

Rebuilding the Art of Association : Philanthropy & the Renewal of American Civic Life

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The Our Common Purpose report stood out in 2020 for its emphasis on civic culture as a foundation for democratic renewal and on the role that philanthropy and Americans' associational lives can play in strengthening it. Six years on, we can see that the report not only anticipated important developments but also helped catalyze them with its strategic recommendations to "dramatically expand civic bridging capacity." Promising new philanthropic institutions and initiatives have emerged – as have new challenges that must be tackled to sustain bottom-up civic renewal.

In his classic work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans have a knack for what he termed “the art of association” – the ability to join forces and solve problems together. The health of democracy in America depends on it. Yet this ability has diminished in recent decades.

For this reason, I welcomed the American Academy's *Our Common Purpose* report in 2020.¹ I was then in my eighth year as the inaugural director of the U.S. Democracy program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. While we had already committed more than \$100 million in grants to nonprofit organizations working to strengthen democracy in a time of polarization, our goal seemed more remote than ever. Amid the upheavals of that year, I saw the need for a new path forward.

In a public review of the report in fall 2020, I shared two reasons it offered a fresh roadmap to reinventing American democracy.² The first was its emphasis on the interplay between democratic institutions and civic culture. Those working to bolster democracy had increasingly focused on institutions and elections while ignoring the cultural underpinnings that enabled their effectiveness and legitimacy.

The second reason was the recognition, as *Our Common Purpose* put it, that “institutions and culture intersect in the realm of civil society: the ecosystem of associations and groups in which people practice habits of participation and self-rule and reinforce norms of mutual obligation.”³

I noted that this recognition – still rare among democracy reformers – was fundamental:

We cannot bring about the changes needed in our politics and civic culture without tending to the health of our civic infrastructure and leadership in our associational life. And this work needs to happen in local communities where the lion's share of social capital formation and bridge-building occurs.

I devoted the bulk of my review to discussing Strategy 4 (“Dramatically Expand Civic Bridging Capacity”) and its two recommendations:

- Establish a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure to scale up social, civic, and democratic infrastructure; and
- Activate a range of funders to invest in the leadership capacity of the so-called civic one million: the catalytic leaders who drive civic renewal in communities around the country.

Six tumultuous years later, how are these recommendations holding up? What progress has been made? And what will it take to sustain and accelerate the bottom-up civic renewal the report envisioned?

The people behind the Trust for Civic Life, the manifestation of the first recommendation of Strategy 4, describe their institution's work in more detail in a companion essay in this issue.⁴ I will thus focus on why I regard the Trust as a breakthrough in practice; one that has avoided three patterns that have come to dominate in this area of philanthropy.

First, democracy-related philanthropy has grown increasingly polarized and politicized.⁵ Much of it now aligns with one or the other bitterly divided camps in our politics. And it seeks to create change within the narrow confines of electoral cycles. In contrast, the Trust for Civic Life – a pooled grantmaking fund – has assembled a cross-ideological group of national funders and is supporting civic hubs and social entrepreneurs in red and blue communities alike. Rather than seeking proximity to politics, it deliberately steps back, focusing instead on boosting shared and pre-political affinities in the communities it supports.

Second, large-scale national funders have long focused their grantmaking on metropolitan areas. This has led to less developed civic infrastructure in other parts of the country, making it even harder for them to secure philanthropic funding. The Trust's alternative focus on rural and small-town America is creating a virtuous cycle, underwriting civic hubs that can in turn attract more support.

Third, national funders have developed a reputation for micromanaging local partners, especially in locations that are less familiar to grantmaking staff based in wealthy coastal enclaves. They do this with rigid grant restrictions, exhausting proposal and reporting requirements, and slow grant cycles. The Trust for Civic Life has taken a different approach, exemplifying the trust-based grantmaking ethos that many funders espouse but fail to practice. It has also moved nimbly to

get resources out to the field. As a result, the Trust has earned growing goodwill and influence among its grantees.

So far, so good. But now the hard work starts. The Trust needs to answer a key question: How is all the activity it supports adding up to strengthen democracy? In developing its answer, the temptation will be to focus on scale and quantity – communities served, participants engaged, attitudinal measures improved. Instead, the Trust should prioritize scope and quality – the extent to which the civic infrastructure it has invested in can be used, repurposed, and sustained over time.

There is a model for creating enduring civic infrastructure. In the early 1900s, Andrew Carnegie invested in public libraries so that community members could use them in myriad ways that they, not Carnegie, saw fit. This approach contrasts with today's outcome-focused strategic philanthropy. Yet Carnegie libraries pay dividends for democracy and civic life in the United States to this day. The Trust should invest in the same spirit, with a view to century-long returns.

Our Common Purpose anticipated that, after proof of concept funded by philanthropy, the federal government would come to support the Trust and help it get to scale. Given worsening fiscal conditions and partisan conflict in Washington, D.C., that is unlikely – but that may well be a blessing, insulating bottom-up civic renewal from top-down democratic dysfunction.

Still, the money will need to come from somewhere. One emerging direction is for the Trust to engage regional and place-based foundations as partners. These underappreciated civic institutions include, for example, foundations like the T.L.L. Temple Foundation in East Texas, or the Dogwood Health Trust in Western North Carolina. Such funders share the Trust's aim of fostering civic health in the communities they care about.

Partnering with regional funders will expand the philanthropic network the Trust has already developed with its national funders and community foundation grantees. A key long-term measure is whether this work becomes self-sustaining. This will require philanthropy that originates within those same places – not only from institutional funders and wealthy individuals but also everyday givers, giving circles, and members of civic groups.

The second recommendation under Strategy 4 has a more diffuse goal. Unlike the first, it is not about establishing one new entity but rather reorienting the funding patterns of many philanthropic actors, especially private foundations.

Here too there has been progress on the supply-side of philanthropy. Community foundations have stepped forward in an impressive way. In part, this reflects the Trust's support for over twenty community foundations as civic hubs. Moreover, in a promising new coalition, CFLeads, the Rhode Island Foundation, and the National Civic League are rallying community foundations to support civic health.⁶

Another important development has been an ideologically diverse set of funders pooling tens of millions of dollars for regranting via the New Pluralists funding collaborative. Their approach focuses on “connecting, aligning, and accelerating the work of leaders and organizations who care about improving trust, cooperation, and belonging in communities across the country.”⁷ As with the funders of the Trust for Civic Life, the New Pluralists avoid the polarized and politicized funding patterns that have become so prevalent elsewhere.

On the demand side, entrepreneurial nonprofits have emerged and secured ample funding. Many seek to replenish, expand, and support the ranks of civic leaders in communities across the country. Others are advancing democracy reforms or protecting democratic institutions and values at the state and national levels. The American Academy maintains a list of “Champions”: dozens of organizations working along these lines and in support of the *Our Common Purpose* report and its strategic recommendations.⁸

The 2020 report suggests that more funding is needed for democracy and civic life relative to other areas of philanthropic giving. That may be true, but there has been a surge of support over the past decade, and not just via the initiatives outlined above. Estimates vary but prodemocratic philanthropic funding has increased from roughly \$1 billion–\$2 billion to \$3 billion–\$4 billion annually.⁹

The constraint may thus not be primarily in the amount of funding but in how it is deployed. What is needed is funding that flows differently to support the work of the civic one million. As I noted in my 2020 review – a point that alas still holds today:

Philanthropic foundations can and should step up to underwrite their leadership. The report does not touch on this, but doing so would entail a substantial shift in how foundations make grants in this area. Instead of smaller, highly-specified, short-term project grants furthering their own strategies, funders need to provide larger, unrestricted, multi-year grants that keep civic leaders and their organizations in the driver’s seat.¹⁰

Another area of opportunity is providing more support for leaders and organizations playing critical field catalyst roles. As the Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit consultancy, has observed, these emerging actors are an

often unseen – at least by funders – yet highly effective type of intermediary or collaborative. . . . Each works to mobilize and galvanize myriad actors across a social-change movement, or field, to achieve a shared goal for equitable systems change. Many of society’s major social-change successes have benefited from their critical work, and aspirations for population-level change will remain elusive until we unlock significant capital to support them.¹¹

One further change is needed. The *Our Common Purpose* report suggested traditional philanthropic foundations needed to step up. It now seems more likely that

the greater need is for more democratic and place-based sources of philanthropy to come to the fore. As I have noted elsewhere, “These alternative forms of philanthropy have the added benefit of helping their small ‘d’ democratic donors connect the dots between their goals and interests and those of the broader community of which they are part.”¹²

Looking back across the initial ripple effects of *Our Common Purpose*’s strategy to dramatically expand civic bridging capacity, we can see several shifts in priorities underway: from national conflict to local legitimacy, from electoral mobilization to civic formation, from ideological purity to pragmatic pluralism, from financial dependence to institutional autonomy, and from mission-driven moralism to the “self-interest, well understood” of American society, to use Tocqueville’s term.

If these shifts continue, they would amount to a recovery of “the art of association.” Americans may yet regain this essential civic capacity – and, in doing so, renew the democratic life that depends on it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>.
- ² Daniel Stid, “A Playbook for Regaining Our Common Purpose,” *The Art of Association*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.amacad.org/news/regaining-our-common-purpose>.
- ³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 3.
- ⁴ Charlie Brown and Christina Jodice, “Trust for Civic Life: America’s Civic Future Starts in Local Communities,” *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 111–121, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/trust-civic-life-americas-civic-future-starts-local-communities>; American

- Academy of Arts and Sciences, “The Trust for Civic Life,” <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/initiative/trust-civic-life> (accessed July 8, 2026); and Trust for Civic Life, *2025 Annual Report: Investing in America’s Civic Hubs* (Trust for Civic Life, 2026), <https://trustforciviclife.org/annual-reports>.
- ⁵ Daniel Stid, *Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization, and the Need for Responsible Pluralism* (SNF Agora Institute, 2024), <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Taking-Democracy-for-Granted.pdf>.
- ⁶ Matt Leighninger, *Community Foundations for Civic Health: Learning & Action in 2025 and Directions for 2026* (CFLeads, Rhode Island Foundation, and National Civic League, 2026), <https://cfleads.org/resource/community-foundations-for-civic-health-learning-action-in-2025-and-directions-for-2026>.
- ⁷ New Pluralists, “Vision and Strategy,” <https://newpluralists.org/vision> (accessed July 6, 2026).
- ⁸ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “Champions,” <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/champions> (accessed July 8, 2026).
- ⁹ Robert Griffin, Charlie Lobeck, Mariana Botero, et al., *Field in Focus: The State of Pro-Democracy Institutional Philanthropy* (Democracy Fund, 2023), <https://democracyfund.org/idea/field-in-focus-the-state-of-pro-democracy-institutional-philanthropy>.
- ¹⁰ Stid, “A Playbook for Regaining Our Common Purpose.”
- ¹¹ Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, Kevin Crouch, and Cora Daniels, “Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders,” The Bridgespan Group, March 21, 2023, <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/field-catalyst-lessons-for-systems-change-leaders>.
- ¹² Daniel Stid, “Top Down Democratic Decline vs. Bottom Up Civic Renewal: Eight Working Hypotheses,” *The Art of Association*, January 13, 2025, <https://artofassociation.substack.com/p/top-down-democratic-decline-vs-bottom>. See the sixth working hypothesis: “More democratic and place-based forms of philanthropy are better positioned to support civic renewal than national mega-funders.”