

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint
To Save Democracy, Fund Organizing
By Loren McArthur

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

Stanford Social Innovation Review
www.ssir.org
Email: editor@ssir.org

VIEWPOINT

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

To Save Democracy, Fund Organizing

Philanthropies concerned with toxic polarization and growing political extremism should invest in community organizing.

BY LOREN MCARTHUR

American democracy is in crisis. Trust in government has been plummeting for decades; an alarming number of Americans—especially young people—no longer believe democracy is the best form of government; and extremism and political violence are on the rise.

The crisis can feel intractable, its roots deeply embedded in our institutions, economic system, and political culture. While there are no easy solutions for fixing our democracy, a large-scale philanthropic investment in community organizing could counter the dangerous tribalism that plagues our public life, reduce the social isolation that is feeding political extremism, and revitalize a culture of grassroots democracy in the United States.

To realize the democratic promise of community organizing, however, donors must cease to view the practice merely as an instrument for advancing their political and policy goals and appreciate the fundamental role it plays in the health of the American polity. Community organizing teaches people the skills of democracy: how to build and sustain organizations together with others, listen to people with different perspectives, forge consensus, and understand where power lies in our political and economic institutions and how to negotiate with it. At a time when people have lost trust in democratic institutions, good organizing provides people a sense of agency and a belief in their capacity to influence and reform those institutions.

Face-to-Face Relationship Building

In the early 2000s, I spent eight years working as a community organizer in the Merrimack Valley region of Massachusetts, a major

textile manufacturing center in the United States for more than a century. One of the region's principal cities, Lawrence, was the site of the famous 1912 Bread and Roses strike, during which tens of thousands of immigrant workers from more than 50 countries walked out for better pay and working conditions. Working with unions and faith communities, both liberal and conservative, I organized campaigns to fight plant closings, improve job conditions for immigrant workers, and create affordable housing.

My experience as an organizer gave me insight into what a truly pluralistic, multi-racial democracy looks like and what it takes to build and sustain one: a radical commitment to building relationships rooted in shared interests and values, despite real and important differences in identity, politics, and belief systems. Too much of what passes for

public life today involves like-minded people pontificating together online. The kind of democratic practice we need in a heterogeneous society does not avoid differences; instead, it seeks to discern and activate the common values in our distinct traditions and histories. It demands of us a pragmatic toleration of beliefs and attitudes that are different from our own, combined with an idealistic faith in the possibility of solidarity.

During the last 20 years, community organizers have shifted their approach to power-building. While the organizations that community organizers founded in the 20th century were constructed at the city level, by the century's end, most US cities had been hollowed out, many bankrupted—the power and resources were no longer there. Organizing groups began to focus on models for building state-level governing power. Organizing networks like Faith in Action also began to expand their inside-the-Beltway presence and to join larger coalitions to influence national policy. Groups that had once eschewed electoral organizing developed voter engagement programs and set up 501(c)(4) organizations to engage in political activity and lobbying.

As organizers became more sophisticated about building power at the state and national levels, philanthropic funding for organizing also increased significantly.

Foundation data from Candid—although incomplete—indicate that foundations invested \$227 million in community organizing in 2008, the year I left my organizing job in the Merrimack Valley. By 2020, that number had surged to \$1.17 billion. During this same time frame, funding for voter education and registration skyrocketed, from a mere \$32 million in 2008 to \$515 million in 2020. These figures do not even include all the funding that organizing groups receive through their 501(c)(4) organizations, which is growing.



LOREN MCARTHUR is a senior director at Arabella Advisors, where he advises philanthropists on policy and systems-change strategies. Previously, he led the civic engagement department at UnidosUS, the largest national Hispanic advocacy organization in the United States, and was the lead organizer of the Merrimack Valley Project in Massachusetts.

The surge in donor investment has helped organizing groups scale their power. Yet in important ways, philanthropy's investment in organizing has also been constricted and limiting. Most donors take a transactional approach to community organizing, viewing it as a tactic for advancing policy or political objectives. They fail to adequately value organizing's role in fostering democratic norms and practices and strengthening social trust—important preconditions of a functional and equitable multiracial democracy.

Community organizing anchored in face-to-face relationship building runs counter to the toxic polarization that is undermining our democracy. A large body of social science research demonstrates that intergroup contact—of the type that face-to-face community organizing fosters—reduces prejudice among different groups. Community organizing that is rooted in personal stories creates the possibility of empathy and connection across divisions and the chance to create new, unifying narratives and more expansive collective identities.

Organizing's role in fostering a culture of grassroots democracy argues for a capacious funding approach that spreads resources liberally across the country. Yet, the distribution of resources for organizing has been geographically uneven. Groups in battleground states and large cities may enjoy access to significant (if episodic) funding streams, while large swathes of the rest of the country are left with scarce resources for the type of democratic engagement that community organizing provides.

The surge in money from institutional philanthropy has other unintended consequences. Organizing groups are tempted to chase big investments from wealthy donors rather than engage in the arduous spade-work of raising money from within their communities. Organizers feel pressure to advance near-term campaigns that produce the concrete policy wins or electoral outcomes that donors crave, neglecting longer-term efforts to deepen their membership bases and develop new leaders. The focus of organizing also skews away from issues

that are more threatening to wealthy philanthropists, such as addressing core drivers of the spiraling economic inequality that is undermining our democracy.

Five Recommendations for Funders

How can donors support organizing in a way that enables it to fully realize its democratic promise? I have five recommendations.

Fund across geographies. | Donors must recognize that organizing is a vital component of the nation's democratic culture and fund liberally across geographies, rather than limit their investment to regions that factor narrowly into near-term political strategies. We must nurture an embrace of democratic norms and practices everywhere, including and perhaps most importantly in the places where anti-democratic beliefs are taking root.

Be issue-agnostic. | Funders should provide open-ended support to communities to organize around the issues they define as most important, rather than conditioning investments on grantees' engagement in specific policy areas. If community organizing is to be a place where people engage in democracy, the people must have the ability to choose what issues they work on.

Support organizing that bridges racial and ideological divides. | Funders should invest in groups that are forging common ground among constituencies that the dominant political culture seeks to divide: working- and middle-class white communities and communities of color, urban and rural communities, ideologically progressive and conservative constituencies, and so on. Many state-based organizing groups, such as We the People Michigan and ISAIAH in Minnesota, as well as national worker organizing groups like United for Respect, are deeply committed to building multiracial constituencies that reach across rural and urban divides.

Invest in groups that are building and accountable to a deep base of active leaders and members. | To support community organizing that fosters meaningful civic participation, donors should invest in groups that have prioritized

base-building—that is, the work of building a mass constituency of active and engaged leaders and members—even if those commitments result in less immediate progress in achieving policy outcomes. The workplace justice lab@RU's Build the Base, Grow the Movement program at Rutgers University is working with several organizing groups committed to creating a deeper base-building culture in their organizations. Donors must also look beyond established organizations to support nascent organizing efforts that have not yet institutionalized but are generating significant grassroots engagement.

Nurture the financial independence of organizing groups. | Nonprofit leaders have raised a loud cry for foundations to provide more general operating support—justifiably so, as unrestricted funding affords groups greater flexibility with their programs and strategy. However, providing targeted support to groups to build their financial independence can have an even greater impact. By supporting organizing groups in developing membership-dues programs, grassroots fundraising campaigns, and earned-revenue strategies, funders can help them curtail their reliance on big philanthropy, establish more authentic community accountability, and become truly democratically governed institutions. For example, Progressive Multiplier, launched in 2017 by progressive activists, is an intermediary fund that provides capital to organizations to develop and scale independent revenue strategies.

Donors commonly balk at investing in grassroots organizing because of the cost of doing the work at scale. But we should not bring a scarcity mindset to the work of revitalizing our democracy. There is ample wealth to deploy: Consider that donors spent a whopping \$14.4 billion on the 2020 elections alone. A massive investment in community organizing to revitalize our commitment to democratic norms and practices and to strengthen social solidarity will go a long way toward building the resiliency we need to survive the threats we face, as well as the creative capacities we need to safeguard a just and prosperous future. ■