

# Strength in numbers: Rethinking the power of funder collaboration

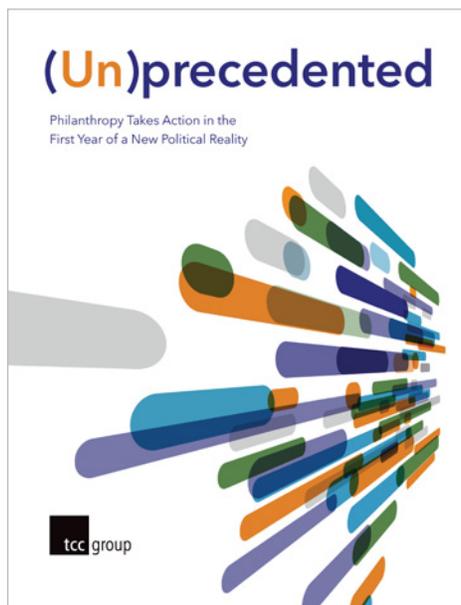
By Melinda Fine, Steven Lawrence and Molly Schultz Hafid

The first 100 days of the new administration. The first year. High-profile state elections in Alabama, New Jersey, Virginia and Pennsylvania. The rapidly approaching midterm elections.

With the second year of the administration proving to be as unprecedented and unpredictable as the first, foundations of varying size, reach, structure and issue priority are asking:

- How might collective action with peer funders strengthen our work going forward?
- What additional giving strategies, roles or leveraging opportunities might we seize to amplify our impact?
- How can we more effectively support vulnerable populations in the communities we serve?
- How can we support our own staff who might be directly affected in this moment, strengthening our institutional culture and climate?
- How can we manage potential differences in perspective among our staff and board?
- What is our appropriate leadership voice?

Our recently released report (*Unprecedented: Philanthropy Takes Action in the First Year of a New Political Reality*) shows that many of these questions are being answered by foundations acting in partnership with one another through funder collaboratives and philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs). And they're coming together in very specific ways in response to the



dramatic scope of the challenges faced by communities fighting for justice.

## JOINING FORCES TO PROTECT VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND LONG-TERM PRIORITIES

Policies being proposed and implemented by the new presidential administration have immediately affected immigrants, refugees and other vulnerable populations and presage long-term challenges in areas ranging from health care to education to the environment.

Funder peers are the single most trusted source of practical knowledge for grantmakers,<sup>1</sup> and PSOs and funder collaboratives consistently provided funders with opportunities to support, learn from and coordinate with each other. In the post-election environment, this role became especially critical.

Most of the nearly 30 PSOs and funder collaborative leaders interviewed for our research began coordinating calls, webinars and other ways for funders to con-

nect with each other immediately after the election. For example, Human Rights Funders Network organized a strategy-sharing call one week after the election and had nearly 150 participants, compared with a usual average of 30 call participants. "Members felt blindsided and unclear about what to do and needed a place to share," noted Mona Chun of Human Rights Funders Network.

PSOs and funder collaboratives provide readymade structures for grantmakers to convene, communicate and coordinate in ways that may not be possible for foundations acting on their own. They can also help to bring along donors not currently engaged in institutional philanthropy. "This political moment has also activated people who are in the next ring of giving – individuals who do not call themselves 'philanthropy' but who want to invest to make a difference," noted Cora Mirikitani of Asian American and Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy. "We must help support and lift up these resources that have not been activated in the traditional philanthropic space before."

Similarly, Kristen Cambell of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) noted that, "We've started inviting funders who are not members to come into the room and share in the learning, which is a mutual win because it opens new ideas and possibilities for engagement for them, and for our members and us as well."

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees' Daranee Pet-

sod shared that “even foundations in conservative areas recognize that the attacks on immigrants and refugees are about people, not politics. We’ve seen conservative foundations that won’t join GCIR provide support to local immigrant organizations, in one case without being asked to do so.”

During this time of political uncertainty, PSOs and funder collaboratives have helped greater numbers of funders to move from learning to increasing impact through partnerships with peers. For example, NEO Philanthropy’s Michelle Lord remarked, “We’ve seen new large and small funders join the State Infrastructure Fund and the Four Freedoms Fund because collaborative funds are an easy way to enter a field they don’t know much about.” These funds can also support 501(c)4 organizations and lobbying.

Adriana Rocha of the Neighborhood Funders Group observed that, “There’s been an urgency for coordinated action. For example, Funders for Justice and Grantmakers for Girls of Color brought 130 funders together to talk about addressing community safety and justice and the impact of political changes on Black and brown communities. We’ve mobilized \$10.4 million in new money to support community safety and justice for these populations.”

Eric Braxton of the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing added, “We had been planning to launch a learning and exchange fund and added a component to include funds for organizations that are adapting their strategies to respond to the changing political environment. [Because of heightened funder member support], we ended up being able to give out twice as much funding as we had anticipated.”

Funder collaboratives have been some of the more valuable, immediate resources for both vulnerable communities and funders looking to have a real-time, responsive impact in their funding.

“We had already shifted strategy from national organizations to regional and local organizations,” remarked Shireen Zaman of the Security & Rights Collaborative. “But it’s ended up now being more relevant for getting traction” with a wider range of funders looking to increase their support of Muslim, Arab and South Asian communities. However, whether this increased engagement in collaborative funding will translate into the engagement of pooled funding in grantmakers’ long-standing areas of focus remains uncertain.

### BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

With the constant barrage of new communities under attack, many within philanthropic institutions are more directly feeling the impact of new policies and political debates. This can deepen divides and slow down progress on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within foundations.

To address the potential for a loss of focus on racial equity as the evolving political environment places new urgent priorities in front of funders, CHANGE Philanthropy is partnering with PSOs across issues and identity communities to embed DEI into their practice. “If we can get their funder members to understand that racial equity is best practice and it’s normalized through them,” noted its director, Carly Hare, “it will reach more funders” and keep funders focused on this priority.

Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy reoriented its entire strategy

around DEI. “For EPIP, the time to focus on equity is now,” stated the organization’s leader, Tamir Novotny. “This is deeply personal for our members, many of whom hail from marginalized communities. They want to have confidence that their organizations are taking equity issues seriously and pursuing real change inside and out.”

Foundation staff and boards are not immune to the divisive tenor of the political discourse. At least a couple of PSOs have initiated training and support focused on how grantmaker staff with differing political views can engage.

### EMBRACING A LEADERSHIP VOICE

The perennial question of when and how to leverage an institutional voice has gained greater attention in the current political environment.

“People are struggling with how much they should be the opposition ... and how much they should be the bridge builder, community builder, adult in the room,” observed the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy’s Aaron Dorfman.

Soon after the new administration took office, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) issued a statement conveying a clear point of view that the organization understood may not have been shared by all of its members. Committed to its big tent, GEO coupled its public release with a statement indicating that “all people are welcomed in the GEO community,” hosting a series of open calls to solicit members’ reactions and perspectives. Its chief executive, Kathleen Enright, noted that some member participants were enthusiastic, arguing that “we are the resistance, and this shows how we are backing our grantees.” Others felt that “what foundations need to be doing is investing in pluralism” rather than taking an explicit stand. The space created by GEO provided an opportunity for open discussion across perspectives rather than isolated, institution-specific deliberation.

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Early in the new administration, GCIR experimented with crafting a joint statement that expressed a clear position on immigrant and refugee-related concerns. By using their voice as a PSO, GCIR provided an umbrella for over 200 foundations to sign on to this public statement – two-thirds of which were not members of GCIR itself.

### LEVERAGING PSOS AND FUNDER COLLABORATIVES FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

In responding to a rapidly changing political environment, the philanthropic sector has demonstrated flexibility, nimbleness and a willingness to collaborate that can serve as a model of creative adaptation for the field going forward. Critical to the responsiveness of the sector during this time has been the existence of a sometimes under-

appreciated and underfunded array of PSOs and funder collaboratives – backbone entities for philanthropy always at the ready to support funder learning, networking and grantmaking.

“There’s been a question among some funders about whether there are too many PSOs,” remarked Cambell. “But PSOs really help funders deepen their understanding and investment, which necessitates there being multiple organizations and focus areas.”

“People feel like something has to change if we can find ourselves where we are now,” concluded Chun. “Program officers and others at all levels are feeling the imperative that everyone needs to rally around a new way of doing things and are motivated to think collectively about what this might look like.”

PSOs and funder collaboratives are

the spaces in which this collective thinking has already begun to happen. ■

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## Notes

1. Harder+Co Community Research and Edge Research, *Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy: A Field Scan of How Foundations Use and Access Knowledge*, Prepared for the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, February 2017, available at <https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hewlett-Field-Scan-Report.pdf>.

## From whispers to roars

*(continued from page 5)*

- sustained, and to understand how information access and the constant bombardment from different news sources will affect these trends.
2. When sponsoring research, include methods that allow people to talk with each other and weigh different opinions. This is what is happening organically in people’s life and could be a better way to measure opinions than using quantitative methods (e.g., surveys) alone.
3. Tap into the momentum from the “conversation movement” by supporting targeted civic engagement as part of an overall strategy.
4. Foster projects that help people “connect the dots” so that they see the larger issues beneath the specific issue you care about. This allows for new solutions and ideas.

People are voicing their opinions, connecting with others and taking action. Grantmakers interested in making an impact in the communities they serve ought to seize the opportunity and do the same. ■

*Michael Perry is co-founder, and Kathleen Perry is senior analyst at PerryUndem, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm.*

## Notes

1. Read PerryUndem’s “What a difference a year makes” (December 6, 2017) for results of their comprehensive study on voters’ attitudes toward sexism, gender equality and the 2016 presidential election on [https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-](https://www.scribd.com/document/366406592/PerryUndem-Report-on-Sexism-Harassment-Culture-And-Equality-compressed)

- AndEquality-compressed.
2. Anna North, “You just accepted it: why older women kept silent about sexual harassment – and younger ones are speaking out,” *Vox*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/17116086/me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-workplace-millennials>.
3. PerryUndem, op cit.
4. Anna North, “Why women are worried about #MeToo,” *Vox*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/4/5/17157240/me-too-movement-sexual-harassment-aziz-ansari-accusation>.
5. See <https://www.scribd.com/document/336804316/PerryUndem-Gender-Equality-Report>.
6. See <https://www.scribd.com/document/367291049/PerryUndem-Research-Communication-Black-American-Survey-Report>.