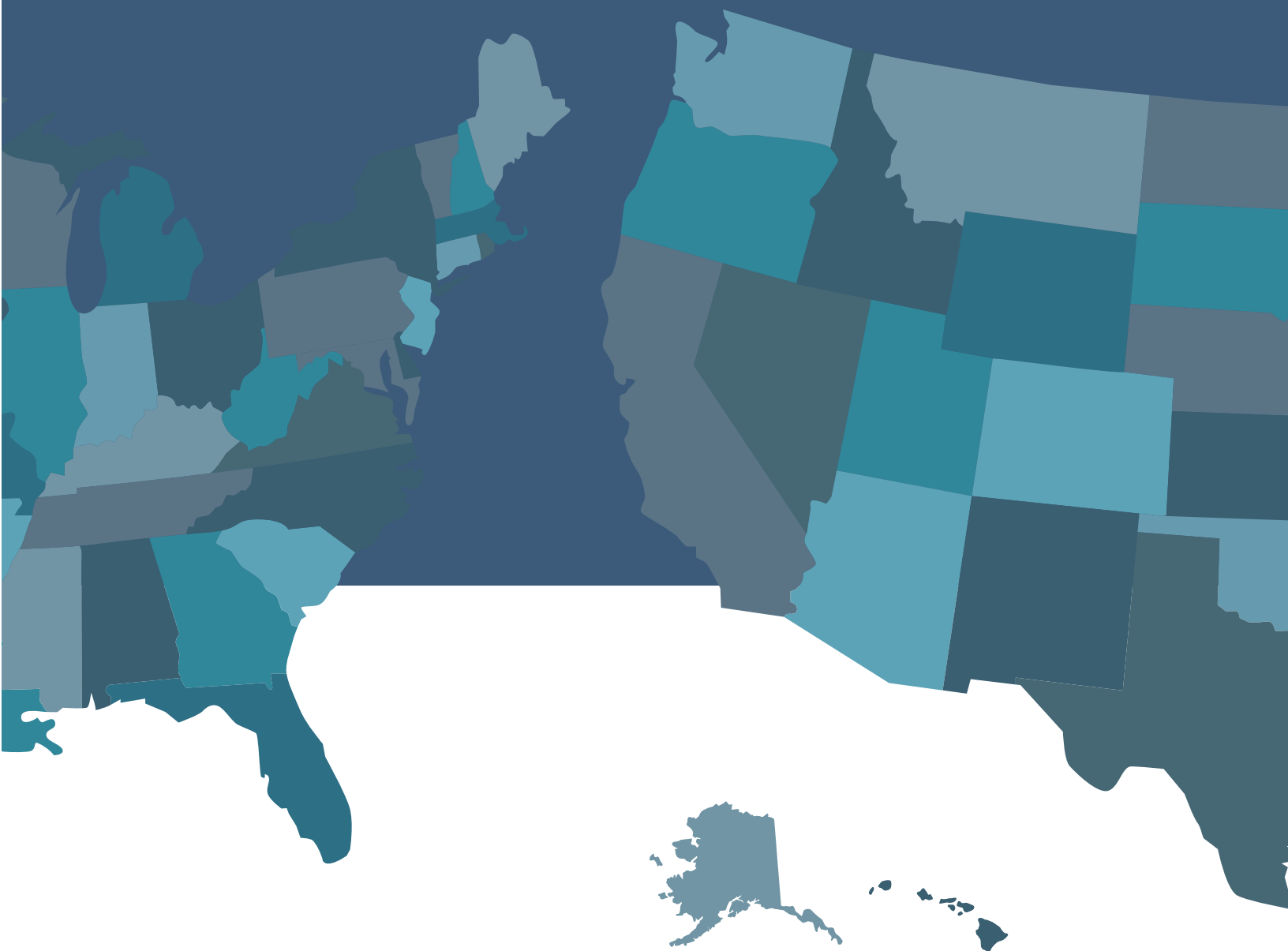# OUR DIVIDED NATION:

Is There a Role for Philanthropy
in Renewing Democracy?

ABOUT THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

The Kettering Foundation (KF) is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

ABOUT THE COUNCIL ON FOUNDATIONS

An active philanthropic network, the Council on Foundations (www.cof.org), founded in 1949, is a nonprofit leadership association of grantmaking foundations and corporations. It provides the opportunity, leadership, and tools needed by philanthropic organizations to expand, enhance, and sustain their ability to advance the common good. With members from all foundation types and sizes, the council empowers professionals in philanthropy to meet today's toughest challenges and advances a culture of charitable giving in the US and globally.

What shall we do about our democracy? It's the question of our time—in blogs and newspapers, on cable news, in coffee shops and bars. Political activists are concerned about political contributions, dark money, foreign influence, misleading media, and social media. Government watchers bemoan the seeming collapse of norms of civil society. Trust in the institutions that make up our communities has been shrinking for decades. Volunteerism numbers are on a downward trend, and fewer Americans are making charitable contributions.

It's clear that we are "in a moment." The moment may be crystallized in the mess at the federal level, but it is leading people to look much more broadly at how our communities function. More and more of us are seeking new ways to engage in community, to fix the election system, and to expand democracy. More and more of us are seeking new ways to feel ownership and belonging in civil society.

For those of us in the foundation world, we cannot ignore this moment. Our resources—which are dedicated in one form or another to strengthening our communities—can't stay on the sidelines.

We should all be thinking about how our work affects trust and engagement and strong civic practice. That doesn't mean we must turn our funding purely to lobbying for changes to the electoral college or for deliberative democracy work. It does suggest that we ignore these challenges to civil society at our country's long-term peril. Democracy, fundamentally, involves working with people from many walks of life, all toward the common good. For some of us, it means funding efforts to change laws; for others, it means supporting projects like *On the Table* or grantmaking practices that devolve decision-making powers to more people in the community. Recent laws in Illinois, Florida, and Massachusetts have recommitted those states to stronger civic education, and foundations are supporting other civic education efforts, too.

We're all in this together. And we all have a role to play. That includes philanthropy.

Stuart Comstock-Gay
President and CEO
Delaware Community Foundation

Americans' confidence in government has been declining steadily since the 1970s. But in recent years, public attitudes have shifted from healthy skepticism to crippling cynicism. People are frustrated by the ineffectiveness of Congress, harshly critical of elected officials, and deeply worried about the divisive tone of public discourse. Americans still support the core ideals of democracy, according to recent surveys, but they worry that the nation is no longer living up—or even aspiring—to them.

The challenges facing American democracy raise difficult questions for philanthropy. Many in the field are asking whether the foundation world has done everything it can to shore up democratic values and aspirations or whether it has been pursuing its own ideas of the public good and, as some critics maintain, turning a blind eye to the gathering storm. To what extent can philanthropy's efforts to strengthen communities and rebuild public trust be effective in the face of stiff headwinds? How can it be more responsive to the needs of a democratic society?

What role does the public play, if any, in defining the priorities of grantmaking organizations? And what can we learn from successful community-building efforts going on in the field?

In late May 2018, the Council on Foundations and the Kettering Foundation convened a two-day symposium in Dayton, Ohio, to take up these questions. The symposium brought together a group of prominent foundation leaders working at the national, state, and community levels. While a lot of important work aimed at supporting democratic reform is going on in the philanthropic sector—improving voter information, rewriting campaign finance rules, bringing an end to partisan gerrymandering—the group took a broader view, exploring how philanthropy can narrow the gap between people and institutions, strengthen public engagement, build civic capacity, and generally bolster democratic norms and practices.

To what extent can philanthropy's efforts to strengthen communities and rebuild public trust be effective in the face of stiff headwinds? How can it be more responsive to the needs of a democratic society? What role does the public play, if any, in defining the priorities of grantmaking organizations? And what can we learn from successful community-building efforts going on in the field?

The exchange was focused on the problem of divisiveness and whether there is a role for philanthropy in addressing the deepening cleavages in American society. The question may seem rhetorical, but in her welcoming remarks, Vikki Spruill, then-president and CEO of the Council on Foundations, reminded the group that there is no real consensus in the field about the role of philanthropy in advancing

the public good. The foundation world has certainly played a vital part in American society over the last century, she said. It has tackled some of the nation's deepest and most intractable problems from poverty reduction and education reform to health-care access and breakthrough scientific research. But to the extent that philanthropy can be called a unified sector, it has often lacked "a shared vision of the common good," she said. All too often, it gets itself "caught up in knots" because there is no common understanding about the nature of the problems facing the country today, let alone the right approach to addressing them.

Kettering Foundation program officer Derek Barker kicked off the discussion by encouraging the group to reflect on what divisiveness means for philanthropy, to share examples of what's working and what isn't, and to identify some of the unresolved questions that the foundation world will need to address if it is serious about its civic mission. "The question is whether there is a role for philanthropy in renewing our democracy," Barker said. "We need to drill down and figure out what that role might be, identify what work is being done, and see what we can build on."

PHILANTHROPY IN AN ERA OF DIVISION AND DISTRUST

Pluralism has always been a hallmark of American society, but today there are growing concerns that our differences are tearing us apart. Many see the nation reverting to a kind of tribalism that not only threatens our social cohesion but also undermines key aspects of our democratic system. Recent surveys show that 7 in 10 Americans believe we have reached a dangerous new low point and are at least as divided as we were during the Vietnam War.

These divisions are not new, but they are being exacerbated in new ways. There are forces at work today that are inflaming tensions and breeding confusion and doubt. Powerful social media platforms and

cable news outlets seize on conflict and weaponize information for profit or political advantage. Other forces, less visible but perhaps more insidious, include a powerful lobbying industry in Washington, ideologically driven media companies, super PACs funded by "dark money," and even, it would seem, foreign governments bent on influencing the outcomes of American elections.

The Loss of Unifying Narratives

One of the effects of this new culture of division and doubt is that we are losing the common narratives about who we are as a people. We know what divides us, but we are no longer sure what binds us together. "The narrative that I grew up with about the promise of the American experiment is changing—but I'm not sure I know what it's changing into," said Sherry Magill, recently retired president of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. The traditional narratives of the US as a nation of immigrants, as an experiment in self-government, as a city upon a hill are giving way to something that has yet to be defined, she said. "When the narrative changes in a fundamental way, then fundamentally we are a different people."

> *"The narrative that I grew up with about the promise of the American experiment is changing—but I'm not sure I know what it's changing into."*
> *—Sherry Magill*

The group was reluctant to speak of divisiveness as a problem to be solved. It's better understood as a manifestation of persistent tensions that have become more pronounced and urgent in recent years, tensions that "tear at the fabric of the common good," in the words of Angela Graham, program director at the Fetzer Institute. Divisiveness is a complicating factor that makes it more difficult to

address our common problems. But it can also present opportunities for exploring the deeper issues facing many Americans today, such as long-term financial insecurity, anxiety over the pace of technological change, and the loss of a sense of control in looking toward the future. Divisiveness can be "a point of entry," Graham said, "for getting below the waterline of partisanship."

The Changing Dynamics of Public Conversations

Some participants observed that much of the talk about divisiveness is not about our differences at all but rather about the erosion of barriers that kept many Americans outside of mainstream public discourse in the past. "What is described as *division* or *divisiveness* is sometimes a reaction against people who have decided to wake up, step up, and be engaged," said Natalye Paquin, president and CEO of the Points of Light Foundation. "What some people call divisive," she said, "is actually galvanizing and can have the effect of making communities more cohesive."

What we are seeing today represents a major shift in the civic leadership of towns and cities across the country, according to Cheryl Hughes, senior director of civic engagement at The Chicago Community Trust. Many of those who formerly lacked a place at the table are now making their voices heard. This is changing the dynamic of public conversations in a profound way, she said. "The struggle through this shift is very intense and may seem divisive. But it's an opportunity to begin building mutual trust within our communities. This can be leveraged as a healing stage."

Anne Filipic, chief program officer at the Obama Foundation, added that the social fabric may appear to be fraying, but it was never whole.

"Ultimately we're trying to create a civil society of the future, not restore the social cloth we had in the past."

—Anne Filipic

"When we look around today, we see a society that doesn't enable all people to participate fully. Some of that is systematic inequity. That has meant that whole communities have not had a seat at the table." The civic fabric may be unraveling, she said, but "ultimately we're trying to create a civil society of the future, not restore the social cloth we had in the past."

The point elicited responses from several in the group who stressed that the prescription for what ails democracy today is not to be found in restoring something that has been lost. "The question of how you renew democracy is one that traps you in nostalgia," said Sam Gill, vice president of communities and impact at the Knight Foundation. "I think the question is, What does a successful democracy demand in a globalized era? In a digital era? That's a question we can try to answer."

Gill went on to distinguish between divisiveness—one side pitted against another—and the friction that naturally arises when one group says, "I'm no longer okay with the status quo." "There is a pretty good argument," he said, "that a lot of the divisiveness right now comes as a reaction to people saying, 'I'm tired of being left behind. I'm tired of being left out. I'm tired of the system.'"

Articulating a Collective Vision

Research shows that civic engagement and social activism are on the rise today, much of it fueled by anger and frustration with politics. There is no doubt that this has heightened tensions and exacerbated divisions, said Javier Soto, president and CEO of the Miami Foundation. "We've seen an upsurge in people's involvement. But they're involving themselves in very defined and rigid camps on one side or the other of this divide. The problem is, Who is building the bridge to create a collective vision?"

One of the challenges for philanthropy is how to be a steward of a collective vision at a time of disagreement and disunion. How do you serve the common good if there is no consensus about what constitutes the common good? What is the best way to restore a sense of shared purpose? "Should we be focused on divisiveness itself

and ways that we can manage or deal with that?" asked Pittsburgh Foundation president and CEO Maxwell King. "Or do we want to focus on the *sources* of that divisiveness? I don't have an answer, but that's what I think is on the table."

Another option, perhaps, is not to focus on divisiveness at all but to concentrate energy and resources on building robust communities. Several participants referred to Tufts scholar Peter Levine's research showing that healthy and cohesive communities share three characteristics: public deliberation, collaborative work, and strong civic networks. "As I'm thinking about program interventions, I'm not looking at how to reduce divisiveness head-on," said Anne Filipic. "I'm looking at how to support those characteristics of strong communities—discourse, collaborative work, and relationships. I believe that if we made progress on those issues, we would see a decrease in divisiveness."

CONFRONTING PROBLEMS FACED BY DEMOCRACY

Divisiveness represents just one of a constellation of challenges facing American democracy. Several participants cited recent literature pointing to an erosion of democratic norms and attitudes and a deepening crisis of confidence in government. Holly Kuzmich, executive director of the George W. Bush Institute, described a nationwide survey she and her colleagues conducted in collaboration with Freedom House and the Penn Biden Center. The study found that while there is broad public support for democracy, most Americans have serious misgivings about the state of our political system. "People fundamentally still believe in democracy and its origins and how we've set up our government," Kuzmich noted. "But they have heavy concerns that our laws and policies reflect powerful special interests rather than the will of the people."

"People fundamentally still believe in democracy and its origins and how we've set up our government. But they have heavy concerns that our laws and policies reflect powerful special interests rather than the will of the people."
—Holly Kuzmich

The finding is reflected in much of the research of the Kettering Foundation. According to David Mathews, president and CEO of the foundation, numerous studies have shown that beneath the widespread cynicism and mistrust of government lies a pervasive anger. Many Americans feel that they have been forced out of their rightful place in the national conversation by politicians, special interest groups, media outlets, and other institutions that claim to speak on their behalf but are actually in service to their own narrow interests. "In our research we have heard over and over again that people no longer feel they have control over their future," Mathews said. This feeling of powerlessness is at the heart of people's anger and frustration with government, but it also helps to explain the loss of confidence in public institutions.

Waning Confidence in Democratic Institutions

Legacy institutions like churches, newspapers, schools, and the police have always played an important role in American public life, serving as pillars of community and conferring a sense of connectedness and security. But many Americans—young people, in particular— fail to identify with these institutions, said Stuart Comstock-Gay, president and CEO of the Delaware Community Foundation. Worse, they feel that some institutions are partly to blame for the hardships

facing millennials today from soaring student debt and the shortage of affordable housing to a job market where even college graduates struggle to earn a decent wage.

Many millennials are opting out of public life, electing not to participate in a system they feel is unresponsive to their values and concerns. Some are choosing social media and online networking over traditional forms of community engagement. Others are shifting their allegiance to movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, preferring to make their voices heard through activism and protest instead. "There is confidence in movements," Angela Graham noted, "but not necessarily in institutions the way we have thought of them in the past."

The Breakdown of Constructive Dialogue

The crisis of confidence in institutions is just one of many factors that have weakened the American community. People are far less likely to know their neighbors than they were a generation ago. They are less likely to belong to neighborhood associations and community groups. They are less likely to come together to identify problems and discover common ground. And when they do come together, the conversations are often less constructive and more confrontational.

Several participants expressed concern about the culture of insult, accusation, and attack that has come to characterize American public life. According to Farhan Latif, president of the El–Hibri Foundation, "The violence, the fragmentation, and the depletion of the American dream are profoundly worrisome." Speaking from firsthand experience as an immigrant, he said that he had lived in more than a dozen different cities across the globe while he was growing up. "I picked America as the place I wanted to come and live. I wanted to join this great experiment and live in a society where things were working. To see this nation move in the direction of the places I escaped from is troubling and distressing."

The Impact of New Technologies

In his landmark 2000 study, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam cited many reasons for the decline of civic engagement in the US over the last half–century. But he singled out one in particular: the onslaught of television and other technologies that he said were "privatizing our leisure time" and "undermining our connections with one another and with our communities." This notion was a recurrent theme in the exchange—how digital technologies are introducing new opportunities but also disrupting the public square. They connect people across boundaries of space and time, offer them access to unprecedented amounts of information, and give rise to new forms of activism such as swarms and flash mobs. But they also spread misinformation, inflame tensions, and create filter bubbles and echo chambers that polarize rather than unify people.

> *"I picked America as the place I wanted to come and live. I wanted to join this great experiment and live in a society where things were working. To see this nation move in the direction of the places I escaped from is troubling and distressing."*
> —*Farhan Latif*

"There is a good argument to be made that the level and intensity of technological change represents a phase shift," said Chris Gates, senior policy advisor of the Global Social Enterprise Initiative. New technologies are transforming the structure of our political system from the community to the national level in ways that are barely recognized, let alone fully understood. Gates said that research he and his colleagues have done shows that many Americans feel powerless and overwhelmed in the face of these changes.

If philanthropy is concerned with advancing the common good, then it may need to spend less time evaluating the success or failure of its programs and more time answering to the public it aims to serve.
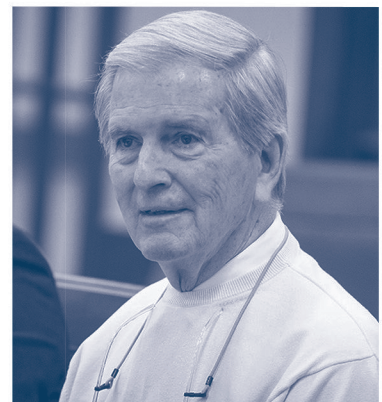
Deepening Income Inequality

Several participants spoke of widening disparities of income and wealth as perhaps the most pressing problem facing American democracy. It's now increasingly clear that decades of economic growth have not produced their promised benefits, at least not for the vast majority of Americans. "If you earn the median income in this country, the last 30 years have not been good to you," as Sam Gill pointed out. "They haven't killed you, but you're not better off than you were. So, I think people are rejecting the logic of a system that purports to offer you prosperity."

For philanthropic organizations committed to advancing the common good, growing inequality represents a wicked problem—one that doesn't lend itself to clear solutions. Some organizations are tackling the issue head-on. The Ford Foundation, the second-largest foundation in the US, is a case in point. In 2016, it boldly announced that it was refocusing 100 percent of its grantmaking on "inequality in all its forms."

But the wealth gap also raises difficult questions about the *raison d'être* of philanthropy. The goal of foundation work is often described as private wealth for public benefit. But who decides what constitutes "public benefit"—the public or the institution? Until philanthropy can find an answer to that question, the public will continue to question its credibility as an institution. It will be continue to be viewed as "a special interest group," in Sherry Magill's words, one more concerned with protecting its own privilege than in serving the public good.

PATHWAYS TO COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Democracy-building starts with the local community. There is no shortage of initiatives going on across the country aimed at nurturing vibrant and robust communities. Not all of them are place-based. "We tend to think in old-fashioned ways about the community as a

geographic thing," as Maxwell King noted. "That is very important. But the lived experience of people that we work with is that they are members of multiple communities. Some are geographic, some are professional, some are virtual, and some are communities of interest."

> *"We tend to think in old-fashioned ways about the community as a geographic thing. That is very important. But the lived experience of people that we work with is that they are members of multiple communities."*
>
> *—Maxwell King*

In looking at examples of what Derek Barker called "philanthropy's positive role," the group observed that successful community-building efforts share several common features. They focus on creating spaces for people to come together, on cultivating democratic skills and capacities, on developing civic leadership, and on supporting communities with ideas, access, networking, and other resources that go beyond financial support.

Creating Public Space

One of the most valuable grantmaking strategies for building robust communities is to create public space. While the term refers to venues for dialogue and collaborative activities, it also describes a metaphorical space—a context—in which people can interact across barriers of social difference and begin to discover common interests. One step in building community is to foster mutual understanding and trust, and that requires public space. "If you're going to bring small groups together in community–like settings," said Natalye Paquin, "there has to be some *there* there."

Angela Graham agreed, saying that communities don't often come together on their own. "What we really have to do," she said, "is create a safe space and a kind of permission so people feel they can go really deep and say, 'What do I care about?' That fosters a sense of agency."

"What we really have to do is create a safe space and a kind of permission so people feel they can go really deep and say, 'What do I care about?' That fosters a sense of agency."
—Angela Graham

Creating public space also requires establishing a context for meaningful dialogue. People need "mechanisms of engagement," as Sherry Magill observed. She described how a civic group in her city—the Jacksonville Community Council—served as a convener of conversations for several decades. The council's mission was "to bring folks together to identify a local issue, study it for a while, produce a report, and then create an implementation team run by volunteers to go to work." The council closed its doors last year, she said, leaving a "civic vacuum" in the city. "We have *space*, but we no longer have anybody responsible for just inviting folks to come together to chat."

Building Democratic Capacity

Much of the hard work of developing democratic skills and capacities must be done at the local level—by people within a community. But grantmakers and intermediary organizations often play a pivotal role in strengthening local capacity. They offer ideas and information, technical and administrative assistance, training and hands-on learning opportunities, networking and access, and even marketing and media relations know-how. They also create opportunities for learning together, which builds capacity over time.

"The number one reason why people volunteer is because they're asked. They come back when they know they've had an impact."
—Natalye Paquin

According to Natalye Paquin, the Points of Light Foundation has focused much of its energy on creating a culture of volunteerism as a way to develop local capacity. "The number one reason why people volunteer is because they're asked," she said. "They come back when they know they've had an impact. So what we're focusing on is building the capacity of nonprofits and organizations that are engaging human capital to actually move issues forward. We have to think about how we leverage, learn, and harness the energy that we're seeing in these swarms that come together and build networks that move issues forward."

Developing Civic Leadership

Another common denominator in successful community-building efforts is an emphasis on leadership development. This work can take different forms. For example, the Miami Foundation develops the leadership skills and management competencies of emerging leaders in greater Miami. "I've spent my career in service to our local community," said Javier Soto. "I think where we can move the needle the most is by identifying, training, and propelling young, emerging leaders." The goal of the Miami Fellows program, he said, is to train people to be not just effective but also ethical in their public service to the community.

"I've spent my career in service to our local community. I think where we can move the needle the most is by identifying, training, and propelling young, emerging leaders."
—Javier Soto

While traditional leadership programs are essential, Cheryl Hughes said that the Chicago Community Trust also sees a vital role for those who may not fit conventional definitions of leadership or who have been excluded from the tables of leadership. Through its widely–replicated program *On the Table*, for example, the trust stresses the importance of "rockets" in the community—people who may not be formally recognized as leaders but serve as agents of change in their neighborhoods and communities by bringing people together, sparking conversations, raising issues, and advancing local causes. Another trust initiative offers training to emerging leaders with disabilities, actively connecting them to opportunities for civic engagement and leadership. "As a community foundation," Hughes said, "the trust seeks to acknowledge and elevate all forms of leadership in the community."

Identifying Community Resources

Successful democracy–building efforts are those that build on assets and capacities that already exist within a community. They graft onto existing rootstock rather than plant new seeds. This means that grantmakers have to begin by listening to and learning from the community, understanding where its capacities lie, and identifying the resources it already has at its disposal rather than offering ready–made solutions.

Foundations are at their best, said Sherry Magill, "when they invest in what I call 'other people's ambitions' and 'other people's dreams,' not sit around and 'bake' what we think are the right solutions for them.

How you lead really matters. You have to show up and show up and show up. And you have to meet with everybody and do a lot of listening."

Anne Filipic underscored that grantmakers need to work *with* communities, not *on behalf* of them. "We need to support a model of civic leadership that encourages people to unlock the civic potential of their communities," she said. That means approaching community building with a collaborative mindset, "building deep relationships both between individuals and civic leaders and creating true discourse and discussion."

THE PITFALLS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

It's always risky to speak of philanthropy as a unified sector. There is no consensus about whether philanthropy even represents a sector in the first place, as several participants observed. "We're not monolithic, we're not all the same people, and we don't all think alike," said Sherry Magill. Even so, a number of common practices and methodologies in the grantmaking community often stand in the way of effective democracy building.

While many grantmakers stress the importance of "civic engagement," the phrase has come to mean so much in general that it often ceases to mean anything in particular. Worse, it sometimes encompasses practices that have a host of unintended consequences, such as discouraging community participation and deepening public mistrust of leaders and institutions. The group spoke at some length about the pitfalls of civic engagement and the problems associated with outdated models of public participation.

- *Prescribing solutions instead of building capacity.* There is still a widespread tendency in the foundation world to approach the challenges of democracy as if they were technical

problems that could be solved by science, expertise, and technological intervention. But too often, in an effort to develop solutions that can be taken to scale, grantmakers ignore people at the local level. "Philanthropy has to be careful not to be too overbearing and dictatorial," said Javier Soto. "Too often it enters into community the way government does, imposing a set of universal rules and guidelines that violate the community's own way of doing things." It also imposes unrealistic timelines that fail to account for the sometimes painstakingly slow process of building relationships and cultivating local capacity. Some of the best efforts are "longitudinal," said Angela Graham. "Everybody tends to default to this three- to five-year time horizon. But there are a lot of things that you're not going to even remotely move the needle on in five years."

- *Engaging without listening.* Some grantmakers that make the case for civic engagement do listen to the public but, as several participants noted, they are sometimes reluctant to learn from and act on what they hear. In some cases, engagement is viewed as peripheral to the real business of philanthropy. Cheryl Hughes noted that in many cases "civic engagement is not seen as an integral part of what foundations do. But in fact, civic engagement as a field is comprehensive and philanthropy itself represents an act of civic engagement." She acknowledged that engaging the public can be time-consuming and requires a high level of accountability. "If you invite folks into a community dialogue, you actually have to listen and provide feedback on what you heard," she said. "And if you promise to take a direct action, it is important to follow through."

- *Overemphasizing measurable outcomes.* It's one of the ironies of philanthropy that though it's accountable to nobody, at least in the traditional sense—it has no money to raise, no products to sell, no elections to win—it's

inordinately focused on metrics and accountability. "The professionalization of philanthropy involved adopting a lot of the systems and metrics of the business world," Maxwell King observed. But the work of building strong and healthy communities doesn't adhere to the logic of the marketplace. It emphasizes civic practices like bringing people together, building trust, and deliberating about shared concerns, and these activities are difficult if not impossible to measure with the accountability systems favored by many foundations. This means that the metrics work against the very thing the programs are designed to promote. They also fail to adequately distinguish between different kinds of impact, as Vikki Spruill pointed out. "Are we drivers of change? Or are we facilitators, or catalysts, of change? The answer, of course, is both. But the metrics evaluation model requires that you have to prove that you're actually accomplishing something." If philanthropy is concerned with advancing the common good, then it may need to spend less time evaluating the success or failure of its programs and more time answering to the public it aims to serve.

A CHALLENGE FOR PHILANTHROPY

One of the challenges facing philanthropy today is to figure out what kind of democracy it wants to support and how best to go about doing that. The group acknowledged that this will not be easy, given the current mood in the US. There is scarcely any real agreement in our national discourse about what democracy means, what it requires, and what it asks of citizens. "I think people used to understand what they meant when they spoke of American democracy," said Sherry Magill. "I'm not so sure anymore. I'm not sure we even know what we're talking about when we say 'democracy.'"

A first step, perhaps, is for philanthropy to come together around a common set of aspirations. "There is some value in agreeing on a

couple of set things that we want to have," said Alberto Ibargüen, president and CEO of the Knight Foundation. "I think it has to be general, it has to be unspecific so that we're able to bring in as many people under the tent as possible." The conversation has never been more important, he added. It may be time for philanthropy—like other vital American institutions—to reflect on its relationship to the public and how it can best serve the common good.

"There are interesting parallels between the conversations taking place in the foundation world and those occurring in other professions," David Mathews noted in a set of closing reflections. As the Kettering Foundation has learned from working with journalists, public administrators, college and university presidents, and other professionals, many well-intentioned efforts to build community and strengthen democratic values seem to be undercut by inadequate or outdated models of civic engagement.

"There is some value in agreeing on a couple of set things that we want to have. I think it has to be general, it has to be unspecific so that we're able to bring in as many people under the tent as possible."
—Alberto Ibargüen

But a number of professions, sensitive to the public's anger and loss of confidence, are experimenting with new ways of thinking about and relating to the public they serve. What is common to much of this work, Mathews said, is an effort to reexamine the traditional relationship between the institution and the public. "The question that seems to be agitating many in the foundation world today—the burr under the

saddle—is whether there is any relationship between philanthropy and the challenges facing democracy." It's a question without an easy answer, he acknowledged. But it's one worth wrestling with all the same "as it gets to the very meaning of philanthropy."

"We know that there is no simple solution to these challenges," Vikki Spruill acknowledged. "But the Council on Foundations remains committed to this conversation and to the important role that philanthropy might play in renewing our democracy." She added that the council has dedicated time at the 2019 "Leading Together" conference in Miami to raising these questions and carrying the conversation forward. Philanthropy has to put the mirror to itself and begin to articulate a shared vision of the common good, she said. "If not us, who?"

SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

Derek Barker
Program Officer
Kettering Foundation

Vanita Bhargava
Senior Advisor to the
    President and CEO
Council on Foundations

Stuart Comstock–Gay
President and CEO
Delaware Community
    Foundation

John Dedrick
Executive Vice President
    and COO
Kettering Foundation

Anne Filipic
Chief Program Officer
    Program Team
Obama Foundation

Chris Gates
Philanthropic and
    Nonproft Advisor

Sam Gill
Vice President, Communities
    and Impact
Senior Adviser to the President
John S. & James L.
    Knight Foundation

Melinda Gilmore
Director of Strategic Initiatives
Kettering Foundation

Angela Graham
Program Director
The Fetzer Institute

Cheryl Hughes
Senior Director of Civic
    Engagement, Communications
    and Civic Engagement
Chicago Community Trust

Alberto Ibargüen
President and CEO
John S. & James L.
    Knight Foundation

Maxwell King
President and CEO
The Pittsburgh Foundation

Holly Kuzmich
Executive Director
George W. Bush Institute
Senior Vice President
George W. Bush Presidential
    Center

Farhan Latif
President
El–Hibri Foundation