



# Philanthropy for a Multiracial Democracy

How Investing in Pluralism Can Open  
the Aperture for Democracy Funders

By Farai Chideya, Lyell Sakaue, and Liz Jain

American democracy has always been an ambitious and complicated experiment. The cohort of citizens granted the right to vote and allowed to reliably exercise that right has expanded over time through constitutional amendments and legislation. Much of that has happened in a single lifetime, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the US Supreme Court removal in 1972 of English literacy tests imposed on Native American voters,<sup>1</sup> and decisions on access to bilingual voting ballots, which continue to be debated.<sup>2</sup> Expanding the franchise was never just a change in American politics—it was an upgrade. But every single expansion required hard-won fights as well as continued vigilance. In short, at any moment in time, there are questions about who can access the full rights of American citizenship, as well as who is willing to advocate for the greater good.

While questions about what philanthropy can do to strengthen democracy in the United States may be particularly salient in the wake of a contentious US election season, these issues predate this moment and would have been pressing regardless of the outcome in November 2024. Still, The Bridgespan Group is increasingly hearing from donors wrestling with the questions: What kind of contributions matter? Where to go from here? We have spent months—before and after the election—talking to donors, field leaders, and advisors; reading what others have written; and reflecting on our own work to try to provide insight into those questions.

Many others have written about the challenges we face—pointing out problems with the ways our media, education, economic, electoral, lobbying, judicial, and philanthropic funding systems work.<sup>3</sup> In this article, we focus on some of the things that are working and what donors can learn from them.

So how do we build a democracy that works for all of us? There may not be a simple formula that can guarantee the path to a truly multiracial, pluralistic democracy—one where people of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, and religions are respected and empowered in the civic space. (See “What Do We Mean by a Multiracial, Pluralistic Democracy?” on the next page.) However, it is not only possible to build such a democracy that works for everyone—there are bright spots where it is already happening. In fact, many people who now experience the greatest threat are also proactively leading the charge, benefiting the broader society by offering a vision of what democracy can look like. Much of that work takes place outside of the structures of elections and focuses on how communities can be heard and included. And there’s a lot more that can be done today. We share examples that bolster our optimism, with an eye toward donors who want to embrace the audacious opportunity that comes from deploying resources toward the work of perfecting this union.

## What Do We Mean by a Multiracial, Pluralistic Democracy?

A pluralist democracy is one where people of all demographics—across race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, to name just a few examples—can exercise their political power and play an active role in governing the nation. A pluralist democracy also allows for multiple points of view both between and within communities. Effectively representing the interests of any specific identity group requires a pluralist approach. Not only are coalitions of people of color navigating varying interests across identities, but within any given racial or ethnic group there can be competing interests along generational lines, genders, sexual identities, classes, geographical regions, immigration stories, religions, and other characteristics.

We highlight multiracial because debates about which racial groups have the right to vote, to representation, and to a voice in decision making have continued from the drafting of the US Constitution—with Article 1 granting suffrage exclusively to white, landowning men—to the present day.

A multiracial, pluralistic democracy is one that is intentionally inclusive and recognizes that charting a shared path forward requires understanding how we got to where we are today, including deliberate efforts to exclude entire groups of people from equal participation in the franchise and governance.

In essence, such a democracy is an antithesis to authoritarianism (where power is concentrated with little to no checks or room for dissent) and illiberalism (where there are still elections and nominal trappings of democracy but a repudiation of human rights, individual freedoms, and the rule of law). While many in the democracy space importantly define their work in opposition to these oppressive systems, a multiracial, pluralistic democracy is what can be built as an alternative.

Sources: “[About](#),” New Pluralists, accessed January 18, 2025; Daniel Stid, [Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization and the Need for Responsible Pluralism](#), SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, July 2024; “[Becoming America](#),” Pop Culture Collaborative, accessed January 18, 2025; Scot Nakagawa, “[Primer on Authoritarianism: Types, Expressions, and Relationships](#),” The Anti-Authoritarian Playbook, January 5, 2025; Marlene Laruelle, “[Introduction: Illiberalism Studies as a Field](#),” *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

## Key Lessons for Democracy Donors

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Over the past decade, democracy funding has grown significantly.<sup>4</sup> The [Democracy Fund](#) estimates that institutional philanthropy—not including the grantmaking of individual donors—currently invests an average of \$2.7 billion to \$3.4 billion a year to support democracy, up as much as 61 percent in four years.<sup>5</sup> And such funding is dwarfed by election giving—political donors contributed unprecedented sums of money in the 2024 election cycle.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, this leads to a funding environment where elections sit at the center of how democracy is defined. “Democracy funders often focus on resourcing field partners to drive civic engagement around elections or policy campaigns, and the disconnect between this approach and the totality of what is needed to achieve a deep and resilient democracy in the US is becoming more pronounced,” says Bridgit Antoinette Evans, CEO of [Pop Culture Collaborative](#), a pooled fund that supports efforts to transform the American narrative landscape to ensure a just and pluralist future. “The assignment has changed—democracy funding also needs to focus on where we have the power to instill pluralist norms, behaviors, and identities that can stand the winds of time when individual leaders fail us.”

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EVANS, CEO, POP CULTURE  
COLLABORATIVE



While philanthropy’s role in building a stronger democracy is complex, there is no avoiding the reality that outside funding is involved in our current system—and funders should be aware of the potential impacts. In fact, significant philanthropic funding drives work that is effectively weakening our democracy by limiting who has access to the full rights of citizenship. From 2015 to 2021, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy estimates that “regressive” public policy organizations—defined as those focused on rolling back individual rights—spent on average over \$1 billion per year. Their fundraising and spending increased by more than 50 percent, and their assets and regrants doubled during that time.<sup>7</sup> Its research also found that philanthropy has effectively nurtured these efforts that undermine a more democratic and just society by embracing the best-in-class giving practices of providing mostly multiyear, unrestricted funding and general operating support over a sustained amount of time, even decades.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to note that the desire for a democracy that works for everyone is not a partisan pursuit. In fact, not getting trapped by a party or partisan framing allows multiracial, pluralist efforts to thrive. We talked to many donors who come to this work with a deep commitment to values. Take philanthropist [Michael Stubbs](#), who says his childhood affected his desired outcomes for his giving. He was born into a white political family in Bermuda, his father a surgeon and member of parliament. He also was born into

generational wealth yet acknowledges how Bermuda’s history of slavery contributed to that wealth as well as shaped the demographics and culture of the island. “I have been blessed to live in a majority Black environment where Black people were the heads of businesses, achieving excellency in all of the professions, in government, in leadership, in all things,” he says. “To come from that environment to America, with its stark lack of racial equity, is alarming.”

To Stubbs, the term multiracial, pluralistic democracy is a bit fussy when it comes to his and his husband’s democracy giving. “We just don’t call it that. We just say: we love and trust Black people; we love and trust brown people. That’s at the very heart of our ethos.” They came to this ethos after years of political giving, as Stubbs got tired of “feeling like we were throwing darts at a dartboard.”

Stubbs is not alone. Increasingly, donors and their advisors are seeing the importance of investing in a broader set of democracy work, but many are looking for the path forward that fits this moment.

**Overall, from our discussions, we found three big lessons for donors:**



**Go long:** Building a multiracial, pluralistic democracy is the work of decades if not generations. The challenges are deep, and organizations doing this work need funder partners who can think long-term and remain committed, even if the work is not completed in a single election cycle.



**Go local:** Leaders are increasingly seeing the importance of building democracy from the community level up, fostering trust in systems and collaboration among different groups around shared interests.



**Don’t go it alone:** Collaborate with the leaders on the front lines and fellow donors. There are existing networks and collaboratives looking for support and offering opportunities to learn and coinvest.<sup>9</sup>

While these lessons were consistent, there are wide-ranging options for what funders can invest in to strengthen democracy. Although some of the examples we discuss still focus on free, fair, and representative elections, this is far from the only place funders can invest to support a multiracial, pluralistic democracy. If anything, we heard that the field of democracy funding has been too siloed, missing opportunities to strengthen broader civil society and shift narratives about our collective identity that undergird the health of our elections and institutions.

Thankfully, there is a home for donors regardless of the levers they would like to focus on. Next, we share just a few options.

# Philanthropy can pursue a range of strategies to ensure a thriving multiracial, pluralistic democracy

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">Note: All five elements are interconnected.</p>	<p><b>Fair, free, and representative elections</b></p>	<p><b>Secure election integrity</b></p> <p>Fortify election administration for fairness and accountability</p> <p>Advocate for policy changes to ensure fair campaigns</p> <p>Leverage litigation to protect against immediate threats</p>	<p><b>Empower voters</b></p> <p>Improve voter registration processes</p> <p>Ensure all voters can access a trusted voting method and increase turnout</p> <p>Expand the franchise by working against voter suppression and supporting the restoration of rights</p>	<p><b>Expand representation</b></p> <p>Support outreach for the Census and invest in equitable redistricting</p> <p>Cultivate a leadership pipeline of diverse elected officials</p> <p>Obtain representation for places currently unrepresented</p>	<p><b>Reform elections</b></p> <p>Advocate for alternative electoral systems to improve fairness</p> <p>Redesign the election process to enable equitable outcomes</p>
	<p><b>Effective and accountable government institutions and leadership</b></p>	<p><b>Strengthen government impact</b></p> <p>Eliminate policies and precedents that harm marginalized communities</p> <p>Improve standards and outcomes</p> <p>Ensure execution of policies is fair and effective</p>	<p><b>Modernize government</b></p> <p>Invest in sophisticated civic technology and analytical capabilities</p> <p>Invest in able, diverse career staff</p> <p>Streamline internal processes</p>	<p><b>Secure accountable leadership</b></p> <p>Limit influence of money in politics</p> <p>Strengthen ethics laws for career employees and elected officials</p> <p>Invest in judicial independence</p>	<p><b>Reform government</b></p> <p>Reform existing structures in service of equity and effectiveness</p> <p>Advocate for structural changes to remake modern government for all</p>
	<p><b>Empowered citizens*</b></p>	<p><b>Protect civil rights</b></p> <p>Enshrine equal rights under the law</p> <p>Leverage litigation to protect rights under threat</p>	<p><b>Strengthen an engaged electorate</b></p> <p>Invest in high-quality civics education</p> <p>Encourage a culture of volunteerism</p> <p>Drive toward a vibrant public square</p>	<p><b>Build community power</b></p> <p>Support community organizing and power building</p> <p>Invest in movement infrastructure</p> <p>Support efforts to increase community participation in the policy making and implementation processes</p>	
	<p><b>Responsible and trusted media and information</b></p>	<p><b>Limit misinformation</b></p> <p>Invest in organizations fighting misinformation or hate speech</p> <p>Advocate for new policies to govern social media and technology companies</p>	<p><b>Strengthen responsible media and information exchange</b></p> <p>Support a pipeline of diverse and skilled journalists</p> <p>Strengthen media integrity, editorial independence, and nonpartisanship</p> <p>Support and scale trusted, nonpartisan media outlets</p>		
	<p><b>Strong social ties and a collective narrative</b></p>	<p><b>Strengthen social ties</b></p> <p>Support efforts to limit extreme partisanship and political polarization</p> <p>Invest in efforts to eliminate authoritarian ideology and violent extremism</p>	<p><b>Build a collective narrative</b></p> <p>Invest in narrative change for a collective vision of equity, inclusion, and justice</p> <p>Build collective faith in democracy and a shared belief in the role of government</p>		

\*The recommendations in this section do not take into consideration immigration status.

# A Vision of an Effective Multiracial, Pluralistic Democracy from Leaders Already Building It

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Building a multiracial, pluralistic democracy in the United States involves creating something that has never fully existed before. The enterprise requires imagination—but at the same time, the future is now. Here are four different ways that it is already happening on the ground.

## Finding common cause around issues

Some of the democracy work having the most impact does not have to do with voting. Instead, sometimes it centers around how people connect personally and intellectually and how those connections relate to larger issues. One example of such work is [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#) (SURJ), which describes itself as “a home for white people working for justice.” The national organization has 200 chapters working to mobilize white people in every state to find common cause with Black people and people of color. For example, SURJ was able to build multiracial coalitions around housing concerns that successfully halted the momentum of white nationalist groups that were attempting to make inroads in various communities in rural Tennessee. By knocking on doors to talk to people about why they thought white nationalists were mobilizing in the area, organizers learned that there was a deep discontent with housing. “There were slumlords hurting the quality of life, and the far-right organizers were using discontent to seek followers,” says Kelly Sue Waller, SURJ’s Tennessee-based Southern Crossroads director. By focusing on the common issue of housing, SURJ was able to form statewide coalitions joining rural white renters with Black-led activist groups in Memphis. This is the kind of coalition building often missed when elections are the only focus.

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ERIN HEANEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SURJ



“I think if we want to get out of the kind of boom-and-bust cycle that is around just elections, we’re going to have to create political homes for people that are the places where people make meaning, and have community, and find belonging over a much longer period of time. We’ve got to expand the amount of infrastructure we’ve got to be able to engage people in the practice of democracy,” says Erin Heaney, executive director of SURJ. She continues: “SURJ is doing this in a way that is race forward, that doesn’t actually just try to create a false sense of unity or a false sense of solidarity but is actually helping people make meaning in new ways.”

Similarly, [New Pluralists](#)—a coalition of funders, practitioners, storytellers, researchers, and innovators—is working to shift how people see themselves and others. It is attempting to do this by turning everyday places where people already gather—faith communities, civic associations, educational settings, and workplaces—into meaningful encounters across differences. In 2022, New Pluralists’ first major investment was more than \$10 million to support local leaders, networks, and community groups addressing divisive forces in their neighborhoods and communities, all part of a portfolio it calls Healing Starts Here.

The diversity of the portfolio is part of the point. For instance, the work of its grantee the ALL IN Initiative in Connecticut’s Naugatuck River Valley, one of the most conservative and impoverished areas of the blue state, includes hosting community dinners that have successfully attracted a diverse range of residents coming together around urgent issues of their community, including economic inequality, a childcare crisis, lack of affordable housing, shrinking job opportunities, and the racial disparities within all these issues. Other grantees include Reconstructing Reconstruction, an ambitious effort from New Orleans to bring together a “community of communities”—a coalition of 13 organizations—that will lead learning sessions to understand how Reconstruction Era policies continue to affect people today and how all of New Orleans can heal from those effects.<sup>10</sup> The host organization, the Plessy & Ferguson Initiative, was founded by the descendants of the opponents in the historic case that established the separate-but-equal doctrine.

## Expanding the idea of who an American is, what they look like, and why they belong

Shaping the narrative is a powerful lever to strengthening democracy. “Each of us moves through our lives immersed in what we call a ‘narrative ocean.’ Instead of water all around us, we are swimming in ideas, narratives, norms, and behaviors that shape how we think about ourselves and the world, and how we relate and act inside that world,” says Evans of Pop Culture Collaborative. “In the best of circumstances, that narrative ocean is helping us to be more powerful, connected, just, and joyful.”

Pop Culture Collaborative is a \$60 million pooled fund launched in 2017 that invests in efforts like TransLash Media, The Meteor, and IllumiNative, which are changing the American story to center people of color and LGBTQ+ communities. The collaborative also works to build connections with showrunners, producers, and others who can help creators in their cohort reach the widest and most high-impact audiences. The current cycle of Pop Culture Collaborative’s [Becoming America Fund](#), first launched in 2020, supports more than 45 artists, producers, cultural strategists, and thought leaders



Pop Culture Collaborative supports organizations like IllumiNative, a social justice nonprofit dedicated to elevating Native peoples’ voices. Here IllumiNative holds its inaugural Indigenous House at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival. (Photo by Anna Webber/Getty Images for IllumiNative)



who will work within six themed cohorts, giving grantees opportunities to network within their cohort and coordinate their narrative work. “We are actively investing in the storytellers, narrative and cultural strategists, and movement leaders who are fostering pluralist identity and culture at the scale of millions of people,” says Evans. “But we’re still on a journey toward a time when philanthropy actually recognizes that investing in this work isn’t just important, it is urgent and necessary to the survival of democracy.” In part, this requires funders to define democracy more broadly than just who is voting and who is winning elections, but also who is able to have a voice in telling the story of America.

One of those storytellers is Imara Jones, CEO of [TransLash Media](#), which produces a variety of content, including a podcast bearing the organization’s name. Jones says the work she and her team engages in “expands the idea of who an American is, what they look like, and why they belong.” Another project by TransLash is a documentary that aired on PBS, [American Problems, Trans Solutions](#), which follows three Black trans social entrepreneurs. It was important to Jones to highlight people who were innovators, not victims. “Fundamentally, countries are ideas—a country is essentially a group of people that tell the same story about themselves,” says Jones. “In order for us to have the country that we want, we have to tell new stories.”

TransLash also digs deeply into the vilification and threats of violence (and actual violence) against the transgender community. One part of TransLash’s work is an audio documentary series called [The Anti-Trans Hate Machine](#). The most recent season, subtitled “A Plot Against Equality,” focuses on “the way that paramilitary groups are using anti-trans hate in order to both develop and solidify relationships with politicians,” says Jones. She explains: “Anti-trans ideology is essential to the recruitment and to the sense of identity for the Proud Boys—it’s essential to the group cohesion and activity of Patriot Front and Blood Tribe and some of these others. The project is an effort to show the way that democracy overall is being undermined through the attacks on the trans community.”

Similarly, the [22nd Century Initiative](#), commonly known as 22CI, believes that the “front lines of democracy are in every community.” 22CI is working to create an effective, multiracial, cross-class, and culturally diverse coalition against authoritarianism. 22CI makes the case that even when authoritarians may be gaining ground, what is rarely recognized is that those who believe in the democratic promise of the United States still make up the majority of people in the country, says Scot Nakagawa, director of 22CI. Narrative work is a big tool that 22CI uses to achieve alignment among the wide range of groups that share this belief. The organization brings together artists and strategists to develop frameworks and tools to create stories and narratives that make meaning for shared democratic futures. Nakagawa writes on how important it is for narrative

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TRANSLASH MEDIA



work to build a story that can resonate across ideological and partisan divides because authoritarianism harms everyone: “By stepping outside partisan frameworks, we can better challenge authoritarianism and pave the way for a democracy that reflects the diverse voices and aspirations of all people.”<sup>11</sup>

## Using elections to shift power and support pluralism

While a broader view of democracy is a necessary, elections will continue to be critical. The leaders we talked to who are focused on a multiracial, pluralistic democracy suggested different ways of framing and funding electoral work. Rather than trying to pick the few right races to support, donors can think of their investment in elections as a tool for building long-term power in a way that represents the range of voices in American society.

Sometimes the hard part of that work comes in defining the problem. Ashindi Maxton, a longtime philanthropic strategist who cofounded [Donors of Color Network](#), knows that well. Currently, she is the director of Mission Telecom Giving, the philanthropic wing of the nonprofit telecom company Mission Telecom, which invests its revenue in social change. She was also on the founding boards of Way to Win, Texas Organizing Project, and other movement organizations. Her specialty is reframing issues, as when she made the case to climate donors to invest more in communities of color, resulting in \$120 million annually to climate work with a racial justice lens.

Maxton shared how she helped reframe Women Donors Network approach to their work in a way that embraced pluralism. “If what you care about is electing more women, that is not a women’s problem but a democracy problem, because it is a democracy problem that women are elected at such low rates relative to their part of the population,” she says. “That kind of reframing then opens the door to more inclusive thinking because the same is true for other identities, including Black people, Native people, Arab Americans, poor people, etc.,” she explains. “It’s about everyone who’s underrepresented in political leadership. Now that you have a democracy framing, you can put a whole lot more people together in that frame. You can talk to people from a very different place, and there’s more power in it. We call this more inclusive frame ‘reflective democracy.’”

The [AAPI Civic Engagement Fund](#) combines deep inquiry into American demographics and cultural competency with more traditional electoral work. Since it was founded a decade ago, it has become a powerhouse in data-rich activations of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities to build power. It uses affiliated 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and political action committee (PAC) organizations to support its network. (See [“Embracing Multiple Giving Tools”](#) on page 12.) The goal of its more than \$36 million in grantmaking is to enable organizations to do year-round civic

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EUNSOOK LEE, EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR, AAPI CIVIC  
ENGAGEMENT FUND



engagement work as well as advocate for AAPIs during elections. “That’s what we think is one of the essential parts needed for the AAPI electorate, because they’re historically disenfranchised and thus underengaged,” says Executive Director EunSook Lee. In its 501(c)(4) work, it funds messaging campaigns in swing states, like Asian Americans Advancing Justice, which runs a multilingual voter helpline in languages including Korean, Cantonese, and Tagalog. With its resources, the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund also gets to support and amplify the work of other groups in the civic engagement space across an array of languages and cultures. For instance, one grantee, Nikkei Progressives, a Japanese American grassroots social justice organization, includes in its work the support of Black-led reparations movements. It also brings in artists as fellows to do narrative change work on solidarity and voting.

One reason the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund is so effective is that it identifies and funds efforts that focus on specific ethnic and religious groups that have a shared experience and runs a focused polling and research organization. That level of demographic tracking found that one-quarter of the AAPI community is South Asian and one-fifth is Muslim. Their research and polling give it the ability to get specific about who and how it funds. For example, it is funding work with the Burmese community in Iowa, and it has gathered data on Filipinos in Arizona and Indian Americans in Michigan. Lee hopes a lesson donors take away from the recent election is: “If you don’t know the community, you’re not going to have the right policy, you’re not going to have the right message, and you’re not going to reach them.”

[Higher Heights for America PAC](#) is the only PAC exclusively dedicated to electing more Black women at the federal and statewide levels, and as mayors in the 100 most populated US cities. The idea for Higher Heights was conceived after what CEO and President Glynda Carr describes as “two girlfriends venting over some coffee and tea around our concern about this democracy.” Carr and cofounder Kimberly Peeler-Allen both worked in politics,



Higher Heights for America PAC is dedicated to electing more Black women to government positions. The PAC was instrumental in the election of Angela Alsobrooks, seen here on the campaign trail in October 2024, to the US Senate. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

but they saw a need to find new ways to engage Black women in the work of getting other Black women elected. In the 2024 election cycle, for example, Higher Heights chartered a bus that went from Brooklyn to Washington, DC, making stops in several cities to do canvassing. Among the wins: the election of Maryland’s Angela Alsobrooks and Delaware Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester to the US Senate. They will become the first Black women to serve at the same time in the Senate. The fact that Kamala Harris did not win the presidency in 2024 has not slowed them. “I still believe that a reflective democracy is the best democracy. A reflective democracy, at its core, should build economically thriving, educated, healthy, and safe communities for all,” says Carr.

Black women have long made contributions in politics and civic life that have benefited all, with a catch. “Black women-led organizations are still not invested in at scale. We actually put more work into this democracy than we actually get back,” says Carr. The cyclical nature of political funding affects Higher Heights and many other Black civic participation organizations. Higher Heights works to strengthen its position by having a strong research component, particularly with a partnership with the Center for American Women and Politics. Still, Carr warns, “What you see in the post-2024 election cycle is Black women’s exhaustion about not receiving our return in our voting investment and in our energy into this democracy. Black women-led organizations can exhaust themselves with not enough resources to be able to over-deliver our electoral wins.”

### **Embracing Multiple Giving Tools**

Donors looking for the sweet spot where philanthropy meets policy and advocacy work may want to examine the ways different structures—501(c)(3)s, 501(c)(4)s, and 527s—can be used. The 501(c)(3)s are the most well-known type of nonprofit. They can do a limited amount of lobbying and cannot do any political campaigning. Contributions are tax-deductible to donors. The 501(c)(4)s can do lobbying and political advocacy that center on issues. The 527s include political parties and political action committees focused on getting candidates elected. Donations to 501(c)(4)s and 527s are not tax-deductible, but they can have significant impact and operate with fewer restrictions on the use of funds. Limited liability corporations, or LLCs, can also be used for advocacy work in certain circumstances.

See Debby Bielak et al., “[Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change](#),” The Bridgespan Group, April 2, 2024.

## Supporting leaders and communities to wield power once they have it

Most people are familiar with organizations working to help people gain power. But helping elected officials use their power is equally important. Pluralist governance is possible when a diverse cohort of leaders can be successful. Ludovic Blain, executive director of the [California Donor Table](#), a statewide pooled fund that invests in communities of color to achieve a democracy that works for all people, candidly warns that if we want a more diverse cohort of leaders to be successful, “you cannot be putting people of color, women of color in powerful positions and then leaving them without support to handle everything from the death threats to the budget threats to the insubordination that happens.” Immigrants and LGBTQ+ officeholders face headwinds as well, he adds. Blain’s point is that making the change in who holds power successful requires not just policy support but operational support and training too. “The [power-] wielding work is woefully underfunded,” says Blain, adding, “I’d say the biggest gap is that very few pro-democracy institutions or individuals have a power-wielding portfolio.”

Power wielding is an aspect of electoral work that focuses not on getting people into power but helping them effectively lead once they are elected. One of the groups doing that work is [Local Progress](#), a national network of local elected officials advancing racial and economic justice in local government. Executive Director Ivan Luevanos-Elms says, “Local governments are the laboratories of democracy.” Most local elected officials across the country work part-time in their roles and balance them with other responsibilities.

Local Progress, which has both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) affiliates, seeks to help these local officials who serve at the county level or below—including school board members, county commissioners, and local mayors—have the resources, assets, tools, and skills to become effective leaders. That includes training on how to navigate institutions that throughout history might not have been the most inclusive. As Luevanos-Elms explains: “[They’re] going into an institution that was built for white, landowning men. And [they] have a full-time job, a family, and all these things. And [they] are still expected to come in equipped to govern and to wield power.”

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IVAN LUEVANOS-ELMS,  
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LOCAL PROGRESS



Such work in fostering an effective diverse cohort of elected leaders also builds an appetite for a multiracial, pluralistic democracy. Luevanos-Elms, who immigrated to the United States when he was four years old, asks, “How can we demonstrate that a multiracial democracy is not a threat—it’s just a reality? How can we make sure we demonstrate that these policies are meant to pull everybody up?”

Sovereign Tribal nations can provide a proof point of inclusive pluralistic democracy in practice as there is tremendous diversity across Native nations that find common cause and are increasingly able to effectively wield power through greater access to self-governance. According to the Harvard Kennedy School [Project on Indigenous Governance and Development](#), Indigenous peoples are undergoing a renaissance powered by the nation building among the 574 American Indian nations of the United States and companion rights movements of Native peoples around the world. Harvard's Project research finds that when Native nations make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently outperform external decision makers on issues ranging from natural resource management, economic development, and health care. For instance, it has found that "income per person of the average Native citizen living on an American Indian reservation has grown by 63 percent [since 1990]. By comparison, the real income per person of the average American overall has risen by only 20 percent."<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, Tribal nations are increasingly revisiting and revising their constitutions, which often were originally developed by the US government. The goal of revisions is to create governmental structures more in line to Native people's cultural and political values, shared Megan Minoka Hill, senior director of Harvard's Project on Indigenous Government and Development. "There is a renaissance in Indian country around constitutional reform," says Hill. The new constitutions foster greater stability and accountability, increasing citizen support of government and providing a foundation for economic and political development.<sup>14</sup> As Hill fields more questions from the World Bank and other multilateral institutions around the world about these innovations, these developments prompt her question: "What can the world learn from Tribal nations who are redoing their constitutions to meet their needs as who they are in a contemporary way?"

In addition, Native-led organizations are actively trying to ensure the existence of a fair and representative US democracy. These organizations work to protect the voting rights of Native peoples and cultivate more Indigenous candidates as a way to address the lack of representation of Native Americans in US local, state, and federal governments. Recent research conducted by Third Plateau in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy stresses the importance of having Native-led organizations spearhead this work as they are more likely to be responsive to the needs of Indigenous peoples as opposed to Native-serving organizations doing civic engagement work, which are more likely to be operating under priorities that originate outside Native communities.<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, ongoing work in Georgia often revolves around how to wield power effectively to represent the interests of a multiracial citizenry. For Christine White, CEO of [Georgia Alliance](#), a multiracial, pluralistic democracy is "the idea that every vote and every voice is weighted equally regardless of status." To achieve that, the Georgia Alliance works with movement organizations that represent different communities and focus on different issue areas. They pull them into what they call alignment tables, so they can figure out where their interests overlap. As bills come through the state legislature, these groups connect through shared interests. "The voice of the people is best leveraged when it is a collective," says White. "We have leadership development for people to run for office, which is necessary, but I see it a little bit broader: How do we also build the pipeline of professionals who can do the movement work at scale and at the level of sophistication that this time requires?"

# Moving Forward Toward a More Equitable and Engaged Future

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Angela Glover Blackwell, founder in residence at [PolicyLink](#), has written that building a thriving multiracial democracy will be “the next great US innovation.”<sup>16</sup> It serves not only as a stark reminder that a democracy that works for everyone has not yet existed—but also provides the kind of audacious North Star that philanthropy is built for. Our hope is that these stories from the field offer a clearer understanding of the everyday work necessary to build such a democracy.

As donors who take on this challenge consider where to put their dollars, the key question to achieve multiracial pluralism might not be “How can we win this election?” or “How can we find ways to get along?” but rather “What is required to achieve an inclusive democracy for all?” While the country remains so divided, a critical part of democracy work is articulating a vision of democracy that we are inviting people into.

Although institutional philanthropy has a critical role to play in this work, individual donors are essential because of the freedom and nimbleness their giving can bring. There is no single way to give, but there are helpful guideposts. (See “We Invite You To,” to the right.)

A month before the 2024 election, the Democracy Fund, a nonpartisan giving vehicle of eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, launched its [Election Day to Every Day](#) campaign to encourage fellow donors to end the “boom-and-bust” cycle of election-year giving and instead give to prodemocracy efforts year-round. As the campaign points out, antidemocracy forces don’t defund their infrastructure after every election cycle, forcing groups to downsize and lose momentum. Therefore, those working toward a more perfect union shouldn’t either. Democracy Fund President Joe Goldman describes the stakes of this work: “We are in an existential fight with those who oppose our vision of a more inclusive multiracial democracy. And if we lose too many battles in that fight, it will create a level of damage and harm that could take a generation or more to recover from.”

Admittedly, those stakes might sound great, daunting even. But the opportunity and potential gains of helping to build a democracy that works for all of us—the next great US innovation—are so much greater.

## We Invite You To



**Go long:** Building a multiracial, pluralistic democracy is the work of decades if not generations. The challenges are deep, and organizations engaged in this work need funder partners who think long-term and remain committed, even if the work is not completed in a single election cycle.



**Go local:** Leaders are increasingly seeing the importance of building democracy from the community level up, fostering trust in systems and collaboration among different groups around shared interests.



**Don’t go it alone:** Collaborate with the leaders on the front lines and fellow donors. There are existing networks and collaboratives looking for support and offering opportunities to learn and coinvest.

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