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Democracy and Philanthropy: Challenges, Opportunities, and a Rationale for Community Foundations as Conveners

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Challenges in Democracy

- Trust in government and other institutions
- Disconnected and Disengaged
- Need for Civically Healthy Communities

Trust in Government and Other Institutions

- Trust in government is low
 - This alone may not be troubling, but low trust and even distrust appears more pervasive and generalized (e.g. distrust for a government that does not yet exist)
- Generally, citizens respond more favorably today to “small,” “local,” and “grassroots” rather than “big” (as in “big government” and “big business”)

Disconnected and Disengaged

- Our Government *versus* The Government
- Low levels of civic participation
 - Florida: Ranked around 44th on an index of civic involvement in 2009; Millennials are found to be engaging less than the national average
 - California: 8.3% of citizens report that they work with their neighbors to improve community (national average: 8.8%)
- When “we” (i.e. government) ask citizens to be engaged, we typically ask that they volunteer or act as consumers, but not to be active participants in governance authority

Need for Civically Healthy Communities

“One government failure and apathetic citizen at a time, civic illiteracy is eroding the Golden State.” —

San Diego Union Tribune, January 28, 2011

A ***civically healthy community*** is one in which participatory processes are inclusive and diverse and in which participants have the skills, tools, and confidence to contribute meaningfully to the social, economic, and intellectual strengthening of communities.

Why Is Democracy Important? For Whom?

- Substantive *versus* Procedural Democracy



Procedural Democracy

- Facilitates social capital, trust, consensus, and procedural justice
- All participants are perceived by all other participants as credible and legitimate actors.
- ***Achieve political equality in which all peoples have the opportunity to contribute to decisions about the common good in an equally legitimate way.***

Substantive Democracy

- ***Meets the needs of individuals and communities equitably*** so that more people, representative of our diversity, can be included in our democratic processes (procedural democracy).



Substantive Democracy (2)

- Extreme social and economic inequalities can lead to democratic instability, enabling tyrannical or oligarchic governance forms to take hold—wisdom dating back to Aristotle.
- *Why is this a problem?* Harmful to classical liberal ideals and communitarian ideals.

What is Our Challenge?

- ***How can we as a society through our people, organizations, and institutions promote both procedural democracy and substantive democracy, and individualism and community?***
 - How can we be both sensitive to the need for individual freedom and the need to respect all others as individuals?
 - How can we resolve the tension explored so vividly in the movie and musical, *Billy Elliot*, between individuality and solidarity?

Possible Solutions

- **Government:** Lack of trust presents challenges
- **Faith Organizations:** Excellent training ground for citizenship behavior but potentially “denominationally divided”
- **Universities:** Strong neutral party, can excel in research and convening, but potentially restricted by institutional demands and funding constraints
- **Media:** Clear access point for citizens to acquire information, but not always trusted and different outlets tend to attract audiences with particular biases

Possible Solutions (2)

- **Voluntary Associations:** Internally energized and driven but may lack organizational skill to mobilize on behalf of or through whole communities, and can have good or not so good intentions
- **Giving Circles:** Range from informal to highly structured, they have the potential to marshal resources and to invest strategically, but they may lack expertise and may themselves not be inclusive and diverse
- **Community Foundations:** Independent nonprofit bodies that have the potential to strategically invest and cultivate donors based on informed need, but they may not include diverse populations in investment decisions as a standard practice

Solution: *A Facilitated Partnership*

- Who is the best convener?
 - Community Foundations are not saddled with the baggage of distrust inherent in many governmental authorities, while at the same time they are strategically positioned to facilitate a coordination across resource pools. They are generally recognized as honest brokers, fulfilling the wishes of donors. They are structured and provide legitimacy to volunteers and donors while remaining fully embedded in communities.
 - They can benefit through more exposure, particularly within populations that can benefit from donor-based services.
 - Convening includes deliberation and research involvement across business, philanthropy, academia, faith organizations, nonprofit organizations, voluntary associations, government, and the media.
 - Through facilitated partnership, community challenges can be addressed that promote both *procedural* and *substantive democratic concerns*.

Combating Anti-Democratic Potential of Philanthropy

- By focusing on both procedural and substantive democracy, and by acting as a convener with these objectives, community foundations can mitigate against potential anti-democratic outputs:
 - Small amounts of aid can hide larger inequalities and perpetuate class division through placation
 - Resources cannot be evenly distributed
 - Short-term rather than sustainable focus
 - Provoke “us” *versus* “them” between donor elite and fund beneficiaries

Changing Times Require Innovative Partnerships

“In short, government in the 21st Century is not here to tell us what to do, but rather to serve as our partner to help achieve our common goals. The 21st Century public sector leader should act as a convener, catalyst and facilitator of structured discussions in order to solve public problems” — *Golden Governance: Building Effective Public Engagement in California*

This presentation is informed by numerous studies, including...

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