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OPINION

Philanthropy Should Heed What the Declaration of Independence Said About Giving Everyone a Say

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In the Declaration of Independence, a band of Americans demanded a meaningful say in decisions that affect their lives. As we get ready to mark July 4, and as democracy faces its most serious threats in generations, we should consider how we can capitalize on our best democratic impulses to strengthen government, civil society, and all our institutions.

That includes philanthropic institutions, which have an enormous stake in meeting this challenge, not only because they are part of civil society but because donors themselves make many decisions that affect people's lives.

In the past few years, foundations have faced tough questions about whether they are accountable and transparent in their decision making. And they are under fresh scrutiny over the ways they deal with issues of equity and racial justice. In response, some grant makers are trying new approaches that give more decision-making authority to nonprofits, their constituents, and their communities about funding priorities, strategies, criteria, and where and to whom grants should be made.

At the core of these approaches is the growing realization that innovative ideas about resolving hard issues don't spring forth solely from traditional experts and power brokers. More often they are developed by partnering with people who can bring their direct experiences to bear in important decision making about their lives, communities, and futures.

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Some critics may roll their eyes, seeing this shift in philanthropy as yet another “shiny new object” that won't last. But as the Declaration of Independence reminds us, the question of whether – and, in particular, how – to give people a meaningful say is not new and not easy.

One thing is for sure: Dismissing any and all kinds of community participation is not the answer. In a recent article for the *Atlantic*, [“Community Input Is Bad, Actually,”](#) Jerusalem Demsas observes that most official processes for engaging citizens are overrun by “complainers” who derail potentially beneficial transportation, housing, and green development proposals. The result, she says, is that efforts to engage the

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residents who for reasons that range from the sympathetic to the selfish don't want to allow projects that are broadly useful.”

We agree, but we also believe these official processes illustrate what not to do, rather than a rationale for scrapping community participation — a fundamental part of democracy. Considerable knowledge exists on the best ways to engage people in these processes meaningfully, productively, and equitably.

Philanthropy has much to learn from studying what people involved in community development, community organizing, and business management have learned about how to help people take collective action and generate solutions to priorities they identify. In participatory budgeting, now used by some government agencies, for example, residents decide how to allocate a pot of money, first by brainstorming ideas, then refining those ideas into actionable projects, and then voting on how to distribute funds among the projects.

A related approach, called deliberative democracy, gives people structured, small-group settings to learn about issues and options, hear from one another, decide together on what policy they support, and (in some cases) work together to advocate for and help carry out that policy.

These processes are very different from the official public meetings that Demsas wrote about. When [public participation](#) efforts are well designed, well structured, and well supported by institutions, they produce more informed and equitable decisions that large swaths of the public endorses. A [library of research](#) from many disciplines and parts of the world, has shown that giving people a say in decision making can catalyze volunteerism, strengthen social networks, and enable new leaders to step forward.

Unfortunately, terms like “community input” and “participation” are used so indiscriminately that grant makers and other leaders overlook what it takes to do this work well. Putting a few signs around town announcing a public meeting is not enough. It is also unwise to try engaging people from a given neighborhood or community without first building relationships with their leaders and networks. Institutions need not only to ask people what they think but to work with them to apply it in ways that get results.

Thousands of people are quietly yet powerfully showing how this can work. The approaches they have developed come in all shapes and sizes, including [participatory budgeting](#) in cities like Chicago, New York City, Oakland, Calif., Seattle, and Tucson; “[Meet and Eat](#),” a weekly gathering that enables residents in Buckhannon, West Va., to hold lunch discussions on how to improve their town; and communitywide dialogues on topics like school redistricting and sustainability held by [Portsmouth Listens](#) in New Hampshire.

Even more examples of these kinds of processes exist [in other parts of the world](#). The United States lags behind countries like Brazil, Colombia, Iceland, and Taiwan, which have been leaders in promoting innovations that advance democracy, largely by working to strengthen relationships between people, giving them a meaningful say in decisions, and supporting their volunteer efforts.

Moreover, people who learn about these kinds of opportunities are overwhelmingly in support of them. In one national opinion poll, Americans were asked about a list of methods for participatory democracy, such as participatory budgeting and citizen juries, and support ranged from [75 percent to almost 90 percent](#), without significant differences between Republicans and Democrats.

At a time when the United States is deeply divided and many people feel disempowered and disrespected, participation that gives people a real voice in the decisions affecting their lives couldn't be more timely. And no matter where that participation occurs, the elements of a successful process are the same:

- Make sure everyone who has a stake in an issue is represented in participatory efforts — not just the usual suspects or those with the time or inclination to attend meetings. That takes time. Make that time.
- Seeking feedback is not necessarily the same as participation. If the donors who are asking for responses to their ideas are still making the ultimate decisions, that perpetuates the top-down, expert-driven culture ingrained in most institutions.
- Make the process as inclusive and equitable as possible by considering all the barriers to participation, offering many ways to get involved, giving people opportunities to share how their backgrounds affect their opinions, and providing data on how the issue affects and is affected by issues of race and equity.
- Whenever possible, bring people of different perspectives together so they can find common ground. Because of the way polarization is covered in the media, this may seem unrealistic, but real-world examples prove it can be done.
- Give everyone the opportunity to be heard — not just the loudest. For in-person (or video-call) meetings, this means asking the group to set ground rules for how they want to behave and having strong facilitators who remind the group of those agreements. For online processes, it means aggregating responses and providing different kinds of opportunities for people to brainstorm, comment, and set priorities.
- Carve out enough time and space to make decisions — about priorities, action steps, strategies, or grant funding. Dialogue is important, but even better is when a group of diverse individuals or organizations can reach a consensus about what to do — and then work together to do it.

Our society and technologies have changed immensely since America's original July 4, but the democratic impulse of the Declaration of Independence is no less relevant today.

[In fact, our challenges with racism, political polarization, and economic inequality make transparency](#).

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foundations — more necessary than ever before.

The best way for philanthropy to make that happen is by ensuring that donors adopt or support participatory processes that are thoughtful, intentional, and equitable. Collectively, we know how to do this well. As they continue to explore ways to democratize their work, leaders in philanthropy should apply that knowledge and experience to help create settings in which everyone's voice truly matters.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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