their years of dedication and work pay off.”

While some democracy funders couched their reactions in more combative terms than others, most celebrated the election’s historic turnout and orderly process. But Rojas at Marguerite Casey and Maher at the Group Health Foundation declined to celebrate. “We are not celebrating—we find ourselves more worried about our democracy than ever,” they said. “The rules of voting remain unacceptable: We have consented to a society where policies are designed to be intentionally unequal. Far too many rules still target far too many people for exclusion and suppression, especially by race.”

Rojas and Maher give voice to an unease that many progressive democracy funders share. Rather than growing complacent in the face of perceived wins, many echoed John Lewis' words and cited the need for sustained investment. "Democracy funding has for too long followed presidential election cycles, waxing and waning in four-year periods. But democracy is more than a series of moments; it is the days, years, and decades between them," said Stephen Heintz, president and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. RBF is one of a number of national foundations that have upped their democracy commitments this year.

Other foundation leaders also warned against a return to the status quo. "Let's not pretend that we can return back to some kind of mythical space of safe moderation. We need to guard against letting celebration drift into complacency," Hayling said. And Abichandani cautioned, "This is not a time to put our heads in the sand or retreat into months of strategic planning at the expense of making grants."

One silver lining to Trump's non-concession and what may be a messy transition of power is that democracy funders will be less inclined to take their feet off the gas. At least, that is, until January, when Biden and Harris's presumed inauguration (and the conclusion of Georgia's runoff Senate races) will again invite the specter of complacency. Nearly all the funders we heard from cited the need to stay the course on democracy work, both in terms of strengthening institutions and building organizing power.

Mike Berkowitz, who heads the Democracy Funders Network (DFN), said he expects many donors to "take a breather until early in the Biden administration." Although he was concerned the long-term generosity of democracy funders would fade if Donald Trump lost the election, Berkowitz is "less worried about this now because I think the election outcome and its aftermath have made abundantly clear that the issues plaguing our democracy are not going anywhere."

Even if funders do manage to maintain high levels of democracy investment in 2021 and beyond, they'll do so against the backdrop of challenges that far surpass mere election administration. The COVID-19 crisis has only highlighted and exacerbated existing crises of wealth inequality and racial injustice. A nation that already afforded its less fortunate little in the way of security has become an even more precarious place.

Several leaders, including Heintz of RBF and Paul Di Donato, president of the Proteus Fund, argued that if philanthropy wants to make real headway on those problems, it needs to treat a robust democracy as foundational and intersectional, not just as another "boutique" agenda. "If philanthropy hasn't learned this lesson now, I don't know if it ever will—an

inclusive, representative democracy is a basic, non-negotiable platform for almost every issue or movement that we fund,” Di Donato said.

Di Donato also emphasized that getting to a truly inclusive and representative democracy will require a “reckoning to tackle white supremacy in this country,” calling white supremacy “the main fuel that’s feeding the assault on democracy.” Not every funder we heard from tied racial justice and a healthy democracy so closely together, but many did. Rojas and Maher, for instance, stated that those fighting for racial justice have the most to lose from sustained attacks on democratic norms, while society at large has everything to gain from greater racial justice, which they called “one of the unifiers of progress that universalizes opportunity, security and prosperity for all of us.”

When I asked funders about next steps, some of them emphasized staying the course and cautioned against dictating a future course to movement grantees. Ford’s Torres-Springer spoke of letting grantees set the path forward and providing multi-year, flexible funding. In a similar vein, the General Service Foundation has increased payout to 10% over the next three years to support grantees with flexible funding over the long term. Hayling at Libra and Di Donato at the Proteus Fund also talked about “getting out of the way” and finding ways to engage in listening and collaboration while funding groups on the ground that best know their own communities.

Although they didn’t necessarily contradict that line of thinking, other funders shared more specific strategies to pursue in the weeks and months ahead. The most immediate involve responding to ongoing disputes over the election itself. To counter misinformation and attempts to delegitimize the vote, DFN’s Berkowitz said, “funders should be prioritizing communications work regarding the integrity of the election, such as Issue One’s Count Every Vote initiative.” Nick Chedli Carter, who leads Resilient Democracy, urged “immediate commitments and interest in protecting the integrity of the results and ensuring every vote is counted.”

Carter also pointed to the need to dig into “what happened” and apply those lessons to the project of civic engagement. “The election made it explicitly clear that the American electorate is much more complicated, nuanced and unpredictable than most professionals in the civic engagement space may be comfortable with,” he said. “Black and Brown communities are not a monolith, and many past assumptions about the electorate are not holding up.”

Carter was among several leaders who brought up the need for greater attention to the Census and the redistricting process, which both suffer from lower profiles than the national election but play an immense role in the distribution of political power. Gary Bass, executive director of the Bauman Foundation, also emphasized the Census and redistricting. Under Bass, Bauman has been a key player in philanthropy's efforts to support a fair and accurate Census, [efforts that have continued despite massive disruption from COVID-19](#).

"There are three pillars to our democracy—voting, census and redistricting," Bass said. "If any of these go poorly, our democracy is distorted, in some cases for a decade. Racial equity, government funding for programs in communities and fair representation—all foundation concerns—are examples of things affected by these pillars." All three pillars require ongoing financial commitment, Bass went on, "but the next up is redistricting. Fortunately, there is a funder collaborative—[Fair Representation in Redistricting](#)—that funders can join."

Beyond the immediate priorities of staying the course on grantee support, retroactively protecting the election's integrity and doubling down on election reforms, longer-term questions of governance and trust are on a lot of funders' minds. In particular, leaders voiced their hopes that civil society institutions might play a role in restoring Americans' confidence in their own government.

Pushing back against rhetorical attacks on election administration is one element of that, as Mannion at Carnegie pointed out. So is tackling rampant misinformation and conspiracy theories, which serve to undermine public trust in a democratic system. Goldman at the Democracy Fund and Carter at Resilient Democracy pointed to the rapidly shifting media environment as an area of concern. "There is an underestimation of how different the media ecosystem has become, and how people are consuming and sharing information," Carter said.

While most of the funders we heard from cited the need to rebuild public trust in voting and elections, some of those who emphasized movement organizing were less upbeat about government itself, under any administration. Government can benefit lots of people, Rojas and Maher said, but "big change does not come from government. It comes from people who are powerful enough to out-compete corrupting influences and spur government to action." Philanthropy's job, they went on, isn't just to tinker with society's inequities, but to correct grave imbalances in who gets to influence government. People-

powered organizing and advocacy is the counterweight, they said. Hayling at Libra said something similar: “Organizing is the fuel for real change.”

Going forward, it’ll be telling to see how many liberal democracy funders take a more combative stance in the struggle to improve democratic institutions, and how many adopt a Biden-esque approach of cooperation and aisle-crossing. It’s not an either-or, of course, and the laws followed by 501(c)(3) funders give them plenty of leeway to determine what course to take within a nonpartisan framework.

However funders map their own paths forward, we’re unlikely to see democracy funding drop to pre-2020 (or worse, pre-2016) levels anytime soon. “This election represents the bare survival of a democratic system under siege,” Hayling said. “The past four years have taught us that democracy taken for granted is democracy lost. This fight is far from over.”

In many ways, liberal philanthropy in particular has spent the past several years awakening to the realization that the values it espouses are far from universal. It’s finding those values beset by a torrent of authoritarian and even nihilistic impulses, a problem that squeaking by in a national election can stall but cannot fix. “All of this requires significant revisiting of the progressive narrative,” Di Donato said. “Why have pro-democracy voices who also aspire for basic equity and inclusion in society almost completely lost the narrative for why this vision of the world makes sense and is achievable?”