

Responsive Philanthropy

NCRP'S QUARTERLY JOURNAL

MAY 2018

IN THIS ISSUE

Funders can help secure the next generation of activists, voters and grassroots movement leaders

By AUSTIN BELALI

1

From whispers to roars:
The conversation movement

By MICHAEL PERRY AND KATHLEEN PERRY

3

Helping grantmakers navigate
civic engagement funding

6

Strength in numbers: Rethinking
the power of funder collaboration

By MELINDA FINE, STEVEN LAWRENCE
AND MOLLY SCHULTZ HAFID

10

A message from the President and CEO 2

Member Spotlight

15

Students and their supporters, like these demonstrators in Washington, D.C., were among the 1 million plus who attended a March for Our Lives rally across the country. Photo by Flickr.com/Phil Roeder, CC BY 2.0.



Funders can help secure the next generation of activists, voters and grassroots movement leaders

By Austin Belali

A grassroots movement of young people, led by students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, captured the nation's attention with gun control activism following the tragic shooting at the school. Their efforts culminated in a nationwide march to end gun violence that drew thousands of students calling for sensible gun laws.

In the days since the mobilizations began, youth and students are reportedly looking for opportunities to connect with nonpartisan youth-centered civic engagement strategies that bridge reforming our nation's gun laws after the tragedy in Stoneman Douglas High School to broader concerns about the health of U.S. democracy.

Their demonstrations, along with recent mobilizations, call for a concerted national-level effort around capacity-building for youth civic participation.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT OF TODAY

Youth have always been at the forefront of grassroots mobilizations for change from the fights against gender and ra-

cial discrimination to economic inclusion. But, in the past, older generations have been more likely to participate as voters and active voices in formal democratic processes.

There are hopeful signs that there is increasing interest among younger generations to access levels of governmental power. This is important because large-scale system changes in a democratic society happen nonviolently, primarily through active participation in formal democratic processes and institutions.

As foundation leaders and individual donors consider placing big bets on strategies that lead toward lasting systemic change, fostering a culture of formal democratic *(continued on page 13)*



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Funders can help secure the next generation of activists, voters and grassroots movement leaders

(continued from page 1)

participation among generation z and millennials will be critical to the success of those strategies. However, the question remains whether or not these efforts will reach young people hit hardest by poverty, racial discrimination and lack of opportunity.

A CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC AMONG THE COUNTRY'S YOUTH

Newer generations are now more racially diverse than any previous generation since the foundation of the republic. The much-discussed growth in the eligible "New American Majority" voting populations is largely driven by young people of color turning 18, especially among Latino, African-American and Native populations.

Few public schools or candidates running for office have established on-ramps for racially diverse and immigrant youth into avenues for formal democratic participation. The same is true for rural white communities in the midst of a seismic opioid addiction crisis and rapidly declining living standards.

Data and evidence indicate that civic participation between the ages of 16 and 24 is especially habit-forming. When young people vote and stand up as civic leaders consistently, they are likely to continue doing so throughout the course of their lifetime. According to a study in *The New York Times*, political events that happen at the age of 18 are three times as powerful as events at the age of 40, but many existing civic engagement efforts are potentially missing tens of millions of young adults coming of age in an era of rising regional and social inequality.¹

TIPS FOR TAPPING INTO THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Scale matters in youth-focused civic engagement and so does depth. There is a menu of successful youth-focused nonprofit organizations for donors to

choose from and support: some are local community-based organizations, others are national networks, but, due to a lack of investments, most have nowhere near the capacity or talent they need to engage millions of potential young civic leaders and voters through face-to-face conversations year-round.

The "browner," more rural or financially insecure the communities young people live in, the more difficult efforts are to successfully engage them. To be most effective, checks written for youth-focused civic engagement must take into account these three considerations:

1. Gauge whether or not funding approaches account for disadvantages according to race and identity, region and class.
2. Quantify the impact of their funding in ways that account for measured increases in traditional indicators of civic engagement such as voting rates or leaders trained.
3. Request demographic data about the youth populations reached and

make deliberate efforts to reach underserved and marginalized youth.

BEYOND THE CHECK: FUNDER ENGAGEMENT IN YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Carnegie Corporation of New York, Open Society Foundations, Wallace Global Fund and Rockefeller Brothers Fund have been major supporters of youth-focused civic engagement efforts across the country in the past. In more recent years, Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and others have joined the list of major foundations backing youth-focused civic engagement as a priority of their institutions. Individual donors such as Tom Steyer, Ian Simmons and Reid Hoffman have also entered the scene with major commitments to foster increased youth voting.

These efforts have been critical, and yet wider philanthropic engagement is necessary for the coming months and years ahead. There are three particular ways that funders can effectively boost youth engagement.

First, many civic engagement funders choose for various reasons to fund efforts that are issue agnostic and focused on voting as a moral imperative. On the other hand, progressive issue funders view civic engagement as a strategy to advance peoples' rights or protect the environment. The reality is that future partnerships between issue agnostic funders and progressive issue funders to build permanent civic engagement infrastructure will be critical.

Research clearly demonstrates that issue engagement is an important aspect of youth-focused civic engagement. Research also demonstrates that forming a social identity as a "voter" sustains participation over the long haul. Unfortunately, more right-leaning donors have aligned themselves against expanding the electorate and making it easier for people to vote.

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New and Renewing Members

Amy Mandel and Katrina Rodis Fund
Asian Pacific Community in Action
The California Wellness Foundation
Center for Effective Philanthropy
Center for Heirs' Property Preservation
Center for Medicare Advocacy
Deaconess Foundation
Define American
Dyson Foundation
Eugene & Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
Faith in Action
Faith in Florida
Family and Youth Counseling Agency
Ford Foundation
Georgia Appleseed
The Kresge Foundation
Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies
MEDA
Mizrahi Family Foundation
The Nellie Mae Education Foundation
New Orleans Workers' Center for
Racial Justice
Northwest Area
Rural Forward North Carolina
South Carolina Association for
Community Economic Development
Seattle Foundation
South Carolina Community Loan Fund
Southeast Immigrant Rights Network
Southern California Grantmakers
Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee
Rights Coalition
United We Dream
Wallace Global Fund
Weissberg Foundation
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
William Penn Foundation

The most effective donor collaborations should clarify differences about the meaning of civic participation: increasing voting rates, successful advocacy for specific public policy reforms or simply growing the civic capacity and leadership of young people in general.

Different donors will ultimately decide to prioritize different things; there is no reason why these activities can't be aligned toward longer-term objectives.

Second, I believe that funding for youth-focused civic engagement efforts should be directed at the state level. Since the 2016 elections, youth and emerging leaders have been more engaged in actions directed toward the federal government. This engagement has filtered down into the states.

Justice Louis Brandeis said, "It is one of those happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."² In states such as Arizona, Florida, New Mexico and Ohio, young people are the crucial ingredient to expand the electorate, particularly in communities of color. National organizations can be a powerful partner, but youth-focused institutions, embedded in local communities, require the bulk of direct funding support from donors and donor intermediaries.

Lastly, there is a sustainability problem in youth-focused civic engagement. Sometimes a flood of nonpartisan dollars flow in election years or during issue education campaigns, but consistent and reliable sources of funding are scarce.

Donors need to put greater emphasis on leadership sustainability and development. This funding must focus on investing in deep leadership development for sustainable programs for individuals and organizations. Long-term leadership development and capac-

ity building are vital to the success of youth-focused civic engagement programming.

The area where modest foundation investments can have the biggest impact is in supporting cohort-based skills training, networking and paid civic engagement fellowships or internships for young people in vulnerable communities. A breakthrough increase in civic participation without concurrent improvement in financial support and opportunities for career advancement to support young people in financially unstable situations is unsustainable.

BUILDING THE CAPACITY OF YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR LONG-TERM CHANGE

A pool of resources is necessary to equip youth-focused civic engagement organizations with the tools, technology and strategy development they need to convert tens of millions of potential young civic leaders into active voices for democratic change.

After the school shooting in Parkland and student-led mobilizations in response, there is a need for more collaborative funding approaches to ensure that student-led protests lead to lasting change. The bridge is youth-focused civic participation. ■

Austin Belali is director of the Youth Engagement Fund.

Notes

1. Amanda Cox, "How Birth Year Influences Political Views," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/08/upshot/how-the-year-you-were-born-influences-your-politics.html#>.
2. Justice Louis Brandeis dissent in *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/cases/pp/new_state_ice.htm.