



Civil Society for the 21st Century

StanfordSOCIAL
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Civil Society for the 21st Century

Curated by
Independent Sector

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INDEPENDENT SECTOR

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StanfordSOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

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Stanford Social Innovation Review (SSIR) is an award-winning magazine and website that covers cross-sector solutions to global problems. *SSIR* is written by and for social change leaders from around the world and from all sectors of society—nonprofits, foundations, business, government, and engaged citizens. *SSIR*'s mission is to advance, educate, and inspire the field of social innovation by seeking out, cultivating, and disseminating the best in research- and practice-based knowledge. With print and online articles, webinars, conferences, podcasts, and more, *SSIR* bridges research, theory, and practice on a wide range of topics, including human rights, impact investing, and nonprofit business models. *SSIR* is published by the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at Stanford University.

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Introduction

Civil Society for the 21st Century

It's hard today to imagine the sense of wonder that Alexis de Tocqueville felt in the 19th century when he first encountered the energy of American civil society—that vast, undefined space between the individual and the state. Within this space, he observed the instinct of everyday citizens to organize around the things that mattered to them, taking control of their own lives by advancing a shared goal. He saw the genius of American civil society as striking a creative tension between individual and collective flourishing. For a European aristocrat steeped in the traditions of strong central government, established religion, and inherited titles, this was nothing short of a marvel—the very basis of *Democracy in America*.

Nearly two centuries later, we Americans rarely stop to marvel anymore at the countless ways we participate in civil society every day or the myriad organizations that contribute to a better life for us all. In today's America, civil society surrounds and sustains us like the air we breathe. It goes unnoticed and unappreciated due to its very ubiquity.

This article series, then, offers an exercise in mindfulness. It's a chance to focus, for a change, on the oxygen that makes our common life possible and good—to examine and appreciate and question and commit. Over the coming weeks, some of today's leading thinkers and practitioners will explore important issues of civil society in the 21st century: its origins and evolution, its boundaries and blind spots, its values and variety, its obstacles and opportunities.

The discussion, at times, may seem contradictory or even contentious, because we believe that all voices and viewpoints have

a place in the public square. Authors have been invited not only for their subject area expertise, but also for their diversity across multiple factors including gender, race or ethnicity, ideology, and experience. By intentionally inviting a wide variety of voices into the conversation, we aim to model the kind of public discourse and shared meaning-making that have always been the hallmarks of civil society—traits that seem very much endangered in our increasingly fragmented society.

Every conversation needs a conversation starter, and in that spirit, we offer the following question: What would Tocqueville think of today's civil society in America?

The Adaptive Challenge of Restoring Trust in Civil Society

By Dan Cardinali

Driven by a confluence of powerful secular trends, Americans' trust in civil society has declined to alarming levels. Without addressing these trends and reversing the loss of trust, the ideal of private action for the public good could be at risk.

Known by many names—including the charitable sector, impact sector, voluntary sector, and nonprofit sector—civil society is almost incomprehensively vast and diverse. In the United States, religious institutions foster and nurture a sense of purpose in millions of people every day. Education and health and human service organizations support and unleash individual and community talents, dreams, and capacities to contribute to the constant building and rebuilding of our nation. Museums and cultural institutions open up our imaginations, freeing our creative, innovative sentiments and challenging us to imagine and re-imagine our lives, our communities, and our country. And environmental organizations connect us to our natural world, enabling us to recognize our place in it and responsibility to it.

It all adds up to some 1.5 million organizations that employ more than 11 million professionals, mobilize more than 63 million volunteers each year, and take in more than \$390 billion in philanthropic donations annually, plus many hundreds of billions in government grants and contracts. Call it what you will, American

civil society touches every aspect of our daily lives in profound—though often unnoticed—ways.

When I speak of civil society, I ground it in a notion of *private action in service of the public good*—as opposed to public action for public good (which is government), or private action for private good (which is business). It was this instinct that so amazed Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century: Individual Americans were compelled to form voluntary communities in pursuit of causes that complemented—but often superseded—their own selfish needs and desires. Striking a tension between individualism and a commitment to common good, American civil society, he believed, had the foundational elements for a healthy democracy.

For decades, civil society flourished at this instinctive level where Tocqueville first observed it, without much formal recognition by the federal government. It was only as the United States prepared to enter World War I that policymakers altered the tax code to recognize the essential role of civil society in promoting a healthy and self-sustaining democracy. Despite the cost, Congress enacted the **Charitable Tax Deduction in 1917**, determined to ensure that even as the country focused its powerful human, technological, and financial resources overseas, everyday Americans would be incentivized through a tax deduction to care for the wellbeing of their neighbors and communities.

The Great Depression and post World War II years saw a growing partnership between civil society and government. Increasingly, government recognized that citizen-led civil society organizations were critical to ensuring that the common good was protected and promoted. Investing in civil society through grants and contracts, government became one of the biggest sources of financial support to civil society. Over the years, civil society evolved into a complex set of organizations, some of which are now multibillion-dollar enterprises while others remain completely volunteer-led local initiatives.

Even as government increased its formal relationship with civil society, institutional and corporate philanthropy also evolved a unique role in the common good ecosystem. From “big bets” to capacity building, philanthropy has been a primary engine of innovation for many of America’s most transformative programs and ideas. Without robust philanthropic organizations investing in a diverse set of nonprofits, civil society would be much compromised in its ability to partner with business and government in promoting and protecting the common good.

Nearly a quarter of the way into the 21st century, I have no doubt that Tocqueville would be amazed at the size, scope, and institutionalization of American civil society. But even more surprising, I imagine, would be the sheer magnitude of the challenges facing civil society today. Whether it is growing income and wealth inequality, changing conceptions of community, or the deep political and cultural polarization of American society, the very idea of “private actions in service of public good” is taking on new meaning and manifestations. Revisiting America today, Tocqueville would, I am certain, be concerned about how civil society is changing alongside national identity and wonder how it might evolve to ensure that a strong sense of the common good continues to drive the great experiment that is American democracy.

So how would Tocqueville know—how can we know—whether American civil society is in fact helping individuals and communities flourish? If the purpose of civil society is to promote the common good, then it stands to reason that a general wellbeing index—a collection of societal measures of our wellbeing—is a powerful indicator of success. So by examining these measures, we can get a good sense of how healthy civil society is.

Every year, Gallup asks some 175,000 respondents to rate their lives based on five interrelated factors of wellbeing: sense of purpose, social relationships, financial security, relationship to community, and

physical health. By analyzing individual responses and extrapolating to the broader population, researchers can quantify the percentage of the population that is *thriving*, *struggling*, or *suffering*.

The trends are not encouraging. Despite a generally good year economically, wellbeing saw an unprecedented drop in 2017—worse than 2009, in the depths of the Great Recession. Last year, there were significant, widespread drops in wellbeing among women, low-income households, Democrats, and political independents. Wellbeing among men and Republicans merely broke even, despite their perceived political ascendancy. Not a single state saw a year-over-year increase in wellbeing. Meanwhile, communities of color reported statistically significant declines, led by blacks and Hispanics.

Apart from economics, what are the factors that contribute to or detract from a general sense of wellbeing? Research tells us that connection, community, purpose, and agency are all powerful predictors of wellbeing, while alienation, isolation, and powerlessness negatively correlate. By its very nature—participatory, voluntary, and communitarian—civil society ought to boost the positive drivers of wellbeing while mitigating the negatives. So, given the broad-based collapse in Gallup's wellbeing numbers, it's worth asking the question: What role does civil society play in all this?

It is clear to me that *trust* is one of the core elements of American civil society. Even in the 1830s, Tocqueville recognized that Americans trusted one another enough to create civic spaces in which individuals could commit their private resources in service to community goods. Without such trust in those with whom we share our daily lives, civil society struggles and ultimately fails in promoting individual and communal wellbeing.

Of course, we know that trust in American institutions—including Congress, the presidency, big business, big labor, and even the

media—has been declining for years. Through it all, civil society has largely managed to buck the trend—that is, until 2017, when Americans’ trust in civil society dropped by nine points to stand just below the halfway mark, **according to the Edelman Trust Barometer**. In other words, ask the average American today whether they believe in the nonprofit sector, and the answer comes down to a coin flip. This is perplexing, because civil society is not the “other;” it’s not some external institution that affects our lives from afar. Instead, civil society is us. It’s how we associate and organize and interact with those around us. So when Americans tell pollsters that they don’t trust civil society, they are saying, in effect, that they don’t trust their fellow Americans, their neighbors.

While there are many factors driving the deterioration of trust in American life, I believe that three play a disproportionate role. First, America is experiencing a significant increase in the concentration of wealth among the so-called one percent. According to the Pew Charitable Trust, wealth gaps between upper-income families and lower- to middle-income families **are at the highest levels ever recorded**. Exacerbating this situation is the persistent fact that structural racism **acts to maintain, or even increase, the wealth disparity** between white households and households of color. In this environment, private action in service of public good appears increasingly futile.

A second factor driving the deterioration of trust in civil society is a shift in how we define “community.” The civic institutions that Robert Putnam wrote about in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* were based largely on proximity—all the clubs and societies and organizations that brought people face to face with neighbors in their physical community. Increasingly, however, technology is changing every aspect of our lives, including how we associate and how we define community. Virtual connections extend our sense of community well beyond

place, and technology expands the potential scale of civic action even as it changes the nature of that action. This is what Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, calls the “**fourth industrial revolution**”—neither bad nor good in and of itself, but a challenge that civil society must learn to manage. Until virtual communities inspire the same kind of trust that physical communities once did, it may be harder to pursue private action in service of the public good.

A third major reason why trust in civil society is diminishing is the sharp increase in political and cultural polarization. Rather than seeking commonalities with their neighbors, Americans are self-selecting into communities that reinforce existing viewpoints, interests, and beliefs. As journalist Bob Bishop points out in an interview about his book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* :

[O]ur political differences are really just the tip of what has been a social and economic transformation. The nation has sorted in nearly every way imaginable ... Not only have demographic groups sorted themselves into particular places, we've also constructed our social lives so that we spend more time around like-minded others. Over the last thirty years, our civic clubs, our neighborhoods, and our churches have all grown more politically homogenous.

America has always been a nation of rich differences. Over the last 30 years, however, this “great sort” has eroded our connection to those who diverge from our beliefs, experiences, and worldview. As a result, private action on behalf of the public good is increasingly circumscribed by what one considers her or his community. When community is limited to those with whom you share a worldview, then American civil society is deeply compromised in its ability to build a common good that extends beyond any limited, self-selected group.

Because it springs from a disparity between values and circumstances, eroding trust presents an “**adaptive challenge**,” to borrow from the work of Ronald Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Adaptive challenges are notoriously difficult to solve because stakeholders often find it hard even to agree on the nature of the problem. In this case, however, many leaders of civil society identified the issue of declining trust—and its attendant drivers—well before I did. It was a theme we heard constantly as far back as 2015, when **Independent Sector** partnered with more than 80 organizations to conduct a nationwide “**listening tour**” **known as Threads**. More than 2,000 participants across 13 communities took part in Threads, often sharing profound concerns about declining trust, pervasive inequality, social fragmentation, and low civic engagement. Even then, as we **shared in our report on the project**, the message was clear:

As organizations strive to achieve ambitious missions, each must decide how they will respond to a complex environment changing at unprecedented speeds. The options are to attempt to influence it, adapt to it, or ignore it. For most organizations, the first two options require significant change; choosing the last would risk receding into irrelevance over time.

Irrelevance is not an option. With this blog series, our hope is that American civil society can begin to write the next great chapter in its story. Professional communicators often use a well-known narrative framework called SOAR, which stands for situation, obstacle, action, and results. With this series, we hope to take a deep dive into the first half of that framework. We will examine the origins, definitions, and boundaries of civil society, in addition to the values and strengths that have allowed it to thrive for so long. We’ll also confront some of the blind spots, weaknesses, and political critiques that could represent obstacles to continued success—if not an outright existential crisis.

In the end, however, situation and obstacles are merely the prelude to what really matters: action and results. For centuries, American civil society has proven capable again and again of taking the actions that produce results for the common good. In every instance, we have risen to the challenge by searching deep within our nation's soul and finding renewal grounded in a conviction that the American democratic experiment was worth struggling for.

I'm confident that this time will be no different.



Dan Cardinali is president and CEO of **Independent Sector**, the only national membership organization that brings together nonprofits, foundations, and corporations seeking to advance the common good. Known for his commitment to performance management and measurable impact, Cardinali's work at Independent Sector is focused on em-

powering organizations to work collaboratively to improve life and the environment for individuals and communities around the world.

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Listen to **Independent Sector's Civil Renewal podcast**. In the first episode, Cardinali interviews *SSIR* Managing Editor Eric Nee.

The American Context

The American Context of Civil Society

By Yuval Levin

In both the conservative and progressive imagination, civil society is valued—for opposite reasons—as an arbiter between the individual and the national state. But by viewing civil society as the core of America’s social life, we can see our way toward a politics that might overcome some of the dysfunctions of our day.

Civil society is a distinctly American preoccupation. That is not, of course, because voluntarism, mediating social institutions, or a robust charitable sector are somehow unique to our country. All of those [exist in different forms throughout the world](#). But in no society are they as intricately tied up with national identity as they are for us.

The reasons for that are more complicated than they seem. We like to believe that we care so much about civil society because it is our great strength. Communitarians of various stripes are fond of quoting Alexis de Tocqueville to each other and reveling in the amazing multiplicity of ways in which Americans work together from the bottom up. I do this myself all the time. And there is good cause to do it: Tocqueville was deeply perceptive about us, and the scope of our independent sector is astounding.

But that is only one side of the coin. Americans are also distinctly obsessed with civil society because although the civil sector has always had a central place in our national life, its place has also

always been contested in ways that cut to the core of our politics, and because the very idea of civil society points to deep tensions in our understanding of what our society is and how it works.

For one thing, it points to the great distance between theory and practice in American life. The dominant social and political theories we have had about ourselves have always been stark, liberal stories: highly individualistic, rooted in rights, inclined to extreme abstraction, and focused on government. The actual practice of American life has not resembled these theories all that much. It has tended, instead, to be very communitarian, rooted in commitments and mutual obligations, pragmatic and practical, and focused on culture. This has often meant that our theories do not explain either our virtues or our vices very well, and that we lack a conceptual vocabulary adequate to how we live.

This chasm between theory and practice does a particularly great disservice to our understanding of the role of civil society, because there is really no way to describe our civic sector in the terms our various political ideologies usually demand. This often leads, in particular, to assorted misimpressions about the relationship between civil society and government in America, with distinctly different valences on different sides of our politics.

In the conservative and libertarian imagination, civil society is often forced into theories of classical-liberal individualism that view the voluntary sector as fundamentally a counterforce to government, and therefore as a means of enabling individual independence and holding off encroachments of federal power. It is in the civic sector that liberal theories of legitimacy—as arising from direct consent, and leaving fully intact the rights and freedoms of the individual—are said to be best put into practice, so that it is in civil society that legitimate social organization is said to really happen. The implicit goals of this approach to civil society involve a transfer of responsibility from

government to civil society, especially in welfare, education, and social insurance.

In the progressive imagination, meanwhile, civil society is often understood in the context of intense suspicion of non-democratic power centers, which are implicitly taken to enable prejudice and backwardness that oppress minority groups and undermine the larger society's commitment to equality. This has led to an inclination to submit the work of civil society to the legitimating mechanisms of democratic politics—and especially national politics. In practice, this means allowing the federal government to set the ends of social action and then seeing civil-society organizations as among the available means to those ends, valued for their practical effectiveness and local flavor, but restrained from oppressing the individual citizen or effectively governing him without his consent. The implicit goals of this approach to civil society involve a transfer of decision-making responsibility from civil society to the government, which can then use the organs of civil society as mere administrators of public programs—especially in welfare, health care, and education.

Both of these visions of civil society express a view of American social life that consists, in essence, of individuals and a national state. The dispute between left and right in this regard is about whether individuals need to be liberated *from* the grasp of the national state or need be liberated *by* that state from would-be oppressors among their fellow citizens. Civil society is seen as a tool for doing one or the other. Such visions, in other words, tend to ignore the vast social space between the individual and the national state—which is after all the space in which civil society actually exists.

This is, of course, a highly distorted way to think and fight about the political life of our country, since most of the governing in America is done by states and localities. And it is also a distorted way to think about our social lives, which are mostly lived in the institutions that fill the space between individuals and the federal government.

A politics shaped by such multilayered distortions easily devolves into crude, abstract debates between radical individualism and intense centralization. And these, in turn, devolve into accusations of socialism and social Darwinism, libertinism and puritanism.

But centralization and atomism are not actually opposite ends of the political spectrum. They are closely related tendencies, and they often coexist and reinforce one another—each making the other possible. The centralization and nationalization of social services crowds out mediating institutions; the resulting breakdown of communal wholes into atomized individuals leaves people less capable of helping themselves and one another, which leaves them looking to the national government for help; and the cycle then repeats. It is when we pursue both of these extremes together, as we frequently do in contemporary America, that we most exacerbate the dark sides of our fracturing and dissolution.

There is an alternative to this perilous mix of over-centralization and hyper-individualism. It can be found in the intricate structure of our complex social topography, and in the institutions and relationships that stand between the isolated individual and the national state. By seeing civil society as the core of America's social life, we can see our way toward a politics that might overcome some of the dysfunctions of our day—a politics that can lower the temperature, focus us on practical problems, remind us of the sources of our freedoms, and replenish social capital. In the context of this American moment, such a politics could hardly be more valuable.

It is a good thing, therefore, that we Americans are distinctly preoccupied with civil society. Although we disagree about its place and function, the fact that we take it to be essential to who we are suggests we know that our theories are inadequate, and that understanding ourselves through the character and work of our civil society could help us better know our country and better live out its ideals.

In this respect, American life offers a rich and constructive context for thinking about civil society, and civil society offers a rich and constructive context for thinking about American life.



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Civil Society and the Foundations of Democratic Citizenship

By Daniel Stid

Civil society can act directly to solve critical problems, but its indirect effect might be just as important: allowing individuals to participate, collaborate, and—in the process—develop into citizens capable of upholding democracy.

In using sociologist and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville as a touchstone for this essay series on American civil society, it is tempting to emphasize the affirmations and gloss over the challenges he presents to us. But we need to reckon with the full sweep of his thinking about civil society, especially with what he saw as its essential, albeit indirect, role in fostering democratic citizenship.

Most of us will recall how Americans' unique aptitude for forming what Tocqueville termed public or civil associations—the precursors of today's nonprofit and voluntary organizations—left a deep impression on the Frenchman when he visited the United States in the 1830s. As he noted in *Democracy in America*:

Americans of all ages, conditions and all dispositions constantly unite together. ... To hold fetes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distribute books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes. They establish hospitals, prisons, schools by the same method. Finally, if they wish

to highlight a truth or develop an opinion by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association.

This well-known observation, however, is just the starting point for Tocqueville's assessment.

Tocqueville went on to describe two roles he saw associations playing in the United States. The first was to provide a means for solving collective problems: "Among democratic nations all citizens are independent and weak; they can achieve almost nothing by themselves and none of them could force his fellows to help him. Therefore they sink into a state of impotence, if they do not learn to help each other voluntarily." But by joining forces in an association, individuals could solve the collective action problem. This first role is akin to the conception of nonprofits that prevails today, one that emphasizes the importance of their direct contributions or impact.

The second role that Tocqueville saw associations playing is less familiar to us; indeed, there is a sense in which we have lost sight of it. This role was indirect: drawing individuals out of their private concerns, where they would otherwise stay focused and striving, and enabling them to be part of something larger than the circumstances of their own existence. In doing this, they invariably had to rub elbows and learn to work with others with different interests and points of view. And in this way, those participating in associations became better collaborators, leaders, and citizens. "The only way opinions and ideas can be renewed, hearts enlarged, and human minds developed," Tocqueville observed, "is through the reciprocal influence of men upon each other."

To appreciate the importance that Tocqueville placed on both the direct and indirect roles of associations, we need to remember his real doubts about whether democracy could be sustained in the United States. The country was for him a precarious political experiment due to the volatile combination of unprecedented equality and the lack

of traditional mediating institutions. Tocqueville feared a scenario in which the great mass of Americans, becoming increasingly isolated in their individual pursuits, would give up any claims on being citizens who were concerned with the well-being of their fellow man and the public life they shared. Instead, they would submit to a paternalistic and despotic central government that would rule over them as a shepherd would “a flock of timid and hardworking animals.”

Tocqueville believed that associations operating outside the sphere of government and economic life—what we now refer to as civil society—were essential bulwarks against any incipient democratic decay and despotism. The direct role these associations played in solving problems meant that they could be tackled without having to involve the federal or state government. Tocqueville was skeptical that government above the local township level could do much to solve problems—the national government was too far removed, and any action it would take would be uninformed and heavy handed, whereas state governments were too apt to be swayed by petty concerns and volatile majorities. Townships and voluntary associations were the means through which citizens who knew and trusted each other could solve problems, as well as broaden their individual perspectives and develop their civic skills.

While the rough-and-tumble nature of these local institutions might lead to some messiness and occasional failure, Tocqueville warned against the government acting in a top-down manner. “What political power could ever substitute for the countless small enterprises which American citizens carry out daily with the help of associations?” he asked. “The more [government] replaces associations, the more individuals will need government to help as they lose the idea of association. This is the endless vicious circle of cause and effect.” The indirect contribution of associations—that which broadened the perspective and capabilities of participating citizens—is

no less important than their direct impact in combatting this cycle; indeed, the former was and remains a necessary complement to the latter.

It was for this reason that Tocqueville emphasized the importance of understanding the contributions of associations to democracy in America. “In democratic countries, the knowledge of how to form associations is the mother of all knowledge since the success of all the others depends on it.” But how can we apply this belief? How can we regain a firm grasp on “the mother of all knowledge” to put it to better use today? Here are three steps we all can take:

First, we need to reset the balance in how we think and talk about the contributions of nonprofits. Alas, as the government agencies and foundations that fund nonprofits have zeroed in on defining and tracking their direct impact, the attention we pay to nonprofits’ indirect role in fostering democratic citizenship has faded. Nonprofits are much more than instruments for direct impact. To be sure, professionalism, strategic plans, and performance metrics are good things for them to develop. But so are volunteers and individual donors, board members with diverse perspectives, and community-wide coalitions. It is also helpful for nonprofits to listen—really listen—to the voices of the people they are supporting, and to encourage and enable their beneficiaries to bring their voices to bear in the public square. These approaches can lead to amateurism, indeterminacy, tensions, and conflict, but they also produce more and better citizens for democracy.

Second, we should stop assuming that if we can just scale and replicate the right high-performing nonprofits, and/or feed enough money to effective advocacy groups, we can solve major, multifaceted social problems. Effectively addressing faltering public schools, gun violence, climate change, and problems like them will require much broader and more engaged movements, built by capable and committed people. These movements, in turn, will rely

heavily on the indirect effect of nonprofits and voluntary associations to develop people willing and able to participate in them.

Finally, while we are at it, we might also take some cues from observers like Yuval Levin, Heather Gerken, David Brooks, and James and Deborah Fallows. From ideologically diverse vantage points, they have all discerned the need for and fruitfulness of experiments in our laboratories of democracy at the state and local levels. They are observing how entrepreneurs from multiple sectors are coming together in varied associational ways to solve problems in ways that no longer seem possible in our polarized and exhausted national politics. Not surprisingly, nonprofit and civic leaders are serving as the catalysts for this collective problem-solving. They are updating and remixing Tocqueville's diagnosis and prescription—and not a moment too soon!



Daniel Stid is director of the [Madison Initiative](#) at the [William and Flora Hewlett Foundation](#). He oversees the foundation's eight-year, \$150 million effort to support the values and institutions of US democracy—especially Congress—in a time of polarization.

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On Shared Vision and a New Social Compact

By Robert K. Ross

Civic engagement and community voice make up the secret sauce of US democracy. We need a new, community-generated social compact to assert the vision and policy framework for an inclusive 21st-century America.

This year, I'll complete my 18th year working in philanthropy. I've spent the entire time as president of a single foundation: [The California Endowment](#). While I still awaken each and every morning with gratitude and passion for the position I hold—this job really is a gift—I realize I have relatively few years left in this role. When I transition out of it, what I will most fondly recall is the way our foundation has contributed to America's epic battle against inequality and injustice. In partnership with the community we serve, we've thrown some punches when punches needed throwing.

While there are still many battles I'd love to help win, one thing in particular is gnawing at my innards: There's no shared vision for our nation that is born from our communities and no new social compact to support that vision.

Our foundation needs this compact, philanthropy needs it, the nonprofit sector needs it, California needs it, and our nation needs it. From the perch I occupy, there are moral, strategic, and spiritual reasons why this is our most pressing imperative.

Moral

Whether you call us the nonprofit sector, charity sector, or independent sector, we currently lack a sense of identity, or shared moral purpose. The only thing that clearly binds us together is our tax status with the Internal Revenue Service.

That needs to change, and I believe change starts with our moral purpose. What we truly share is a goal of confronting and fixing structural inequality and poverty in America. Inequality in health, economics, education, the arts, or housing is indeed structural and systemic. It is what links the African-American male targeted by the Detroit police to the undocumented immigrant high schooler in Los Angeles to the desperate white rural Kentucky towns struggling with opiate addiction.

Inequality in America isn't destiny; it's systematically manufactured. The machinery? Injustice based on race, gender, economics, immigration status, and LGBTQ identity. It's time for us to come together to denounce all injustice. Our leaders must have a point of view about confronting structural inequality in our nation, and assert this point of view through ideas, innovation, policy, and systems change. Providing charity care to the needy is noble but insufficient to create the full moral response we need.

We need to own this problem of structural inequality, and not pretend that magical elves will somehow solve it. And if you believe the social responsibility VPs in the Fortune 500 will solve it, then you are kidding yourself. If we are not rising to the invitation of a shared vision of prosperity and equity in America, then we are complicit in maintaining the tragic status quo.

Strategic

As a philanthropic institution, we take pride in listening to and learning from our grantees and the communities we serve. And

the voices of marginalized, disinvested, stigmatized, and forgotten communities influence and shape the grant-making strategies we employ.

We are now entering year eight of a ten-year, place-based campaign across California called [Building Healthy Communities](#), where we invest in ideas from grassroots and youth leaders. We want them to tell us how to improve health and wellness where they live. This bottom-up approach has been a great and illuminating ride. But we have also heard a lot about what leaders in these communities don't want and don't like, including dysfunction, gridlock, chaos and injustice in Washington, DC.

This phenomenon places our foundation—and like-minded foundations across the country working against structural inequality and inequity in America—in an awkward position. In the hyperpartisan, scorched-earth landscape that defines America's political and civic theatre these days, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either we “weigh in” on the side of the communities we serve, appearing as though we've chosen a political side, or we adopt the careful and cautious posture of just laying low, for fear that we might creep over the nonpartisan guardrails. More simply put, we can either appear like a political operative or behave like a head-in-the-ground ostrich, oblivious to the horrible things that are happening all around us. This is because what our field lacks—at least for those among us who deem inequality in America as a problem that needs solving—is a shared, affirmative, forward-looking vision about what the communities we serve want from our nation, as opposed to what they don't want.

We have to figure out the shared values and principles that undergird how America should work, and then translate those values and principles into a policy framework to advance opportunity and reduce inequality. Most important is executing that framework.

Spiritual

In the year 2026, America will celebrate its 250th birthday as a democracy. The time is ripe to ask and act on a fundamental question: What kind of nation do we want to be?

As a private citizen, I may be interested in and intrigued by the views of people named Trump, Clinton, Ryan, and Schumer. As a foundation executive, however, I want the organizations and leaders we support—the people who are fighting on the front lines in the pitched battle against inequality—to guide, shape, and inspire our board of directors (and other nonprofit boards).

The party to which we swear allegiance is not Democratic or Republican—it is Community. And I believe that strengthening and optimizing the voices of community leaders to exert power and control in pursuit of their vision is job #1 for those of us blessed to steward resources in dollars and influence.

This constitutes a profoundly spiritual question about the future of our nation.

In the 1820s, a French sociologist named Alexis de Tocqueville visited America, gathering data and insights about this fledgling republic. In his monumental work *Democracy in America*, he noted the emergence of self-organizing community “associations”—groups of ordinary citizens who gathered together to address and solve problems. These groups were nowhere on the executive “org chart” of the nation—they just gathered to assert their views on how the nation should work, through the lens of their community. And then they would act. Tocqueville was describing the spirit and ethos of what would eventually morph into the nonprofit sector.

Civic engagement and community voice make up the secret sauce of our democracy. We need a new, community-generated social compact to assert a vision and policy framework for an inclusive

21st-century America. This time around, the framers will not be all-white, all-male, and 50-percent slave-owning.

We are now a more-pluralistic America, an America that must answer the spiritually driven question about the kind of America we want. Examining “who are we” demands the engagement of our faith community and faith leaders as well. If inequality in America has a structural foundation, then we can and must dismantle that structure. It needs to be our cause *célèbre*, led by those who are most familiar with the beast and best understand how it works.



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Today's Charitable Sector and Its Roots and Challenges

By Alan J. Abramson

Like all of civil society, the American nonprofit sector is a living thing. Its recent evolution has created a large and diverse force for good, but faces distinct challenges ranging from identity to sustainability.

How did civil society develop in the United States, and where does it stand today?

To begin answering this question—and because I'm an academic focused on the charitable portion of the nonprofit sector—I believe it's helpful to start by using available data to identify the major features of today's 501(c)(3) charitable sector.

I preface my remarks by noting that the very idea of an overarching charitable sector is relatively new. In fact, as historian Peter Dobkin Hall [observed in an important essay](#), the notion that diverse nonprofits belong to a unitary “sector” dates only to the 1970s when, according to Hall, the idea of a coherent nonprofit sector was “invented.” Prior to that, there were large numbers of individual nonprofits, but there was a much more limited belief that they shared important attributes and were part of a single, broad sector.

The charitable sector today

According to the “[Internal Revenue Service Data Book](#),” as of 2017 there were 1.3 million 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofits

operating in a wide variety of fields, including health, education, human services, the arts, international relief and development, and the environment. Depending how one measures, charities account for 5-10 percent of the nation's economy and about 10 percent of employment. The health and education subsectors are by far the largest in dollar terms, with hospitals and other health-related nonprofits accounting for 60 percent of all charitable nonprofit expenditures, and nonprofit universities and other educational institutions making up 17 percent of spending.

Nonprofits' largest revenue source is a surprise to many. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) at the Urban Institute, in 2013 48 percent of the revenue of reporting public charities came from fees for goods and services, 33 percent from government, 13 percent from philanthropy, and the remaining 6 percent from investment income and other sources. While most believe that private contributions are the largest source of charitable sector income, in fact at least in the aggregate earned revenue and government are much larger sources of charities' revenue than philanthropy.

There are similar misconceptions about the sources of philanthropy. While many would guess that corporations and foundations provide the largest amount of private donations, in fact, individual contributions are significantly larger. *Giving USA* reports that out of total giving of \$390 billion in 2016, individuals accounted for 72 percent, foundations for 15 percent, bequests for 8 percent, and corporations for 5 percent. Importantly, about one-third of giving goes to religion. Philanthropy currently totals about 2 percent of GDP and has been holding relatively constant at about this level for several decades.

The charitable sector's roots

The diversity and size of the US charitable sector are, in part, a legacy of the 1601 British "[Statute of Charitable Uses](#)," which listed

a broad range of charitable purposes that later shaped charitable practice in colonial America. From “the relief of aged, impotent, and poor people” to “schools of learning” to “marriages of poor maids,” British law provided the blueprint for a broadly defined charitable sector, and the US tax code reflects this heritage.

To qualify for tax exemption under section 501(c)(3), organizations **must pass a five-part test**. The law requires that they have some organizational structure, be engaged in one of several specified “exempt” activities (such as religious, charitable, scientific, or testing for public safety), not distribute their surpluses (profits), not devote a substantial amount of their resources to lobbying, and not engage in partisan political activity.

However, the broad set of activities that qualify as charitable under section 501(c)(3) offers significant latitude to US charities and helps explain the sector’s growth. Moreover, the seeming lack of IRS interest in ruling organizations unqualified for 501(c)(3) status due to ineligible activities reinforces the relatively permissive activity test.

Beyond the tax code, the growth of the charitable sector has several sources, according to historian David Hammack and other experts. First, increasing affluence in the United States, especially after World War II, meant that richer Americans could afford to give more to charities. They could also afford to buy more services from nonprofit hospitals and universities. The large share of total charitable sector revenue derived from fees results in part from the dominance in the sector of nonprofit health and educational institutions that depend heavily on charging for their services.

A second factor is the growth of government. In the United States, government, especially at the federal level, has grown in a distinctive way. Instead of adding large numbers of federal employees, it has contracted with non-federal “third-parties”—

including state and local governments, nonprofits, and businesses—to provide federally funded goods and services. As described by political scientist Lester Salamon, in his book *The Tools of Government* and elsewhere, this system of third-party governance takes advantage of government's ability to raise revenue through the tax system and the service-delivery strengths of charities (and businesses). This arrangement also accounts for the relatively high share of nonprofit income derived from government.

Finally, Hammack points out that the civil rights movement and the opening up of nonprofit activity to a more-diverse range of social entrepreneurs who were sometimes previously discouraged—or even prevented—from establishing new organizations spurred the rapid growth of the charitable sector beginning in the 1960s.

Current and future challenges

The US charitable sector is vital and diverse, but the growth patterns described above point to several important challenges facing the sector now and into the future.

First, there is the issue that many nonprofit organizations look like businesses, because a large share of their income derives from business-like fees for service. This raises the question of whether such “commercial” nonprofits that charge for their services belong in the same charitable sector as “donative” nonprofits that rely more heavily on charitable contributions, or whether there should be a dividing up of the current charitable sector.

Next, there are worries about philanthropy, which has been stuck for many decades at 2 percent of GDP. While many would like giving to grow above this level, philanthropy may now actually shrink due to recent tax law changes that reduce tax incentives to give. Nonprofit leaders are already wrestling with how to restore tax incentives for philanthropy while also considering other approaches to increasing giving above previous levels.

Finally, there are the twin issues of definition and identity in the charitable sector. Stakeholders need to own up to data indicating that the nonprofit sector is not all about philanthropy and voluntary action, but also government funding and earned income. The “independent” sector is also an interdependent sector that has important relationships not only with philanthropy, but with government and business as well.

Within this interdependent sector, many charities owe more allegiance to their subfield (whether health care, education, or the arts) than to the charitable sector as a whole. To gain more influence in policymaking and other arenas, different types of organizations will have to come together, and make a stronger case for the charitable sector as a whole and the important role it plays in our society.



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Does the Tax Code Define Civil Society or Vice Versa?

By Harold Hancock

Civil society wasn't invented by the tax code, but changes in the law can have serious, if unintended, consequences on the public good. Nothing is final, however; with change comes new opportunity.

What is this wonderful book we call a tax code—the collection of rules that provide for how individuals and businesses pay income (and other taxes) and interact with the Internal Revenue Service? Except for seasoned tax professionals, mention of the tax code generally induces some combination of fear, loathing, and incomprehension. Politicians generally refer to the tax code as too complex and constantly in need of reform for the good of all Americans.

But the tax code is more than a collection of technical rules. It is also a collection of policy choices about behaviors that legislators want to encourage (such as home ownership, charitable giving, and tax credits for certain investment) and discourage (such as penalties for fraud and non-payment of taxes, and limitations on certain deductions). More broadly, it is an attempt to interact with the economy and society through technical rules. As such, it is a valuable window into the United States—a nation's values, priorities, and aspirations.

The tax code, although a collection of technical rules, is constantly evolving, and civil society is part of this interactive process. The tax code is rooted in current social issues, because more often than not

tax writers are responding to what is happening in the real world. At the same time, tax policy affects future behavior in ways that are sometimes intentional, sometimes less so. It is a rare case where legislation is so forward-looking that it can accurately predict the future. It is also true that legislation can do unintended damage. But that should not be the end of the story. It is merely the beginning, as civil society reacts to the changes and a new generation of tax writers makes adjustments to reflect the new realities.

For example, one of the provisions included in the first tax code (in 1916) was a deduction for charitable gifts. It has been present in the tax code since then, even with significant changes over the years. Why is this important? Because charitable gifts are one of the clearest expressions of private action in the service of public good. I want to be clear that there are many others—volunteering time, for example—but the transfer of money from one person to another is the type of activity the tax code understands.

The charitable deduction was not included as a novel idea policy-makers thought would make for an interesting experiment. It was a reflection of the importance of activities that were already well established in the United States. That is, it acknowledged the existence of a civil society and recognized the importance of including charitable giving in this new thing called the tax code—the new rules to govern how to compute and pay income tax.

The deduction for charitable contributions is now only one of many provisions in the tax code that supports civil society. There are provisions that encourage different types of exempt organizations for different purposes, special rules that focus on business income unrelated to an organization's exempt purpose, and specific rules for different types of charitable donations (such as food inventory and conservation easements). These are just a few examples of the levers available for influencing the shape and scope of civil society. While many policymakers (and staff) are smart, fo-

cused, and interested in creating policies that support civil society, the variety of provisions are beyond their collective imaginations.

What happens, then, if we begin to view changes to the tax code as undermining civil society, whether intended or unintended? First, it is important to realize that, so far in US history, there has never been a “last” tax bill. Any tax bill is only the most recent tax bill; there is always another one for new proposals and changes to existing proposals. Second, civil society is not isolated—it changes over time as other areas of society change. The tax code is often a reflection of broader societal changes and policy priorities that may not always properly take into account the needs and contributions of civil society. These changes can be frustrating, but it is also an opportunity for innovation.

Over the last 15 years, the people and institutions that operate in civil society have adapted to demands to do more, in different ways, and with different resources than before. Civil society should be built on this spirit of innovation, properly viewing change as an opportunity, understanding the macro issues and recognizing how civil society fits within the larger picture—and then helping policymakers see the same thing. Despite the political noise in Washington, DC, there are dedicated and serious people who are interested in good policy, and their need for information is nearly unlimited. Engaging with and educating these policymakers can help ensure that the next tax bill focuses on civil society.

My point is that the tax code is important, but civil society should be the dominant influence on it, and not the other way around. Just like the business community, those who engage in civil society by creating organizations, and devoting their time and money to private action for the public good, should take the lead in defining how this area of the economy fits into the broader policy choices represented in the tax code.

Civil society is not unique to the United States. But, the creativity, diversity, and scope of American civil society is distinct, and the tax code has long reflected its unique character. That is not going to change, but the people and institutions that define civil society must remain engaged with policymakers and embrace the opportunities that change provides.



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Civil Society and American Exceptionalism

By Brian Gallagher

American civil society has a history of and reputation for political independence—and alongside it, accountability, transparency, and governance. But these unique qualities are at risk.

American exceptionalism has traditionally implied that the United States is unique among nations. The concept stems from a belief that America's democratic ideals and personal freedoms, paired with its resources and entrepreneurial spirit, make it a nation to look up to—or at the very least, first among equals.

Alexis de Tocqueville's writings in the first half of the 19th century popularized the notion that American exceptionalism extended to its communities, specifically their burgeoning private activism and organization. As other contributors to this essay series have noted, his observations include, "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens," and "Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations."

Tocqueville observed Americans meeting and organizing to solve problems and elect local leaders. He was impressed by their willingness to forge a path of their own accord. These characteristics remain today, as Americans [continue to volunteer](#) in large numbers and across demographics, but Tocqueville would nevertheless have

to adjust his beliefs if he returned anew. While modern American civil society may still be unique, what makes it exceptional is not people's willingness to volunteer or organize—indeed, I have witnessed countless citizens from Japan to Colombia step up in times of need. Rather, what makes it unique is the political independence it has historically enjoyed. That independence fosters greater accountability, transparency, and governance by forcing civil society groups to answer to a wider array of individuals and constituencies.

It's no secret, however, that civil society's political independence is under tremendous threat from the divisive culture wracking the nation. We must fight back to preserve it.

What it means to be politically independent

Over the years, I've sat on boards of directors, allocation boards, and advisory boards. We've debated policy, funding decisions, and the best direction for each organization and the community it serves. And while there are sometimes special interests in nonprofit boardrooms, a hallmark of these panels has been that members put aside their differences to work together. They leave their political interests, or social views, at the door, and the community's interests come first.

This dynamic mirrors the civil society organizations that developed out of Tocqueville's era, which prospered because of their independence from political or social interference. As the nation turned from the 19th to the 20th century, Americans developed confidence that the state or agents of corruption did not control civil society organizations. They were increasingly seen as a critical third leg of society, reliably filling a service gap between government and business—and working with the two when necessary.

As a result, individuals and families realized they were putting their community first when they donated to, or volunteered for, a nonprofit group. Similarly, they were confident that an individual's politics or

social views would not determine outcomes. Laws and norms meant that civil society groups would be transparent and accountable.

US civil society's global reputation

Certainly, some of these organizations have gone awry over the course of American history. But US civil society, supported by the nation's scale and reach during the 20th century, became a model for the rest of the world. This is still the case today in many areas.

Take Latin America, where NGOs often lack public trust and many people view government as the main provider of services. Our organization, [United Way Worldwide](#), has managed to win trust and support—and ultimately make progress on issues such as early education—in this context by bringing together local groups, businesses, and government to solve social problems. As a well-established, accountable organization that works across sectors, we have gained both public trust and the trust of businesses like Procter & Gamble, 3M, and Dow, which are now partnering with us to improve youth education.

In India, there are many gaps in government's support of social and economic development, and historically, civil society organizations [have had a reputation for corruption](#). United Way and other civil society groups are addressing this perception by raising awareness of community issues, focusing on governance as our differentiator, and partnering with corporate donors to drive greater social impact. We're also involving state governments in the development process. Today, the government is involving civil society groups in policymaking and strengthening reforms, and the nation's 2013 law that requires large corporations to give two percent of their profits to charities is driving more attention to the sector.

Another organization building civil society capacity and independence is the Non-Profit Incubator (NPI), founded in China in 2006. NPI has set up "Innovation Parks" in many Chinese cities, and its staff aims to nurture and train social enterprise start-ups until they are self-sufficient.

With the cooperation of local governments, NPI offers entrepreneurs free or nearly free office space and supplies, as well as IT support, training, and access to its network of officials, donors, volunteers, and other NGOs. The organizations it helps to create—now more than 500—focus on challenges in the enterprises’ respective communities.

Every country in the world has its own relationship with civil society; some regions display greater levels of independence and trust than others. A March 2017 Freedom House report [highlighted how far certain regions have yet to go](#). Yet what helps well-meaning civil society groups across the board improve people’s lives and opportunities consistently goes back to their reputation for political independence, accountability, and good governance.

That’s why it’s shameful we’re putting it at great risk.

Political interference in civil society

Today, America is a nation divided. As Dan Cardinali [noted in his introductory column](#) to this essay series: “Whether it is growing income and wealth inequality, changing conceptions of community, or the deep political and cultural polarization of American society, the very idea of ‘private actions in service of public good’ is taking on new meaning and manifestations.”

In this environment, the reputation and uniqueness of American civil society groups are weakening. Wealthy individuals are setting up foundations to advance political agendas and take advantage of tax laws. Some groups hide behind shell nonprofits to promote messages that drag Americans to the extremes, while others [advocate for the weakening of the Johnson Amendment](#) meant to separate nonprofits from electoral politics. The recent discussion over the charitable tax deduction—a vital way for Americans to easily support their communities—even became partisan. And citizens [are struggling to divest politics](#) from every conversation and issue.

As Americans' distrust of institutions and nonprofits grows, it's hurting our communities and what's made US civil society unique. An individual's first response to a civil society group shouldn't be, "What's their true agenda?" but "They're here to help us." If we continue to build a more politically and socially divisive culture—one where we live in an "I" culture, rather than a "we" culture—we'll let that American exceptionalism slip further and further from our grasp.

We can't take that political independence for granted any longer. Whether we are civil society leaders, donors, or concerned community members, let's stand up for transparency and honesty, and hold groups accountable for their actions. Let's make sure that outside influences stay out of the board room. And let's keep our decision-making and society's focus on what's best for all of us. We had it before, and we can find it again.

America and the world need strong, non-political civil societies. We need a renewed civic order based on the principles and promise that created the vibrant civil society Alexis de Tocqueville identified in the United States. If we accomplish that, we'll once again recognize the unique model that the United States exported around the world for the betterment of all people everywhere.



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Lines and Ties

Parallel Universes? Lines and Ties in Civil Society

By Janet Murguía

The history of America's Hispanic community shows how civil society can create a refuge for those excluded from society at large. But allowing such demarcation lines is never good enough. For a civil society to be effective, sustainable, and worthy, it must tie together all who reside in that society.

As I think about the role, self-identity, and ties that will bind together civil society in the future, I'm compelled to place these concepts in historical context—perhaps because [UnidosUS](#), the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization, is celebrating our 50th anniversary this year. Our organization's founders had a strong belief in and a deep commitment to civil society as the principal vehicle for opening doors of opportunity that had long been closed to the Latino community.

When Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the energy and vitality of our nation's civil sector in *Democracy in America* in 1835, he was of course referencing only a part of what our society was or would become. It wasn't until 1848, after the Mexican-American War, that today's states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Utah, Colorado, and a piece of Wyoming became part of the United States, through conquest. The Emancipation Proclamation, in which Abraham Lincoln freed all slaves in the South, wasn't signed until 1863, around the time that the first Asians began to enter. Puerto Ricans and Cubans became subject to US jurisdiction after the Spanish-American War in 1898. Like the indige-

nous peoples of North America, in different ways and to varying degrees, all of these people and their descendants were largely excluded from civil society, because they were excluded from mainstream society itself.

This was a result of rampant discrimination and segregation. It was also because, despite gaping needs, these communities were neglected and ignored by the government and by private philanthropy. As a result, these communities ended up having to establish parallel civic societies.

For example, Latino communities prior to World War II created hundreds of “mutual aid” societies, known as “*mutualistas*,” that provided a gathering place for the community, in addition to insurance, loans, and legal aid. In the early 20th century, there were an estimated 100 *mutualistas* in Texas alone. In Tampa, Florida’s Ybor City neighborhood, mutual aid societies helped primarily Cuban workers in the cigar industry obtain life insurance and unemployment benefits. They also built hospitals and pharmacies to serve the community. *La Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana* in New York City was a city-wide aid society that both focused on protecting the economic interests of the community and helped Puerto Ricans’ entry into the political process.

Yet, a little over 50 years ago, community activist Hermán Gallegos and academics Dr. Ernesto Galarza and Dr. Julián Samora, the founders of UnidosUS, recognized that this parallel Latino civil society not only was deeply inadequate and unsustainable, but also ran contrary to the values and promise of what American civil society should and could be. In short, a civil society that excludes will ultimately undermine that society. For a civil society to be effective, sustainable, and worthy, it must include all who reside in that society. That is what binds the many organizations that make up the nonprofit sector, with its plethora of missions and constituencies: a belief that civil society should be a force for unity and serve all those who need it.

Galarza, Gallegos, and Samora urged the creation of an organization rooted in the Latino community but able to work within mainstream civil society. The Southwest Council of La Raza, then the National Council of La Raza, and now UnidosUS, served as a catalyst for the hundreds of other organizations that served the Latino community across the country, and an important part of that work was helping them connect with institutions in mainstream civil society.

But it is important to keep in mind that the renaissance of Latino community-based organizations that came out of the Hispanic civil rights movement of the 1960s would not have been possible without three major factors:

- **Civil rights activism.** The activism of farmworkers in California and other states in the Southwest, and the movement among Puerto Ricans to organize against inadequate schools, housing, and economic opportunity in Chicago and in the Northeast, created cadres of activists across the country. And rising interest in self-empowerment led these groups to build organizations to institutionalize and sustain their work.
- **Government engagement.** For the first time in American history, the federal government proactively engaged the Latino community. President Lyndon B. Johnson's experience teaching in a "Mexican school" in Cotulla, Texas, shaped his perspectives on poverty and inequality, and led to the first presidential administration to recognize and invest in the Latino community through efforts such as the War on Poverty. Government funding was crucial in the creation and sustenance of Latino community-based organizations.
- **Philanthropic investment.** For the first time during this era, major philanthropic foundations began focusing and investing in the Latino community. The Ford Foundation,

for example, was instrumental in the creation of UnidosUS, as well as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (now Latino Justice).

Unfortunately, in the 50 years since, neither the government nor the philanthropic sector has sustained this level of engagement. Hispanics therefore have had to rely on nonprofits that are doing the work that government, corporations, and foundations are not. The Latino community has grown sixfold since 1968, now representing 17 percent of the nation's population and half of all poor children of color. Yet foundation support for the community is less than 2 percent of total funding, [according to the most recent data](#), and it is unlikely that unregulated market forces will automatically close opportunity gaps.

Latino nonprofits have played an important role in closing educational and health gaps that exist between the Latino community and others, and they are on the frontlines in providing access to employment opportunities, housing counseling, and financial education. They're also the most important engine of immigrant integration today; more than 75 percent of UnidosUS's affiliates provide English classes, legal help with the naturalization process, and/or voter registration. The question is, as it was last century, whether once again an overreliance on what is now a de facto parallel Latino civil society is sustainable or desirable, especially for American civil society at large.

Nonetheless, there are signs that American civil society is ready to fully integrate all communities under its umbrella. The selection of my predecessor Raúl Yzaguirre two decades ago as the first Latino chair of [Independent Sector](#)—an organization charged with maintaining the health of American civil society—was an important milestone of inclusion. I was honored to serve on the Independent Sector board a decade ago, where I saw firsthand how organizations and foundations with diverse missions and perspectives come together to protect the vitality of our sector. Everything in

my experience suggests that civil society has the tools, institutions, and goodwill to successfully address the shared challenges Dan Cardinali outlined in his [introductory essay for this series](#)—but only if we reflect the interests, perspectives, expertise, and clout of all of those whose interests our sector purports to represent.

As my organization's story exemplifies, civil society will play an important role—perhaps *the most important* role—in shaping our community's and our country's future. In a nation increasingly polarized along geographic, partisan, religious, class, and racial lines, there is no more urgent mission for our sector to promote stronger ties among all Americans, across all of the largely artificial barriers that threaten to divide us. But it must be said that, overall, the sector's record of inclusion of Latinos and other racial and ethnic minorities is disappointing at best. We cannot lead our country toward a more inclusive future if our own sector reflects the vestiges of an exclusionary past.

Latinos and other people of color have always believed in civil society's ability to take “private action for the public good.” It is now time for American civil society to fully believe in them.



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Listen to [Independent Sector's Civil Renewal](#) podcast. In the third episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks

with Marc Freedman, president and CEO of Encore.org, to reflect on Murguía's piece.

Aspirin and Democracy

By Jan Masaoka

With its professional management class and army of consultants, the nonprofit sector can sometimes seem isolated from the messiness of civil society, and a new Philanthropic Beltway may have sprung up. But it wasn't always that way, and it may be time to reclaim an earlier identity as the "volunteer sector," which is inherently democratic.

The nonprofit intelligentsia frequently muses on whether the term "nonprofit" is the appropriate name for the sector, how we can improve the sector's "branding," and whether and how to embrace for-profit companies that want to "do good."

But too often we leave unexamined some deeper questions of self-identity and aspiration. This essay addresses two linked concerns: professionalization as the dominant ethos of the nonprofit sector and the emergence of the "Philanthropic Beltway"—the overgrown infrastructure that stands between philanthropy and those who might want to speak directly to them. It is an argument for a sector identity deeply rooted in volunteerism, democracy, and democratic movements led by those affected by issues rather than those who have become certified, paid experts in those issues.

Aspirin for management headaches

The last 35 years have seen an overwhelming change in nonprofits and identity, shifting from self-identification around cause and

activism to a sector that sees itself—and insists on being seen—as a sector of paid professionals.

An unintentional consequence of this focus on professionalism is the invisibility and dismissal of the all-volunteer nonprofits. Many people are aware that a large percentage of registered nonprofits do not have staff. In California, for instance, 65 percent of 501(c)(3) nonprofits **have no paid staff**. Those of us at staffed nonprofits (including foundations) typically dismiss or condescend to the all-volunteer organizations—at the peril of our whole community.

Several years ago, I was part of a research team that conducted focus groups with all-volunteer organizations (AVOs), such as the fuchsia society, a mandolin orchestra, a Harley Davidson club, and an ethnic history research group. Perhaps the most telling—and damning—finding was that when we asked, “What kind of group are you?”, they universally answered, “Well, we don’t have any staff so we’re not a nonprofit.”

AVOs, scale, and credibility

What nonprofit organization serves more people with substance abuse issues than any other? Answer: The all-volunteer Alcoholics Anonymous, with 400 meetings per week in the city of San Jose, California, alone. What San Francisco nonprofit serves 400 children twice a week? The all-volunteer Vikings Soccer League. When we consider impact in substance abuse and youth development, we severely handicap our thinking by overlooking such efforts.

And in public policy, Big Agriculture knows to put family farms rather than agribusiness in front in legislatures and in the court of public opinion. But somehow we in the nonprofit community—a sector composed of family farms—want to be seen as Big Charity, touting MBAs and investment banker salaries, and “productivity” driven by minimum-wage workers.

This drive for professionalization has paralleled astronomical growth in the nonprofit sector, fueled by government funding (most notably the [War on Poverty](#) and its successors) and the entrance of baby boomers into the labor market. We baby boomers were anti-war activists, women's rights activists, and Third World Liberation activists. Today, we would be known as volunteers. As we started and grew organizations with the new influx of government money, we struggled with human resources, financial management, and insurance.

But if we were seeking aspirin for these management headaches, we are now suffering from aspirin poisoning, and we've passed on the affliction to the next generations. Today's Generation X and millennial nonprofit leaders "get" management. But good management is insufficient for effective nonprofit action. In contrast to baby boomer activists, the new executive directors can write personnel policies and grant proposals while practicing self-care, but they don't know how to get 5,000 people to a protest demonstration or 50 parents to a city council meeting. In short: They have overlooked aspects of democratic leadership.

As we have professionalized the sector, we have lost track of the heart of the nonprofit movement: democracy and volunteerism.

The new Philanthropic Beltway

The sector's current "professional experts know best" attitude is particularly pronounced in philanthropy. Foundations—inherently institutions of the elite— not only have become more expert-driven, but also have created an industry of expert consultants and advisors to themselves.

"Inside the Beltway" refers to the federal government's isolation from the general population. Although the "beltway" originally meant the highway that circles Washington, DC, it has come to describe the lobbyists, consultants, think tanks, and media that encircle

the White House and Congress, creating their own weather, echo chamber, and ivory tower (to mix as many metaphors as possible).

Likewise, an astonishing array of consultants and advisors to philanthropy has grown up around foundations and donors, a Philanthropic Beltway that isolates foundations from the rest of the nonprofit community, not to mention the movements and people who don't speak in the language of professionals. Although numbers are hard to find, many would agree that the Philanthropic Beltway today is growing faster than any other sub-sector. For example, typically one-third or more of speakers at philanthropy conferences are consultants to foundations, while fewer than 5 percent are direct providers (in the arts, for example, a theatre company is a direct provider).

And it's nearly impossible to know how much foundation funding goes to consultants and researchers that support the foundation itself. Foundations can include such expenses in their 5 percent spend-out requirement and expend them in a variety of ways—as grants to re-grantors, as “expenditure control” contracts with for-profit firms, and as straightforward contracts with entities.

But it doesn't take long in the nonprofit sector to see the omnipresent, highly paid, well-educated consultants advising foundations and—on the foundations' dimes—telling nonprofits what to do as well. Individuals with degrees from elite universities cycle from consulting firms to foundations to think tanks and back again. Foundations lean heavily on research they have commissioned and on field experts and philanthropy consultants, rather than on nonprofit experience in the field and people trying to find a link between theory and the family in front of them. They learn about nonprofits through other foundations—“coffee klatch due diligence” as one grantmaker has said. This Philanthropic Beltway creates a filter between foundations and nonprofits, which already act as a filter between communities and foundations.

It is the analog of the management-centric paradigm among non-profits. Both promote professionalism and expertise as the best ways to identify problems, craft solutions, and implement strategies. In human service nonprofits, “client engagement” too often is nothing more than prettified customer feedback. In philanthropy—where equity is the new flavor of the day—funding equity too often means not much more than funding research, convenings, and dialog with other foundations, consultants, and a few carefully chosen nonprofits.

Remembering democracy

Democracy—if we still believe in it—gives respect and authority to non-experts. We believe that any citizen can run for office, not just those who are well born or well educated. We believe that non-professionals can vote. We believe in civilian control of the military.

Movements—in contrast to foundation initiatives—come from those who are most directly affected by a problem. Successful movements often gain moral and financial support from the elites, but they aren’t directed or led by experts. They continue to evolve in turbulent, sometimes chaotic, sometimes fractured ways, but democracy is often like that.

Let’s stop insisting that we are a sector of experts and professionals. Let’s reclaim the phrase “volunteer sector.” Let’s see ourselves in service to democratic movements, rather than as leaders and researchers of those movements. Our country, our communities, our earth—and yes, our nonprofit sector too—are at risk if we don’t.



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Listen to [Independent Sector's Civil Renewal](#) podcast. In the fourth episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks with Kevin Washington, president and CEO of the Y, to reflect on Masaoka's piece.

Religion and American Civil Society

By Kay Coles James

The exercise of faith serves many functions, but its paramount role is to function as the foundation of civil society.

More than 200 years ago, in his 1796 farewell Presidential address, George Washington issued a stern warning. He described religion and morality as “indispensable supports,” the “great pillars of human happiness,” and the “firmest props of the duties of men and citizens,” and, prophetically, alerted us to the harm that would come if America ever drove religion and morality from our society:

Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Looking around today, we see so many examples of the breakdown George Washington warned against. Even as many Americans enjoy unimagined wealth, comfort, and technological convenience, our society is suffering. Broken families, wanton crime, drug dependence, widespread depression, and suicide are common features of daily life in communities from coast to coast.

At [The Heritage Foundation](#), our vision is to build an America where freedom, opportunity, prosperity, and civil society flourish. To ensure the long-term sustainability of our great nation, we must not only promote economic opportunity and limited government, but also care for and nurture the “third sector”—civil society.

But what exactly is civil society? And what is religion’s role in it?

As comprehensively [defined by the World Bank](#), civil society is “the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations.” Reflecting its breadth of participants, civil societies are enlivened by “community groups, non-governmental organizations, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.”

In short, civil society is a fusion of many different types of associations. Given that only a subset of these associations relates to faith and religion, why do I believe religion is so important to civil society, and why did Heritage include a flourishing civil society in its vision statement?

The answers to those two questions are remarkably similar. Religion plays as central a role in civil society as civil society plays in the vision for a better world that propels Heritage forward.

Since fully understanding how religion plays into civil society hinges on how one views religion, we first need to clarify what we mean by it. Is the exercise of faith simply a response to the unknown or a social convenience? If so, the value of religion is merely tangential, much as scaffolding is to a structure. Alternately, is the exercise of faith borne of a sincere conviction in the existence of God? If so, then religion is the foundation on which people of faith must build all else.

If we believe, as I do, that God and religion play a vital role in civil society, then the circumstances now surrounding us are deeply troubling. After all, we are reminded—often painfully—that the health of a civil society is dependent on religious expression and liberty.

I believe that is what George Washington was urging us to always remember. But, looking around today, it's a truth that seems to have been forgotten. Weekly church attendance is down among many Americans, and young people are more likely to consider religion unimportant. Among those who do believe in a higher power, only a slim majority of Americans now believe in the God of the Bible.

Meanwhile, the presence of religion in the public square has shrunk dramatically, with prayer banished from classrooms, the Ten Commandments removed from public settings, and even the traditional greeting of “Merry Christmas” often pushed aside in favor of “Happy Holidays.”

Faith and fellowship are receding from the daily lives of millions of Americans, and the implications of this trend seem graver for our society today than ever before. Because as they recede, ever-greater degrees of disconnectedness, despair, violence, and death are filling the void.

Is this mere coincidence? I think not. Proverbs tells us, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” And absent the clarity and calm that faith brings to so many, our people are indeed perishing.

Not coincidentally, destructive choices are becoming the norm. Teens are choosing to have premarital sex in order to seek love and, perhaps, identity. Adults are choosing not to get married, often relegating their children to life in single-parent households. Families are choosing not to attend church or raise their children in the faith. And generations are choosing to move apart rather than remain together to care for the young and old alike.

But just as our choices have led to these outcomes, so too can they lead us to a better place. Against Washington's warning, we have excluded religious principle from our national morality. And in so doing, we have shaken the foundation on which our society was built, with terrible results. This corrosion can be corrected, if we so choose, and restoring religion's role in our civil society—in our homes, communities, and country—is a critically important place to start.

Why? Because while the exercise of faith serves many functions, its paramount role has been—and, I believe, must again be—this: Religion is the foundation of a civil society.



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Civil Society in a Majority-Minority America? California Offers Both Hope and Caution

By Karthick Ramakrishnan

The contours of civil society are influenced—but not bound—by America’s larger demographic curve. On the leading edge of that curve, California shows the kind of intentional, strategic role that civil society might play in a more equitable and sustainable future.

According to projections by the Census Bureau, the United States will become a “majority-minority” country by 2045, meaning that the proportion of non-Hispanic whites will dip below 50 percent, and no racial or ethnic group will be a numerical majority. What will this racial diversification mean for the future of American civil society?

Answering this question will require, at least in part, a deeper examination of racial dynamics in California. After all, California has experienced the kind of racial demographic shift over the last 40 years that the rest of the United States will experience over the next 40, with migration from Asia and Latin America fueling much of that change. And the kinds of political trends we are seeing in many parts of the country today—a sharp rise in racial anxiety, white nationalism, and movements to restore the nation to its halcyon past—are the same trends California experienced in waves from the 1970s onwards, peaking in the 1990s with the state’s racially divisive

ballot propositions (Prop 187 targeting undocumented immigrants in 1994, Prop 209 banning affirmative action in 1996, and Prop 227 undermining bilingual education programs in 1998). Since the state achieved majority-minority status in 2000, it has lived in relative racial harmony, but it still faces deep inequalities with troubling implications for a vibrant civil society.

We can derive three important lessons from California's experiences with civil society in the context of racial diversification. First, demographic change need not lead inevitably to social exclusion and racially divisive politics—actions by political leaders and social movement actors can push toward mutual understanding and racial healing. Next, innovative philanthropy needs to bridge the divisions between those who promote civic empowerment and those who promote social entrepreneurship—each is incomplete without the other. Finally, the philanthropic community needs to significantly update its understanding of philanthropists of color, and dramatically increase its outreach to them. These interventions are important to ensuring a strong and vibrant civil society in the United States under conditions of significant racial diversification.

Demography as destiny?

It is tempting to view the rise and fall of exclusionary politics and social division in California as purely a function of demographic change. In the early stages of racial diversification, racial minorities lack political power, but their growing numbers fuel anxiety among whites, who fear displacement and turn to political, legal, and social means to preserve their power. This was the case in California from the 1970s through the 1990s. In later stages of racial diversification, such as when California achieved majority-minority status in 2000, communities of color are able to defend themselves against exclusionary policies and, over time, can gain sufficient strength to push for more racially inclusive and equitable social policies.

According to this argument, the United States is in the early phases of the first stage of racial diversification, when communities of color are growing rapidly in their share of the US population, but not yet numerous enough to be politically powerful. This means we will likely see even more social division and exclusionary politics in the decades ahead, with racially inclusive politics and racially equitable policies occurring only after the country reaches “majority-minority” status in 2045.

This is an unnecessarily pessimistic view. It could not have predicted Barack Obama’s elections in 2008 and 2012, nor the kind of racially inclusive moves that George W. Bush made in 2001 and 2006 as he pushed for comprehensive immigration reform. It is also unreflective of California’s own story, which is not simply about demographic changes driving the state’s political life and civil society. The calculations and miscalculations of political leaders have mattered along the way, and so have changes in philanthropy and social movement strategy, as Manuel Pastor skillfully argues in his recent book *State of Resistance*.

The argument of “demography as destiny” is thus not only unnecessarily pessimistic, but also theoretically flawed. It ignores the role of [political leaders](#), [social entrepreneurs](#), and [philanthropic organizations](#) that promote intergroup contact and encourage racial healing. Struggles over equity and inclusion occur in the realm of social movement activity and political leadership, and civic engagement plays a vital role—both in strengthening minority communities, and in building bridges of common understanding and common cause between majority and minority communities.

Linking civic engagement and social entrepreneurship

California’s foundations have played a tremendous role in promoting civic engagement and the empowerment of low-income communities, immigrant communities, and communities of color. For

example, strategic and coordinated efforts by statewide funders on immigrant rights over the past decades **have built up regional networks** of immigrant advocacy organizations **and produced a broad base of support** for immigration policy reform at the statewide level. Building on these successes, some of the same foundations formed **California Civic Participation Funders**—a statewide funder collaborative on civic engagement in 2010 that expanded even further by 2012—to incorporate both 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 funders. The collaborative has played a significant role in increasing the scale of civic engagement investments. According to the Foundation Center, 501(c)3 funders have invested about \$300 million on civic engagement in California from 2011 to 2018, compared to a little more than \$20 million in Texas during the same period.

Operating in parallel, California has also seen a surge of funding in social entrepreneurship and social enterprise, particularly with the rise of Silicon Valley foundations such as the Omidyar Network (founded in 2004), Emerson Collective (2004), Chan Zuckerberg (2015), and Schmidt Futures (2015). Many of these Silicon Valley foundations have incorporated as limited liability corporations (LLCs) rather than as 501(c)3s, and have a stronger interest than more-established foundations in social enterprise and the flexibility to make for-profit investments that advance the social good.

These two large streams of funding—social enterprise and civic engagement—have rarely intersected, to the detriment of each. Some might argue that the funding opportunities for civic engagement and social enterprise are so vast in California that the two streams need not intersect. However, the argument for greater intersection and creative collaboration between these two funding streams is based not simply on the availability of funding, but rather on the limited impact each funding stream has when it operates in isolation of the other.

For example, civic engagement funders have paid scant attention to how civic engagement can become more sustainable, enabling grass-

roots organizations to adopt suitable models of social enterprise that diversify their revenue streams. Social enterprise funders, by contrast, have focused on the viability and growth potential of new investments, but have paid little attention to whether these efforts meaningfully engage the populations they are meant to serve, or whether their efforts have any bearing on strengthening the voices of communities of color. Combining these concerns about community empowerment and social innovation can reap multiple rewards, and pilot programs such as our [SEED Lab](#), in collaboration with Caravanserai Project and Independent Sector, can help point the way forward.

Making critical investments in philanthropists of color

The strength of civil society in a majority-minority America will also depend on promoting the growth of philanthropists of color. There have been a few national efforts to analyze, strengthen, and support philanthropy among communities of color, including by the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#), [The Community Investment Network](#), and [The Vaid Group](#). And California certainly has seen the growth of important organizations such as the [Latino Community Foundation](#) and the [Asian Pacific Fund](#).

At the same time, these developments represent only a sliver of what is possible and necessary, given the significant and growing philanthropic capacity of communities of color. This is particularly true for Asian Americans, who are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, and are rapidly filling the ranks of the upper-middle class in California and elsewhere. At the same time, their civic engagement, volunteerism, and charitable activity lags significantly behind others, setting up an unsustainable racial future with respect to philanthropic activity.

California is already feeling the consequences of failing to meaningfully engage with Asian American and Latino philanthropy. Locally serving nonprofits—including arts and cultural

organizations, and those serving the homeless and disabled—are struggling to gain institutional strength and address the growing needs of their communities.

Ensuring a strong and vibrant civil society in a majority-minority California, and in a rapidly diversifying United States, will thus require us to view communities of color not only as important targets of investment, but also as important sources of community intelligence and asset growth. Greater diversity in philanthropy will not naturally occur as a simple consequence of “demography as destiny.” Just as in the case of increasing civic engagement among communities of color, increasing philanthropy among communities of color will require intentional effort, coordination, and long-term investments by the philanthropic sector.



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What Rural America Can Teach Us About Civil Society

By Allen J. Smart & Betsey Russell

Rural America can be both incubator and innovator when it comes to creating and maintaining civil society.

In their quest to cultivate a renewed sense of civil society, Americans often look to urban areas for examples of what is and isn't working in terms of bridging divides and bringing people together. This makes sense, since approximately 80 percent of us live in urban areas. Many also point to a perceived rift between urban and rural as a bright line of division in our country, which poses a threat to our civil society writ large. There is a popular, longstanding perception (among urban folk) that rural America is somehow separate from the rest of us—either by choice or ineptitude. Studies by the Frameworks Institute have shown that most non-rural dwellers [perceive rural America](#) as either one large, poorly educated and impoverished backwater (a rural dystopia as in the film *Deliverance*), or a self-segregated, agrarian utopia, where life is idyllic and residents want nothing to do with “city folk” (à la the sitcom “Green Acres”). Post 2016, another frame has emerged: that of rural America as an angry white mob that votes counter to its own interests.

These perceptions are patently inaccurate, and they deny the very real fact that rural America is both incubator and innovator when it comes to creating and maintaining civil society.

We believe civil society exists when people who live in a defined geographic proximity work cooperatively—even when they strongly disagree with or dislike one another—to sustain mutually beneficial conditions. Think of civil society as a magic flying carpet that, to hold a community aloft, must contain many different fibers. Ideally, everyone in a community supplies at least one fiber to help weave this carpet and get it off the ground. Once in the air, some fibers naturally break off and float away, so all passengers have a responsibility for continual care and reweaving. In densely populated areas, there are enough citizens to supply fibers so that others can coast along for free. In small rural towns, everyone must contribute multiple threads and stay especially vigilant when it unravels to keep it from crashing to the ground.

Here are five lessons these rural carpet weavers can teach us:

1. Civil society is rooted in actions, not words. Despite having worked (and sometimes lived) in rural America for nearly 25 years, we have never heard anyone use the words “civil society”—not once. Nor, until very recently, have we heard mentions of “equity,” “built environment,” “food deserts,” or “capacity deficits.” The academic terminology used at the confluence of philanthropy, social justice, research, and advocacy isn’t meaningful in the rural context. It’s not that rural people aren’t educated enough to understand this lexicon; rather, they’re too busy engaging in the work of building a civil society to get bogged down in the wordplay. And it’s not that they don’t think deeply—to imply that they don’t would be the ultimate in urban elitism. Instead, while some urban researchers, thinkers, and pundits may spend time developing and analyzing theories about civil society, people in rural communities are spending time imagining and incubating the “real-world” conversations, partnerships, mutual understandings, and trust necessary to create it. In Washington state’s rural Pend Oreille County, for example, local cross-sector partners are working on a range of

projects to improve community health and wellness—and it's just one of dozens of local partnerships we've seen.

2. Civil society abhors siloes. Crossing lines of disciplines and duties is an important standard of civil society in rural America. Individuals play many roles concurrently to keep rural places running. We've met a Louisiana pastor who drives a school bus, pastors a 150-member church, runs a daycare, and is part of every civic committee concerning troubled youth. There's also a school board member who pieces together three jobs and coaches a team vying for the small school state championship. In many rural communities, juggling these multiple civic roles is the norm rather than the exception. This provides a breadth of awareness and civic knowledge that can be elusive in larger urban settings. (It's also true that individual rural towns can function as islands unto themselves, missing opportunities to build mutually beneficial relationships with neighboring towns. This may be a new frontier for expanding civil society in rural areas.)

Rural communities also can be perfect laboratories for understanding myriad ways in which social issues intersect and how to address them in a multi-faceted context rather than a hyper-focused one. An effort to create a school-based nutrition program in a small community, for example, can more rapidly surface interconnected issues such as transportation, oral health, or parental substance abuse. And a common local understanding of causes and available resources to address these problems can create a ripple effect of positive, community-wide impact.

3. Civil society can become a bastion of the privileged. In many cases, civil society in rural communities has been controlled by a few, much to the detriment of the whole. This is generally less due to nefarious intent than to a strong charitable impulse of those in power, who may feel a deep sense of responsibility to their hometowns. Those in power are quick to serve on boards, run for office,

donate to local organizations, and speak their minds. While this may ensure some consistency in leadership for civil society, the downside is that this small group of people ultimately control the community. And while alternative leaders usually exist, they may not feel encouraged to engage.

Fortunately, rural communities can change this dynamic to foster civil society. For example, traditional leaders in one rural North Carolina county never realized that the county's one community recreation center was in a place many people considered inaccessible or unwelcoming. These leaders brought new voices to their decision-making process and now have a new county-wide recreation master plan.

4. Civil society requires constant adaptation. Shifting trends in population, such as influxes of immigrants, are more readily apparent in rural communities than in urban ones. For example, a town of 10,000 is more likely than a city of millions to notice a hundred new neighbors from Senegal. We know of one Colorado community that welcomed immigrants into the fold and, in doing so, kept an important local employer in business. We also know of a town that has become harshly anti-immigrant, weakening the seams of community fabric. Scenarios like these are highly instructive for the rest of America. Communities are living laboratories for issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

5. Rural communities clearly demonstrate the link between economic viability and a strong civil society. The demise of locally owned businesses and their leaders—both main street stores driven out by big box chains, and small enterprises obliterated by the likes of health system conglomerates and corporate agriculture—has diminished the civic energy of many rural communities. In addition to diversifying rural economies, locally rooted institutions often are the first to support local ideas, give young people their first jobs, and participate in efforts that help the community

move ahead. As they disappear, they pull mightily at the fibers of the civil society magic carpet, which communities must invent new ways to reweave.

We often hear the question, “If rural communities are struggling so hard, why don’t people just leave?” Time and time again, rural residents have told us that they would rather stay and work to build the future for their communities than abandon them. They are more than willing to work cooperatively, even when they strongly disagree with or dislike one another, because they recognize that they are ultimately neighbors who will fly or fail together.

In a time when the overall fabric of our civil society appears to be unraveling at an unprecedented pace, we believe rural communities can remind the rest of us how to reweave, lift off, and, subsequently, soar.



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Listen to [Independent Sector's Civil Renewal](#) podcast. In the sixth episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks with Paul Daugherty, president of Philanthropy West Virginia, to reflect on the piece by Smart and Russell.

Keeping Democracy Alive in Cities

By Myung J. Lee

Cities continue to be the place where citizens can engage most directly with government—especially when nonprofits are there to offer capacity, expertise, and reach.

It seems everywhere I go these days, people are talking and writing and podcasting about America's lack of trust—how people [don't trust government](#) and [don't trust each other](#). President Donald Trump discourages us from trusting anything, especially the media. Even nonprofit organizations, which comprise the heart of civil society, are not exempt: A recent study [found that trust in NGOs](#) dropped by nine percent between 2017 and 2018. This fundamental lack of trust is eroding the shared public space where progress and even governance can happen, putting democracy at risk.

How did we get here? Perhaps it's because Americans have taken our democratic way of life for granted. Perhaps it's because people's individual and collective beliefs are more polarized—and more out in the open—than ever before. Perhaps we've stopped believing we can solve problems together.

There are, however, opportunities to rebuild and fortify our sense of trust. This is especially true at the local level, where citizens can engage directly with elected leaders, nonprofit organizations, and each other.

As French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, “Municipal institutions constitute the

strength of free nations. Town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach; they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it." Through town halls and other means, cities are where citizens, elected leaders, and nonprofit organizations can most easily connect and work together to improve their communities.

Research shows that, while trust in government is low everywhere, it [is highest in local government](#). This is likely because people can see that their votes influence issues they care about, and they can directly interact with their mayors and city council members. Unlike with members of Congress, citizens can form real relationships with local leaders through events like "walks with the mayor" and neighborhood cleanups. Some mayors do even more to connect with their constituents. In Detroit, for example, Mayor Michael Duggan [meets with residents](#) in their homes to help them solve problems and answer questions in person. Many mayors also join in neighborhood projects. San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, for example, participates in a different community cleanup almost every week. Engaged citizens who participate in these activities are more likely to feel that their participation in democratic society is valuable and effective.

The role of nonprofit and community-based organizations, then, is partly to sustain democracy by being the bridge between city governments and citizens, helping them work together to solve concrete problems. It's hard and important work. Time and again, this kind of relationship- and trust-building through action creates ripple effects that grow over time.

In my work with [Cities of Service](#), which helps mayors and other city leaders effectively engage their citizens to solve problems, I've learned that local government works better when it is open to the ideas and talents of citizens. Citizen collaboration can take many forms, including defining and prioritizing problems, generating solutions, and volunteering time, creativity, and expertise to set

positive change in motion. Citizens can leverage their own deep expertise about what's best for their families and communities to deliver better services and solve public problems.

More often than not, we've found that city leaders across the country know that the people living in their cities are an untapped resource. They are open to working with citizens and community groups to identify challenges and create solutions. But with tight budgets and limited staff, many cities lack the capacity to adequately connect with residents on a large scale.

Nonprofits offer additional capacity, as well as depth of expertise in specific issues that cities may not possess, like education, homelessness, and technology. Many community-based organizations also have relationships with residents that cities have difficulty reaching, such as immigrant and low-income communities. When nonprofits and community-based organizations proactively connect with city leaders, they can plug into city networks and resources, and use the bully pulpit of the mayor to vastly expand their reach. Working with city leaders helps these organizations connect to new communities and partner organizations and increase their impact.

This is the kind of collaboration that we foster, and we've seen firsthand the far-reaching impact nonprofit organizations have when they work with cities and their citizens to do good. But we're not alone. [Code for Tulsa](#), a local chapter of Code for America, joins residents who have technological expertise with city government to help implement a variety of solutions, including creating more efficient bus routes and ensuring that residents show up for court dates by texting them automated reminders. In Huntington, West Virginia, an organization called [Create Huntington](#) helps develop community ideas, often working with the city to support initiatives. This has resulted in projects such as a community-run farmers market, started by students, that now employs 40 people in a building leased by the city for a dol-

lar a year. In Anchorage, Alaska, the [Food Policy Council](#) partnered with municipal government to make community grants that fund school gardens and edible landscaping, as well as other projects that help residents in vulnerable communities grow their own food.

We now know that this kind of simple, straightforward collaboration can have effects beyond the immediate outcomes. Cities across the country are working with community groups and citizens to implement [Love Your Block](#), one of our longstanding programs to revitalize neighborhoods one block at a time through projects like painting over graffiti with colorful murals and removing trash from playgrounds. A recent Urban Institute study found that the connection Love Your Block forges between city leaders and citizens [can catalyze collective action](#) by residents, boost investment in the neighborhood, and strengthen feelings of trust, all of which enhance their ability to effect change.

Coming together to identify and address concrete, local problems such as a vacant lot covered in litter or a clogged city waterway gives neighbors a way to develop relationships with each other and with the city where they live. Even after the projects end, the new relationships keep people coming together and bring more people out for future community engagement work. As one Love Your Block participant in Phoenix said, “The real change doesn’t come necessarily from the government. I think it comes from the community and the partnerships that are created in the community.”

When nonprofit and community-based organizations connect neighbors with each other and citizens with their local governments, they strengthen democracy, one relationship at a time. More often than not, city leaders are looking for partners to help them break down silos and solve the problems they face. Fostering dialogue and collaboration helps communities solve local problems today, and builds the trust necessary to address more complex challenges together in the future.



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The Human Factor

Civil Society and Authentic Engagement in a Diverse Nation

By Angela Glover Blackwell

Discourse and dialogue have always been the hallmarks of civil society, but when the power of government is used systematically to divide and exclude, it is the stinging conversations and actions at the leading edge of civil society that will reestablish the democratic ideals of an equitable democracy.

For years intellectuals have wrung their hands about how to sustain a vast, vigorous civil society in an increasingly diverse nation. But today, millions of people—activists of color, youth, and women especially—are taking multi-pronged action to defend civil rights, democratic values, and norms of decency. In my 40-plus years as a professional in civil society, I have never seen such an energized populace working to advance America's highest ideals of justice, inclusion, fairness, and opportunity for all. Now a deeper, more exhilarating question arises: Can robust civic engagement, grounded in the quest for full inclusion and equity, produce an authentic, modern-day civil society that redefines the public good and ushers in a 21st-century social compact?

Alexis de Tocqueville rightly recognized that a uniquely American public spirit was required to sustain the democratic experiment. He viewed civil society as a check on tyranny and despotism, and a driver of community. But the goals of civil society have always

been amorphous, and its nature and composition have changed with the times and shifting power relations. Tocqueville's exhaustive account of the best and the ugliest in the nation reminds us there is nothing inherently good about civil society. The good lies in how and for whom it is put to work.



Youth making their voices heard at the State Capitol in Sacramento, California, during a day of action at the annual Free Our Dreams Summit. (Photo by Chione Flegal, PolicyLink)

At the time of Tocqueville's observations before the Civil War, American civil society was the exclusive domain of white men. He saw citizen associations empower those it served while, for the most part, defending the brutal oppression of others: slavery in the South, anti-black prejudice and exclusion in the North, and the slaughter of Native Americans.

For 150 years after Tocqueville's tour, countless organizations and institutions professed to serve the public good, yet defined it in ways that protected white male power and justified discrimination and exclusion. Private societies and clubs shut out all but a select few—a

bulwark against the threat to the status quo posed by women, African Americans, impoverished immigrants, Jews, and Catholics.

The Ku Klux Klan illustrates this dynamic in its hateful extreme. People took private action to guard what they deemed as the public good, white supremacy, and to do so by any means necessary, including intimidation and violence.

But even in mainstream civil society, exclusion and prejudice ruled. Some people may look at earlier generations as models of selfless community spirit, but the nation's most prestigious and influential professions, institutions, and systems that purported to advance the public good—academia, civic leadership, and other pillars of civil society—remained the preserve of white men through most of the 20th century. And many did not open their doors without a fight.

As courts threw out racial zoning, school segregation, and other forms of legal racial separation, organizations such as homeowner councils, neighborhood associations, and parent groups flowered to achieve the same result—keep out blacks and other “undesirables.”

Many other associations—men's leagues, garden and glee clubs—formed under a more benign guise but a similar impulse: maintaining the white world in which white people wanted to live. They advanced a segregation agenda without bloodshed, but with exclusionary intent so deeply ingrained that most members could tell themselves they were simply engaging with their own kind in recreation, charity, prayer, or self-improvement. Racial, religious, and ethnic minorities were free, and in many cases encouraged and supported, to form their own leagues, churches, teams, and scout troops. But tolerance stopped at the locked gates of white clubs.

Civil rights laws tamped down bald discrimination and the most vicious displays of prejudice, at least until recently. Yet the entrenched structures of racism maintain two separate and shamefully inequitable societies: one, largely white, characterized by

opportunity; the other, disproportionately of color, characterized by poverty and nearly frozen mobility. This divide, in the context of a profound demographic shift, has pushed the leading edge of civil society from a quest for equality, or ensuring that everyone has the same legal rights, to a quest for equity—promoting just and fair inclusion and creating the conditions in which all can reach their full potential.

There is a deeply held idea of civil society as a space of polite discourse and benevolent action. But in the current political climate, as the federal government turns its back on the most vulnerable and tries to erase decades of progress toward inclusion, private action for the public good must be fierce, even confrontational. The Dreamers, Black Lives Matter, the high school students acting in solidarity with those affected by the shooting in Parkland, Florida, the Women's March, #MeToo, and many others are often dismissed as too disruptive, too political, overly focused on narrow concerns of race and identity. In fact, they embody the public spirit hailed by Tocqueville. And they stand on the shoulders of courageous, determined leaders throughout American history—through the American Revolution, women's suffrage, and the civil rights movement—who by turns have built a better, fairer, stronger nation, always against furious opposition.

Like Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Martin Luther King, Jr., leaders of today's movements are defining the edge of civil society as a fight to upend the systems and institutions that hold people back, and to create a society in which all can participate, contribute, and thrive.

It brings to mind these questions: What are the goals of civil society in a diverse, divided democracy at a moment of political crisis? Who determines those goals and the right strategies to achieve them? Whose voice, experience, and actions should command attention, respect, and funding? Perhaps most challenging, how can those who understand the transformative possibilities of an

engaged civil society cross the divides of race, generation, and style to make space for the vital, stinging conversations and actions that are essential at this moment?

The work of civil society cannot be top down. It requires the full participation and leadership of people who bear the brunt of society's greatest challenges. A young generation—exercising its agency, leading on issues shaping the future, and finding solidarity across lines of race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual orientation—must be heard as they speak their truth. Only through that prophetic dialogue can civil society move the nation to address the deep, increasingly toxic fissures in economic, political, and civil life.

The recent wave of protests and resistance efforts have gotten most of the attention, but in my travels around the country, I also see innumerable examples of low-income people, people of color, and youth working to build communities and a nation that work for all. These communities need more than glee clubs, garden societies, and philosophical discourse to improve and enrich lives. In Pittsburgh and other resurgent cities, residents are organizing their neighbors and **spearheading initiatives** to make sure new investment does not displace longtime residents but benefits all. The potent, youth-led **Alliance for Boys and Men of Color** in California has won passage of dozens of state bills and local policies to strengthen communities and improve the life chances for millions of young people. Around the country, young people are taking on sex trafficking, lifting it up as a crisis and providing desperately needed support for individuals. In a similar vein, activists **are working tirelessly** to reduce gun violence, not only the mass shootings that garner headlines, but also the daily devastation in communities of color.

Efforts like these define what government and the business sector should be doing in a diverse nation with epic inequality, and barriers that prevent millions of people from participating in economic,

political, and civic life. These efforts, fueled by the radical imagination of contemporary civil society stewards, are modeling what society must do: authentically engage diverse communities to articulate problems, determine priorities and solutions, and create a just, inclusive nation—an America that shows the world what equitable democracy looks like.



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To comment on this article, please [click here](#) and join the public conversation at *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

Listen to **Independent Sector's Civil Renewal podcast**. In the fifth episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks with Pastor Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, to reflect on Blackwell's piece.

The Best Leaders May Be Those Who “Give Up”

By Vu Le

Leadership is often defined by lists of character qualities, values, or skills. But what if the best leaders are simply those who can willingly give up things they value?

What is required for successful leadership in 21st-century civil society? When I was asked to answer this question for this article, I racked my brain for weeks, pondering it between meetings, grant proposals, reports, and the endless small and big fires that a nonprofit executive director must attend to. It is a good question. It is also similar to one that has guided the work of my organization, **Rainier Valley Corps**, as we develop pipelines of leaders of color who can address Seattle’s worsening societal problems: What kind of leaders do we need in this time and place? A partner organization, the **Center for Ethical Leadership**, first posed this simple-but-profound question to us when it was helping shape our curriculum.

At first, I thought of the leadership paradigms that must shift. In this very challenging time in America’s history, we need leaders who are humble, not arrogant; servants, not heroes; adaptive, not technical; curious, not certain; unifiers, not dividers. In addition, they must be able to embrace chaos and complexity, genuinely listen (even to opposing viewpoints), balance continual reflection and quick actions, take big risks, accept failure, and inspire with a vision that includes a place for everyone.

I was thinking of these qualities while on the light rail with my kids, ages five and two, heading home from preschool. They love the train, but on this day, it was crowded and there were no seats. As the train moved, the five-year-old fell against a stranger, while I held the two-year-old and braced for a bumpy ride. Soon, two women seated near us got up. One tapped me on the shoulder, and they insisted the boys and I take their seats. We traded places, and they stood, jostled by the moving train. Although the world has been darker lately, it was nice to be reminded that most people are still kind, still willing to give up their own comfort to help others.

It made me think that while the leadership traits I note above are all necessary, another trait—one we do not talk about often—may be the most important leadership quality of all: The leaders we need in this time and place must be willing to give up things that make their existence comfortable, even meaningful.

A few months ago, I learned about an organization called **Can You Not PAC**. While there are organizations that encourage and support women, people of color, and LGBTQIA candidates to run for public office, Can You Not's mission is to discourage straight, white men—who have dominated public office for hundreds of years—from running.

Although the organization “started out as a fun joke,” according to its **Facebook page**, it does make a critical point. I have seen straight, white men running for public office in neighborhoods where residents are predominantly people of color. Can You Not's suggestion that these white guys might want to sit it out and use their influence to lift up others who historically have not had formal power is often unsettling or offensive, even to the most progressive of them. This parallels the thinking of those who say they want to help poor people but oppose the low-income housing unit in their neighborhood. Or those who proclaim they are invested in public education but fight the increase in taxes that would support it.

How is this relevant to civil society? The societal disparities that we as a sector are trying to address are many, but we may be perpetuating them through our own practices and unwillingness to surrender our privilege. For example, the vast majority of nonprofit directors, foundations CEOs, and board members are white. Although the sector is majority women, the leaders of larger, and thus more-influential, organizations tend to be cis-gender men. And although most people affected by injustice are people of color, only around 10 percent of philanthropic dollars go to organizations led by communities of color.

In light of the challenges facing our communities, civil society leaders must be willing to give up the things they care about, not out of pity and charity, but in recognition of and in response to systemic injustice. Among other things, it means sometimes we men do not apply for that perfect job, even if we think we are well qualified for it. It means white allies sometimes do not take the microphone, literally or figuratively, so that others can have a chance to speak and be heard. It means larger organizations sometimes do not pursue catalytic grants, even if they have a high chance of getting them, and instead support the smaller, grassroots organizations led by marginalized communities. It means foundations share decision-making power with nonprofits and communities who have lived through the inequity they are trying to address.

And, probably hardest of all, it means all of us must let go of our own emotional comfort and ego so that we can have honest conversations about systemic racism, historical and ongoing atrocities, political divisiveness, and other root causes of inequity. By letting go, we can talk about how, in our pursuit of economic gains or existential meaning, we may unwittingly perpetuate injustice even as we seek to end it.

A white colleague of mine once told me that she will never again apply for an executive director position at an organiza-

tion that serves primarily people of color. Another colleague told me she plans to give her entire inheritance back to the Native community, after discovering that her family's wealth came from displacing Native families. On the train heading toward a just and equitable society, we must acknowledge who always gets to be conductor, who always is forced to stand and struggle for balance, whether we got our seat only because of unearned privilege, and whether it is now time for us to get up so that another can sit down.

Although it seems that by yielding to others we are giving up a lot, there is also much to gain. My kids on the train, for example, learned a lesson about kindness, which I hope they will pay forward and thus strengthen our community. When each of us, following our leaders, examines our own privileges, power, and resources, and thoughtfully understands how we got them and when to intentionally let them go, it leads to a better community—one we all benefit from.

But relinquishing the things we are used to having is not easy to do, and there is no certainty that our sacrifices will lead to the ideal outcome. Who is to say that when my white colleague does not apply for this executive director job, it will go to a person of color? What if a guy does not run for office to increase the chances for women candidates to succeed, and another dude runs and wins, but has awful policies? What if I let down my guard, reveal my weaknesses and inexperience with talking about race or transgender identity or disability, and get called out?

There are no guarantees that these things won't happen. And it is paradoxical that the kind of leaders we need must be willing to give up being a leader at all. However, the comfort of certainty, simplicity, linearity, and clear-cut answers is another privilege that the leaders we need in this time and place must be willing to sacrifice.



Vu Le is the executive director of the **Rainier Valley Corps**, a social justice organization in Seattle with the mission of supporting leaders of color, strengthening organizations led by communities of color, and fostering collaboration between diverse communities. He writes the blog nonprofitAF.com, which is usually a lot funnier.

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What Motivates People to Participate in Civil Society?

By Ryan Streeter

Every year tens of millions of Americans sacrifice their personal time and resources to participate in civil society in some way. Why do they do it? The answers are varied and intertwined, but it might boil down to this: Civic-mindedness starts early, runs deep, and aims higher.

Why do we join with others and offer our time and money to make the world a better place? Participating in the institutions of civil society by volunteering and contributing resources is one of the great rebuttals to the overly narrow, Darwinian conception of self-interest that dominated so much social and economic thinking in the 20th century. If satisfaction depends primarily on accumulating money and power, why do so many people reduce both for the sake of others?

It turns out the fabric of our personal interests are interwoven with strong cords of generosity. Research has shown that babies and toddlers **recognize generosity and sociability**, and **react negatively to their opposite behaviors**. Our prosocial tendencies continue into adulthood, but they need consistent encouragement and reinforcement. As public policy researcher Arthur Brooks chronicled in his book, *Who Really Cares*, we give and volunteer when we feel responsible for others. Responsibility is cultivated at the household and community levels, often through religious

engagement. As Brooks writes, people help others through civil society not because they want a tax break, but because they have a sense of duty and feel obligated to give back to their communities.

In addition, the more people feel duty-bound to serve others through civil association, the **happier** they **are**, which is important to understand if we hope to get a better sense of how civil society works. It is a cliché to say that money **does not make you happy**, and even though many of us try to prove the cliché false, we soon discover, paradoxically, that our lives are “fuller” when we let go of our time, money, and energy for people and causes outside ourselves.

Fulfillment: The first and most basic answer, then, to the question of what motivates us to participate in civil society is simply the pursuit of happiness. Or, to be more specific, happiness understood as fulfillment. Happiness, properly understood, has less to do with material gain than teleological gain. Human beings are wired to find purpose and meaning in the pursuit of perfection and improvement. Betterment and fulfillment are about realizing potential. Giving to people in need, fixing problems that hurt or inhibit others, and seeking the good of the communities in which we live all have more to do with taking something from a lesser to a better, or fuller, state. In our quest to find fulfillment, we typically do so not only by **trying to fulfill our own potential**, but also by helping others and their communities fulfill theirs.

Empathy: Moral sentiment theory, as articulated by Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, argued that our moral judgments and actions are rooted in sympathetic experiences. We always care more about the troubles of someone close by than someone far away, or someone with whom we can identify compared to someone with whom we cannot. One survey found that low-income people **were more likely** than high-income people to give money to charity to meet basic needs and help “poor people help themselves.” Other studies **have found** that the more empa-

thy people feel for someone in pain or distress, the more they will do to help, even if they know the pain or distress will end soon.

Awareness: Higher levels of education predict higher levels of giving and volunteering. People with more education **have more exposure** to the reasons why socioeconomic problems exist, and to organizations and networks that **can help solve** those problems. The combination of awareness of both problems and possible solutions prompts engagement in civil society. Completing college **has a greater effect** on volunteerism among students who are socioeconomically least likely to graduate, suggesting that the expanded horizons afforded by higher education make people more civically minded.

Feeling needed: People who feel like they have something to give and believe their particular skills and abilities can make a difference are more likely to participate in civil society than those who do not. People who **like to teach others**, feel needed by others, have had people ask them for advice, and believe they have contributed to the well-being of others are more likely to volunteer than people without those attributes. For these reasons, it should be no surprise that one way to **increase the likelihood** that people will volunteer is simply to ask them to do so. Interestingly, feeling needed is especially strongly associated with giving to secular organizations. Givers to religious organizations tend to be motivated by other reasons.

Faith and transcendence: People who are more religiously engaged—that is, they attend religious services and say their faith is important to them—**give more than non-religious people**, and they give larger gifts on average compared to all givers. Sometimes religiously motivated giving is aimed at curing a social ill such as poverty, but it is also driven by a sense of giving to something more important than oneself, something transcendent. In western theological traditions, the goal of reflecting the personality of God in the world involves giving, because God is the giver of all good things. Regular tithing is not just a way of keeping the lights on

at church. It is also a way of participating in what God is doing in the world, something that transcends any meaning you or I may attach to our giving.

Involvement in religious communities also **produces more voluntarism**. While popular culture and the media typically portray religious faith as an incubator of bigotry and close-mindedness, it would be closer to the truth to regard it as an incubator of community awareness and engagement. In fact, involvement in religious organizations during youth **positively predicts multiple forms** of voluntary activity during adulthood, such as both formal and informal volunteering, and membership in community-based organizations, even if the individual is non-religious as an adult.

In non-religious contexts, people who **experience awe** or feelings of elevation are more generous. These feelings of awe can come simply from viewing inspiring photos of nature, but they also result from witnessing people **doing morally exemplary acts** and good deeds. Also, more than younger givers, who get involved in their communities for personal and professional reasons, older givers contribute because they want to pass on something of value to younger people. This, too, is a kind of transcendence: giving to something that outlasts you.

Moral formation: Woven through the foregoing reasons for participation in civil society is the central importance of moral standards and values. A grounded sense of what is right and wrong, just and unjust, prompts people to join with others to do good in the world. Research **has found** that people who have internalized a principle of care, or the belief that people in need should receive help regardless of whether or not one feels empathy for them, are most likely to give to organizations that help the poor.

A couple of cross-cutting themes are woven throughout the foregoing sources of civil association. First, getting people involved

in the life of civil society at an early age is the best way to raise a generation of civically engaged adults. Being in situations in which generosity is experienced up close and personal has a lasting impact on moral formation, empathy, and the belief that one has something to give. Second, institutions that inculcate moral values, not just principles, are invaluable. Moral values and sentiments prompt action in ways that simply knowing what is morally right does not. For this reason, a combination of embeddedness in religious and spiritual communities, education, and time with friends who actively participate in their communities is the best formula for strengthening a sense of moral elevation that prompts us to leave our homes to go out and help others.



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Civil Society in the Age of Incivility

By Ai-jen Poo

Systems are the bedrock of every society, but it is our shared dignity as human beings that truly determines whether a society works. When society becomes uncivil, it is clear that only our shared humanity as a people can save it.

How should civil society respond when the values that define who we are collectively in America—equality and inclusion, freedom of speech, sanctuary to those in need, due process, and protecting the most vulnerable among us—appear to erode?

Through a decade of organizing at the **National Domestic Workers Alliance** (NDWA), I have found the answer lies in our shared dignity as human beings. The women I work with—domestic workers, who do the work that makes all other work possible—have taught me that humanity is at the core of civil society. While there are systems and rules, our values and connection to one another are at the heart of how, and whether, civil society works.

NDWA fights for the respect, dignity, and opportunity of domestic workers: the nannies who take care of our children, the house cleaners who manage our homes, and the care workers who support elderly and loved ones living with disabilities. Behind the closed doors of private residences, in the shadows of the economy, domestic workers ensure that the most important aspects of our lives are safe and in good care. Yet despite their critical contributions to our society and economy, domestic workers have never

enjoyed the rights and protections that most workers in the United States have come to expect, including the right to a minimum wage and overtime, protection against discrimination, the right to collective bargaining, and protection against sexual harassment. As a mostly women-of-color and immigrant workforce, they've outright been excluded from fundamental labor laws.

Decades of grassroots organizing by domestic workers and their supporters, including congregations, labor unions, employers, and others, have brought about legal and policy change. Most recently, NDWA helped win federal regulatory changes that extended minimum-wage protections to more than two million home care workers. We also fought for and won state labor laws—Domestic Workers Bills of Rights—in eight states. Yet even with these achievements, no law alone can ensure that society recognizes the humanity of this workforce. The cultural norms that shape behaviors and the treatment of domestic workers are far more powerful. Whether we value this work equally to that in other industries, or whether we see this workforce as true professionals or as informal “help”—these are beliefs that are deeply embodied in people, and only people can shift them.

For care workers, this humanity begins at home. The average care worker for the elderly earns a median annual income of \$13,000 per year. This income defines the neighborhood she lives in, the food she has access to, the education her children will receive, and the transportation she can rely on. It is a working poor life, where working hard does not pay the bills; there are limited options and no luxuries. Oftentimes, the same care worker will go to work in a neighborhood on the other end of the wealth spectrum, where the family she supports may pay more for a pair of shoes than she pays in rent. And yet, she cannot and does not dehumanize that family. Her job requires that she genuinely cares for and connects to the humanity of the people in her charge. Home care for the elderly in particular, at its heart and its best, is supporting the dignity and

well-being of another human being who is no less human, but simply needs more assistance with their daily tasks of living.

In our years of organizing, we have seen domestic workers bring this same sense of humanity and care to their advocacy. That is why fighting for the respect and dignity of this workforce, in effect, is fighting for the respect and dignity of how we treat all members of society. As more families find the need to outsource the work of their home, we have a growing reliance on domestic workers to provide the services that enable other family members to work outside the home—from cleaning to caregiving. With a growing aging population that increasingly prefers to “age in place,” meaning to receive personal assistance and medical in their homes as long as possible rather than moving to a nursing home, care workers support a new quality of life for older adults. This has led NDWA to launch campaigns that engage with employers, find solutions that increase affordability for families, and simplify a complex relationship. They begin and end with the understanding that we are all interconnected, and human, with similar basic human needs.

It is not an accident that throughout US history, in times of extreme inhumanity or incivility, social movements comprised of masses of everyday people, moved by their basic humanity, turned the tide. The labor movement of the 1930s addressed the incivility of extreme inequality and poverty, the Civil Rights movement addressed the incivility of Jim Crow. These social movements fought for the humanity and values of the nation. At NDWA, we believe that the American people themselves must be activated and empowered to maintain a healthy civil society. And when civil society is uncivil, only the people, armed with their humanity, can catalyze the renewal of the values that secure it.

No moment is more important than this one for the heart of our society. We live in an age of incivility. We are seeing a rise in dis-

crimination, a reduction in empathy, and the explicit targeting of growing groups of people—Muslims, immigrants, and mothers, to name a few. The effect spreads to us all, and today, in 2018, we are experiencing this at an all-time high. As a workforce disproportionately powered by immigrant women, domestic workers, their families, and the families they support all feel the direct impact of incivility toward immigrants.

Undocumented nannies like Luz, who care for the young children of their employers, are under increasing threat for their safety. The changing political climate could not only impact Luz's ability to stay where she has made her home, but also separate from her family members, who are DREAMers and US citizens. For her employer Amy, this fight is also personal. Were Luz deported, she would be unable to work outside the home until she found someone else she trusted and who had the right experience, and her children would lose the care of someone they have come to love. To simply assume that market forces would supply an adequate replacement disregards both the unique human quality of care work and the fact that the care sector is growing at a rate five times faster than other industries. Without more government investment, it will be impossible to retain and grow this important workforce to meet the growing demand for this work.

As the current federal administration continues to enact uncivil and inhumane policies, including “zero tolerance,” which prosecutes all migrants arriving at our borders and forcibly separates children from their parents, the need to fight for our shared humanity has become the most important one. Hundreds of thousands of everyday people have already responded to the images and sounds of children being held in cages and transported away from their parents like prisoners. On June 30, people took to the streets in more than 780 small towns and big cities around the country, participating in marches and actions led by **Families**

Belong Together, a campaign anchored by NDWA, MoveOn.org, and other groups. This unified call for the immediate reunification of these children with their families—and an end to the “zero humanity” policies of prosecuting, separating, and detaining families for seeking safety and a better life—offers hope for a restoration of humanity, hope in our rising tide of the 21st century.

In this age of incivility, we must learn from domestic workers and the thousands who are mobilized in this moment. We must collectively fight for a society that is truly civil so that civil society can thrive; the very foundation of civil society is at stake. The people of this country are realizing that it is up to us—everyday people and our organizations—to rise to the occasion and act—not only to stop incivility, but also to remind us of the humanity that is both the foundation and at the heart of civil society. A renewal of civil society is overdue. And it must be driven by our shared humanity, from the bottom up and from the inside out.



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Public Trust Reboot: Unleashing the Millennial Civic Spirit

By Yordanos Eyoel

Why millennials' values and ethos make them uniquely poised to close America's civic leadership gap, and how to tap into their civic spirit.

Like a body gasping for oxygen in the midst of a heart attack, so is the current American civil society gasping for the “public spirit” that enamored sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century and has sustained our democracy since. This decline has culminated in a lack of civic trust. Today, Americans **have largely lost faith in the pillars** of 20th-century democracy, with only 41 percent expressing trust in organized religion, 20 percent in the media, and 23 percent in organized labor. **We are also less trusting of each other.** By 2055, America will no longer have a single racial or ethnic majority—yet our most ethnically diverse communities **suffer from higher levels of social distrust**, highlighting that our society is far from embracing the power and potential of a more diverse and inclusive country.

While these trends are consistent across all age demographics, the epicenter lies with millennials—those **born between 1981 and 1996**—who **will soon comprise** the largest segment of the US electorate. Only 25 percent of millennials **express confi-**

dence in the democratic system, and a significant majority (67 percent) in one survey expressed that “you need to be very careful in dealing with people,” illustrating an alarmingly distrustful attitude.

Despite the stakes millennials hold in shaping our country, they are systematically excluded from the civic dialogue, including from the inaugural articles of this essay series. This is not unique to this moment in time. Throughout our history, civil society has contributed to the silencing of young voices by providing narrow access to leadership in both thought and practice. Young leaders such as Alice Paul, Cesar Chavez, and DeRay Mckesson have had to chart a resistance path outside institutional civil society to exercise their leadership. And even when young civic leaders do emerge on the national stage, they are seen as extraordinary rather than representative of their generation and peers. Over time, civil society has failed to reinvent itself to ensure that not just a select few but all young people are informed, empowered, and able to exercise their civic agency. This is despite the fact that the vision, leadership, and tenacity of young people has garnered some of the most transformational changes in America.

Today, we see civil society not only perpetuating this pattern, but also losing relevance and lacking the cultural competence to engage millennials effectively. The institutions that make up civil society have been slow to adapt to the way that rising generations think, learn, and act, leaving young people disconnected and disenchanted.

This crisis of civic trust, coupled with the rise of a new generation, presents a window of opportunity for American civil society to chart a new course. Our ability to reboot civil society depends on unlocking millennials’ civic leadership potential by gaining a deeper insight into their unique values and powerful ethos. Here are three such insights:

1. **Millennials view the common good as the collective responsibility of all sectors—civil, private, and public.** Both the 2017 and 2018 millennial surveys by Deloitte Consulting LLP concluded that young people believe business should prioritize not only the bottom line, but also employees, society, and the environment. Additionally, most believe it is important to give back to their community through work. They want to work for leaders and institutions that embody and produce positive societal value, irrespective of sector. In this regard, civil society also has a long way to go to unshackle itself from the structures and norms that have upheld disenfranchisement in America. Despite its mission, the social sector has often contributed to inequity and injustice by advancing top-down solutions with limited input from and/or ownership by the communities it impacts. To authentically appeal to millennials, each sector must evolve to become more stakeholder-driven and responsive to its community's demands. They must engage those proximate to the issues they seek to solve while also building the muscle for cross-sector collaboration to advance public good.
2. **Millennials live at the nexus of personalization and community.** They are socialized to operate through a loose connection of networks, which enable them to explore and tap into different dimensions of their interests and identity. This affects how they prefer to engage in civil society as well; they desire a personalized, individual journey, combined with access to a social network that cultivates community and a shared mission. Through the use of social media, millennials have grown accustomed to platforms that enable users to create an individual brand, curate a personalized experience by following and engaging with topics and people of interest to them, and be a part of self-selected communities organized around shared interests and goals.



Voters submit their votes with the Voatz tablet system at the Michigan Democratic State Party Convention in April 2018. (Photo courtesy of Voatz)

Millennial-led organizations—including **Watsi**, which connects donors with people who can't afford health care, and **Voatz**, which uses biometrics and blockchain tech to help people vote securely—are leveraging this formula of personalization and community building to engage millennials in civic activities. Organizational models like these are not limited to new entities; some long-standing institutions are also making significant headway in terms of adapting their platforms to better reach millennials. **United Way Worldwide**, for example, has revolutionized its giving campaigns through creating inspiring causes and effective integration of tech-based tools through a partnership with Salesforce.org. The **NAACP** is also investing

in millennials and post-millennials under the leadership of **Tiffany Dena Loftin**, director of Youth and College Division. Loftin bridges traditional, community-based organizing with social media savvy, which facilitates deep skill-building while developing comradery and shared vision across geographies. These exemplars provide a blueprint for civil society institutions to think strategically about their engagement models: leveraging technology, creating both personalized and communal experiences for supporters, and personifying issues through effective use of storytelling.

3. **Millennials see social impact as self-expression.** The belief that change happens through a series of daily decisions is perhaps the marker of this generation. While millennials have largely lost faith in institutions to drive change, they are finding ways to exercise their agency through purchasing decisions, entrepreneurship, protests, and social media campaigns that use tools such as online petitions. They believe these individual choices will add up to systems change.



Tiffany Dena Loftin, national director NAACP Youth and College Division speaks to a group of young people about the importance of mobilizing to fight against gun violence. (Photo by Justin D. Knight)

This is leading to a new wave of organizations facilitating civic action in ways that resonate with rising generations. One example is **Shared Nation**, a membership platform where everyday individuals can pool their funding—with participation starting at \$2 per month—to support organizations solving big global problems. Civil society, particularly philanthropy, can tap into this millennial spirit by creating access points to crowdfunding efforts that leverage the power of grassroots giving, and by creating opportunities for small-but-meaningful civic actions that unleash the power of the “**everyday change maker**.”

As long as we continue to look at our country’s crisis of trust from the lens of 20th-century institutions and fail to recognize the need for a system reboot informed by a new generation, we will deepen the chasms that threaten our democracy and alienate the very people that have the power to redeem it.

So how do we change this? We can start by taking three important steps:

1. Invest in young leaders and entrepreneurs, particularly those proximate to communities who experience civic disenfranchisement, including communities of color and low-income communities.
2. Create formal, capitalized structures for young people to innovate and lead within existing organizations.
3. Engage young leaders as experts in both mainstream and industry-specific dialogue.

Through these investments, structures, and engagement, we believe we can begin to revitalize the “public spirit,” and architect a new civil society that is reflective of and relevant to our current milieu.



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A Question of Values

Looking to Civil Society for the Values that Shape a Culture

By David Brooks

Culture is born of values, and civil society is where people live values most urgently. Amid growing social isolation in the United States, a new set of values is emerging around community, healing, and belonging, and they will likely define an era.

One of my heroes is Frances Perkins. She grew up a rather timid girl and eventually went to Mount Holyoke College, class of 1902. The school's strong social mission filled her with a burning desire to do good in the world. But although it was a burning desire, it was not a focused desire. She floated around, trying her hand as a teacher and social worker and other things, trying to get a sense of what specific vocation she was called to.

In 1911, she happened to be in lower Manhattan and witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, in which more than 100 young seamstresses burned to death due to unsafe factory conditions.

It was a call within a call. It was her “agency moment.” She already had some vague sense she wanted to do good, but here was a specific problem—a lack of worker safety and worker rights—that burned into her consciousness. She would dedicate the rest of her life to that problem, rising to become the first woman in a US presidential cabinet. She was Secretary of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt.

I find that many people go into the social sector the same way. They have a vague desire to do good, and then they feel a burning call to address a specific problem—homelessness, hunger, poverty, racism, or what have you. They hate their problem, but they sort of love it too. Love is a process of attention—you love the thing you can't stop thinking about. A lot of the people I see doing the most good in the world can't stop thinking about their problem. They are a little obsessive. Their problem has called them, it has structured their lives, it has given them something to pour their lives into. Some of them send out mass emails linking to articles about their problem. Sometimes I wish I could unsubscribe, because their emails are clogging my inbox. But I could never do that. Telling them I didn't care about their problem would be like telling them I didn't care about their child.

In other words, most people go into the social sector to solve a specific, sometimes local issue. But I started paying attention to the social sector by looking at the sector as a whole, and it has given me a different perspective on the work that many people in the sector do.

I was doing my job as a political journalist, covering issue after issue. And I started noticing that many social problems really pointed back to the same macro issue, the weakening of our social fabric. The problems were different—rising suicide rates, men dropping out of the labor force, opioid addiction, political polarization, worsening racial divisions, the violation of our basic democratic norms. But they all flowed back to social isolation, loneliness, the fraying of our communal bonds. They all flowed back to the fact that many people are less connected than they were.

I was covering politics, but it was crystal clear that the real problems afflicting the country were pre-political. They were about the withering away of the quality of our community, the level of trust we have for one another, and the common stories that make us one people.

They were about the withering away of the sense that you may disagree with me, and you may not be like me, but you are my brother, you are my sister, and, despite our differences, we are in this together.

It became blatantly obvious to me that the problems of politics were downstream from the problems of community. So then the question became: Well, who is addressing the problems of community? It's the social sector. People in the social sector may see themselves fighting racism or poverty or hunger or homelessness, but when I look at the sector as a whole from the outside, what I see is a group of people collectively reweaving community.

Moreover, I see an emerging system of values. In the 1940s and 1950s, we had an "organization man" culture that encouraged people to work in big organizations but didn't offer a lot of creativity. Then in the 1960s and 1980s, we had a highly individualistic, "I'm free to be myself" culture—a left-wing social individualism and right-leaning economic individualism, respectively—that offered a lot of personal freedom but didn't do much to help people forge communal bonds. Now, especially in the social sector, I see a new ethos forming. I don't pretend to understand it yet. Somehow this new ethos is more communitarian. It is suspicious of big institutions but trusting toward small ones. It is about commitment and service and redistributing power in new ways.

I hope that in conversations we can name the values that make us distinctive today. I do know that the social sector's behavior is ahead of its self-consciousness. People are living a new creed, even if they haven't yet put that creed into words.

I also know two other things. Societies change when cultures change. Usually what happens is this: Some group, often on the edge of society, finds a new and better way to live. Other people admire it and then flock to copy that new way of living. After a while, somebody names that new way. Eventually, the whole culture shifts.

Collectively, people begin to think in new ways. They begin to value different things, and love and admire different things.

I think the people in the social sector are finding, willy-nilly, new ways to live. Moreover, the values emerging there are the values America needs most right now. They are the values of community building, relationship, healing and transcending difference. If the early 2000s were defined by the Silicon Valley hackers, and the 1980s were defined by the Yuppies, and the 1960s were defined by the hippies, I believe the coming years will be defined by some of the people in this sector, who are living most urgently to build a new social fabric, who are working most urgently to build a new power dynamic, and who are thus addressing the central problem of our time.



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Listen to **Independent Sector's Civil Renewal** podcast. In the third episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks with Janine Lee, president and CEO of the Southeastern Council of Foundations, to reflect on Brooks's piece.

Civil Society as Public Conscience

By Larry Kramer

Civil society can help make sure that we in America do not turn our back on fundamental values, or forget about those who lack market and political power.

Does civil society address questions of values in ways that government and business cannot? This question makes sense if we presuppose limits on the values government and business can express. However, there are no such limits, as evidenced by the way both sectors have, throughout US history, taken positions and played roles on all sides of our nation's great moral and political debates. This is hardly surprising inasmuch as "government" and "business," no less than "civil society," comprise a multiplicity of actors with widely divergent interests, passions, and beliefs. The principle of federalism is built on the idea (well-established empirically) that different governments, operating at different levels and in different places, will respond to problems differently, creating multiple channels for competitive democratic action. Likewise, the competitiveness of the marketplace ensures that, with rare exceptions, there are business interests on different sides of most questions.

Yet while government and business may not be monoliths, their decisions and actions are subject to predictable, systematic forms of distortion. Were our political institutions perfectly democratic, they would still be buffeted by differences of opinion and preference that, as James Madison famously wrote in his essay "Federal-

ist No. 10,” are “sown in the nature of man” and beget “the violence of faction.” Not that it matters, because these institutions are far from perfect. Differences in wealth, in access, and in the ability to organize and communicate inevitably produce disparities in political power and effectiveness. Nor is this just some improvident flaw in our institutions that can be corrected. Such distortions are a baked-in operating feature of any democratic system. We can—and should—seek to moderate these to the extent feasible, but (again quoting Madison) we could not eliminate them “without extinguishing the liberty which is essential to [democracy’s] existence.” In truth, they would persist even then.

Actors in the private sector face different distorting pressures from market competition. Given the complexity of our society and economy, consumer and/or investor demands often pull business interests in opposing directions. Oil companies want to continue promoting combustion engines, for example, while utility companies and automobile manufacturers are eager to replace them with electric vehicles. The common thread is the overriding need all businesses share to generate returns—a values-limiting influence exacerbated by the principle that the only legitimate object of business is maximizing owner or shareholder value. This odd, myopic belief, an invention of late 20th century neoliberal ideologues, has been weakened in recent years by the advent of social enterprises, B corps, and public benefit corporations, not to mention the slow rise of impact investing. But the effects of these new forms are (and will always be) constricted by the overriding imperative every for-profit enterprise faces to earn enough money to remain in business.

One other systemic constraint deserves mention: Both government and business are hampered, albeit for different reasons, by severe short-termism. In the case of business, an emphasis on short-term profits is built into the structure of capital markets, as well as exist-

ing rules for accounting, public disclosure, and executive compensation. In the case of government, pressure to deliver near-term benefits is an inherent feature of competitive democratic politics, which make it difficult for political leaders to pursue long-term projects at the expense of current supporters and constituents.

These distortions matter because, realistically speaking, government and business are the most viable routes to achieving things at scale. The resources available to civil society organizations are rarely large enough or reliable enough to give them the kind of reach these other sectors attain easily. Philanthropic sources can sometimes supplement public goods that government or for-profit companies may undersupply—think of the role nonprofits play in the arts, for example, or in providing direct services to the poor—but the most serious needs and problems of society invariably require public spending, market-based activity, or some mix of the two.

What sets civil society organizations apart is that they are free from precisely the forces that limit actors in government and business; they are neither responsible to voters nor (usually) restricted by market discipline. They can be entirely mission driven, which gives them the freedom to test controversial ideas, develop challenging positions, and advocate for change based wholly on the magnitude and meaning of an issue or objective. As important, they can use this freedom to intervene with government or business in ways that overcome or circumvent the obstacles that bias these sectors' decisions and activities. Short-term pressures may make it difficult for government agencies to invest in experiments, for example, but they can take up proven concepts. Civil society organizations can establish the necessary proof and, within legal limits, help overcome political barriers that may block adoption. Nonprofit activity may likewise be able to correct market defects or foster conditions that encourage deeper business investment. Nonprofit leaders can take risks that government agents and busi-

ness managers dependably shy away from, and they can stay with efforts that take time to show results.

More profoundly, nonprofits have the freedom to play the role of “prodger,” of idea advocate, of irritant to systems that need to be irritated. Civil society can be our public conscience, helping make sure that we do not turn our back on fundamental values, or forget about those who lack market and political power.

There is a rub, of course (there’s always a rub). Civil society organizations may be free from political and market discipline, but only by subjecting themselves to the whims and caprice of philanthropic funders. This alternative distortion is to some extent blunted by the pluralistic, decentralized nature of the funder community; there are a great many funders out there, and they represent a broad range of ideologies, interests, and viewpoints. But the flaws in this system are many and well known. Scrambling for dollars is time consuming and difficult, and most funders restrict their support while failing to cover a grantees’ full costs. Awkward differences between how funders and grantees understand a problem or think it should be addressed are common. Nonprofits understandably feel that funders sometimes undervalue their expertise and front-line experience, while funders just as understandably feel responsible for making independent judgments about how nonprofits should use their resources. And while the funder community is more pluralistic than its critics allow, many viewpoints and approaches indubitably fail to find support—sometimes for worse, as well as for better.

Navigating these shoals forms a great part of any responsible funder’s work. But understanding the role civil society needs to play can provide a touchstone to guide one’s actions. That means being open to supporting new ideas. It means keeping an eye on the long-term and being willing to take risks—not just the risk that something may not work, but the reputational risk of tackling controversial matters. (As I like to say, what’s the point of being

unaccountable if you never use it?) But above all, and especially in these unspeakably awful times, it means fighting steadfastly for fundamental values and resolutely standing up for those who lack power. With so many of our political and business leaders cravenly abandoning their integrity and principles, being society's conscience has never been more important.



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Who Defines the “Good” in “Common Good”?

By Sarah L. Kastelic

If a “good” is held to be common, then surely that decision must come from community. Too often the community’s role is unexamined in this regard, but the intentionality of one Native culture in defining and protecting the common good might serve as an example to us all.

In my [Alutiiq language](#), the word for “good” is *asirtuq*. In English, it literally means “it is good.”

As an Alutiiq, my worldview and cultural values give me a specific lens through which to understand “common good.” It is a lens rooted in important questions about relationships between people, people and the environment, and people and institutions. It is also rooted in questions about the relative benefit of organized society to individual people. Civil society may benefit from a broad and inclusive examination of our worldviews and values as a path to better defining and defending the essential role of the nonprofit sector, and how it contributes to the common good. By examining my Alutiiq worldview and values, I gain insight about how the nonprofit sector plays a role in serving the common good.

My maternal grandmother, Glaphera “Gladys” Pearl Lukin, was born in Afognak, Alaska, in 1929. She was the fifth of 11 children born to her mother, Katie Noya Ellanak, and she and her family

moved among the small Alutiiq villages (several hundred people in each) of Karluk, Ouzinkie, and Port Lions, near Kodiak—the top of the Aleutian Island chain. She spoke English in school, Russian in church, and Alutiiq at home. For a period of time, she attended boarding school in Eklutna on the mainland of Alaska, and she left Alaska in 1949.

In harsh, remote, rural environments like the one in which my grandmother lived—where people historically relied on a subsistence way of life (taking our food from the land)—common good is about what is best for the collective. The common good has helped ensure the Alutiit's (plural of Alutiiq) continued existence as a unique people. It draws on the teachings of our ancestors to raise healthy, thriving, spiritually strong children who are secure in their identity as *Sugpiaq*. This is our Alutiiq word for ourselves, which translates as “the real people,” a general word for human beings that is distinct from our ancestors—the ones who came before—and spirits.

Many Native cultures in the United States and Indigenous cultures around the world are relational at our core. We are organized around extended families and kinship networks that create a natural helping system and protective capacity for *uswiillraak*, or “children.” As “the real people,” we have clear responsibilities to other human beings—including those who came before us and those who will come after us—and to the environment on which we depend. These responsibilities are encoded in our values and creation stories, which some cultures view as their original instructions from the Creator of the universe.

The **Kodiak Alutiiq worldview** specifies that there are “a set of interrelated and valued elements that sustain our well-being.” The spheres of well-being include physical, emotional, social, ethical, and cognitive, and each has several aspects:

The physical sphere (*nuna*, or “place”)

Who Defines the “Good” in “Common Good”?

- Ties to homeland
- Stewardship of animals, land, sky, and waters
- A subsistence lifecycle respectful and sustained by the natural world

The emotional sphere (*anerneq*, or “breath, spirit”)

- Faith and spiritual life from ancestral beliefs to the diverse faiths of today
- Humor

The social sphere (*suuget*, or “people”)

- Our people (community): We are responsible for each other and ourselves
- Our elders
- Our family and kinship of ancestors and living relatives

The ethical sphere (*lla*, or “universe”)

- Sharing: We welcome everyone
- Trust
- Respect for self, others, and the environment is inherent in all values

The cognitive sphere (*keneq*, or “fire, process”)

- Our heritage language
- Learning by doing, observing, and listening
- Traditional arts, skills, and ingenuity

Taken together, what does this set of values tell us about common good? Four main themes stand out. First, the Alutiiq worldview, like that of many other Indigenous cultures, emphasizes interdependence—out of necessity, we rely on one another. We are taught that each human being has different gifts and talents (provided by the Creator), all of which the community needs. Community members therefore have the responsibility to contribute their gifts and talents; we are bound together, and each person is indispensable.

Second, to ensure that all of these gifts and the natural resources on which our survival depends continue to support our existence, stewardship is essential. We are responsible for ourselves, other people, and the environment around us. We cannot afford to discount or ignore the very things that will allow us to continue to exist as humans, and specifically as the unique Alutiiq people we are.

Next, spirituality, including faith and prayer, is integral to how we are bound together, and how we care for the relationships and resources that sustain us. Our interdependence and spirituality connect us to something larger than ourselves, give us purpose and meaning, and provide a sense of belonging, which all humans need.

Finally, it is not enough to conduct ourselves properly with regard to human and environmental relationships; we are called to continue to learn more about our language, history, ancestors, and traditional arts and skills, and to share that knowledge—to pass on what we know.

I don't live on our traditional Alutiiq homelands, but I believe these principles are just as relevant in my day-to-day life in Portland, Oregon—where I lead a culturally based nonprofit—as they are anywhere else. The way I demonstrate these practices looks a little different. I do not have access to many of my traditional foods; it's harder to learn and practice Alutiiq without a physical community of fellow language learners; and most importantly, I'm separated from my extended family, from whom I derive my identity. Yet I still have the opportunity and responsibility to contribute to the common good of my Alutiiq community, and to the broader common good of my diverse local community in Portland. And according to my worldview, I have the opportunity and responsibility to strengthen my own health and well-being through these practices.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines common good as “the public good; the advantage of everyone.” My Kodiak Alutiiq worldview syncs up with that mainstream definition, but we have the

added benefit of thousands of years of lived experience boiled down to practical instructions for how to achieve it. The Alutiiq people define what the common good is for ourselves, based on traditional knowledge built and passed down over seven-and-a-half thousand years of continued existence in south and southwest Alaska. We know the practices that will provide the best way of life and future for ourselves. We know what will allow each Alutiiq to contribute to our collective well-being, steward our members and resources, conduct ourselves with a spiritual orientation, and continue to share what we know with each other and the world.

I believe the same holds true for other communities and for civil society as a whole. Many of these values and practices are common among other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Civil society has drawn on some of them, and now has the opportunity to thoughtfully consider whether other elements are a good cultural fit for an evolving understanding of the common good and the pathways that help us to achieve it.



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Civic Virtues and the Healing of Partisan Divides

By Robert A. Boisture

In a time when many are drawing a line between communities and ideologies, the best line to draw is one that goes right through every human heart—a line that leads to five essential civic virtues.

Over the past several decades, deeply entrenched forces have brought ever-greater polarization, toxicity, and dysfunction into America's civic life. Loud and angry voices have urged us to embrace a politics of anger, division, and fear—and too many of us have obliged. Meanwhile, our country's two major parties have moved ever further apart.

As a result, we are losing both the solidarity and the shared moral vision we need to maintain a strong and healthy free society. The prognosis for our democracy is not good.

If we are to arrest and ultimately reverse this decline, civil society leaders and organizations must first recognize that civil society, like every other major sector of American life, has contributed in important ways to this polarizing dynamic. Too many of us and our organizations have sorted ourselves out along ideological lines, live and work within ideological bubbles, and galvanize our supporters by demonizing those on the other side.

However effective these behaviors have been in building grassroots support for our respective causes, over the long term, they lock us into what can best be described as a partisan death spiral. As our recent history makes clear, the thought that either conservatives or liberals, Democrats or Republicans, will gain and hold power long enough to enact and sustain their vision of America is a dangerous illusion.

The much bleaker reality is that as soon as one political party gains power, the other party's top priority becomes ensuring its defeat. And when, inevitably, the party in power fails to deliver rapid progress on deeply embedded problems, the pendulum swings back to a divided government or to the other party's control.

The resulting threat to our democracy is neither speculative nor very far down the road. For example, if government remains deadlocked on how to fix the federal budget's long-term, structural imbalance, Social Security, Medicare, and other entitlement programs—along with interest on our rapidly growing national debt—will consume 100 percent of federal revenues by the early- to mid-2030s. This will leave nothing for either discretionary domestic spending or national security. The longer we defer action to fix this problem, the more wrenching the retrenchment will be.

While both parties have plans that could put us back on a sustainable fiscal path, neither has a realistic prospect of enacting and sustaining its plan. Likewise, this same political gridlock is preventing us from addressing a growing list of other urgent national challenges. The only sustainable way forward is bipartisan compromise, but if we continue to become more polarized, this compromise will become ever harder to achieve.

What, then, are we to do?

I believe we must begin by recognizing that overcoming our political polarization is fundamentally a heart-level challenge.

We must acknowledge that too many of us have closed and hardened our hearts toward those who stand on “the other side”; that too often we engage them not as fellow citizens who deserve respect and solidarity, but rather as hostile strangers to be met with suspicion and fear; and that in this process of retreating into our tribal bunkers, we have lost any sense of a shared moral vision of what America ought to be.

We must courageously step up to both dimensions of this spiritual and moral challenge—the challenge of opening our hearts in love to all of our fellow Americans and the challenge of coming together to create a shared moral vision for America in the 21st century.

We would do well to begin by reflecting on the hard-won wisdom of Soviet dissident and political prisoner Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as expressed in *Gulag Archipelago*, his classic account of the Soviet prison camp system:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart ... Since then, I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the evil inside a human being ... It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.

Regardless of our personal faith or spiritual path, or even if we do not claim one, we must commit to the hard and never-ending inner work of constricting evil and profoundly opening our hearts in love. As Solzhenitsyn notes, inspiring and supporting this work has been the central goal of all of the faith traditions. Over the centuries, each has developed spiritual disciplines and practices to guide this journey, as well as spiritual communities to support it. Today, these are priceless resources for us all.

How can we gauge our progress on this journey?

The test must be whether our actions as citizens embody the core civic virtues essential to a free society.

1. Do we recognize the sacred dignity and worth of every person?
2. Do we bring to civic life a wholehearted commitment to the greater good?

3. Do we admit that we are fallible and must therefore be open to having those with whom we disagree change our minds?
4. Do we embrace principled compromise as an essential civic virtue?
5. Do we recognize that we are all in this together and that in the long run, none of us can flourish unless all of us flourish?

Only when a critical mass of us brings these essential civic virtues to our common life will we be able to come together to take on the second challenge of renewing our democracy—the challenge of creating a shared moral vision and a new social contract for America in the 21st century.

Again, faith traditions have much to offer. Each in its own way has endeavored to envision what society would look like if its touchstones were the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of the natural world.

It is particularly thought-provoking that while some of the core principles underlying these spiritually grounded perspectives align with a liberal ideology, others align with a conservative one. Perhaps thoughtfully engaging these perspectives could help us all step outside our ideological boxes to engage in both morally grounded self-reflection and a shared search for common ground.

All of this has profound implications for civil society leaders and organizations. For a great many Americans, participation in civil society organizations is the primary place where our approach to citizenship forms—where we learn, or fail to learn, the essential civic virtues. Further, it is primarily within civil society that we will come together as a nation, or fail to come together, to create a shared moral vision for America.

America will remain a flourishing free society only if civil society proves that it is up to these two daunting tasks. May we all hope and pray that it will.



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Listen to **Independent Sector's Civil Renewal** podcast. In the seventh episode, Independent Sector CEO Dan Cardinali speaks with Stacey Stewart, president of the March of Dimes, to reflect on Boisture's piece.

Civics Can Make Us More Civil

By Stefanie Sanford

Civics has always been a deep-rooted part of American culture. It's time to get it back into our classrooms.

Earlier this summer, *New York Times* White House correspondent Maggie Haberman announced she **was taking a break** from Twitter. This, despite the fact she has more than 900,000 followers and has regularly used the social media platform to track breaking news, get tips, and engage directly and almost instantly with her readers. It was exciting and alluring—fast, vibrant, cool. But she was stepping away, she said, because Twitter has devolved into an “anger video game.”

Mark that as another victory for the trolls, the fake-newsters, and the endlessly aggrieved. #CivilityIsForLosers.

Twitter is just the latest of many technologies that promised to break down old hierarchies, democratize information, and bring people closer together. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Yik Yak, Digg, MySpace—all promised new, more-vibrant, virtual communities. Instead, they have pushed us further apart, and our civic life is riven by snark, bile, and bullying.

A promising new tool for building civil society

My embarrassing confession: I was once a civic-minded techno-optimist. Nearly 20 years ago, at the height of the tech boom, I

was a graduate student and policy advisor to the governor, shuttling between my office in the Capitol complex and my student cubicle in the University of Texas Tower, while many of my peers were starting online companies. Some were hoping to get rich, but others set up companies to foster charitable giving, community engagement, or online voter registration. It seemed like everyone was bent on changing the world with these astounding new tools.

A couple of years earlier, Harvard professor Robert Putnam published his seminal and controversial book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, in which he argues that America's civic institutions have been in free-fall since the 1960s. His evocative exemplar was that millions of Americans were in bowling leagues in the Fifties but now bowled alone. Instead of gathering in bowling alleys or rotary clubs, or even around the family dinner table, Americans were becoming increasingly isolated.

His despair about the decline of civic life didn't resonate with me. I didn't know anyone who had a bowling shirt, but I knew lots of people working to make a difference. So, I wondered, did Putnam's lament matter? Surely, all this new technology and all these energetic young people I saw scurrying about were going to replace that stodgy old order with something much better. Who needs bowling when you have Friendster?

I wrote a dissertation that later became a book about these exuberant Gen-Xers: *Civic Life in the Information Age*. I argued that civic life did not have to be rooted in old institutions that mandated regular meetings and tired hierarchies. I thought that youthful energy and technology would replace that sleepy social capital with a new version. I called it "just in time social capital."

As it does today, media coverage back then tsk-tsked the fact that young people didn't turn out to vote—"slackers!" But the young people I profiled were using technology to connect in new, more

agile ways. No dyspeptic breakfast buffets in a hotel conference room to plan that charity golf tournament. These magical online tools (email!) enabled people to get together “just in time”—to clean up a park or respond to a hurricane—then move on to the next problem. Like Haberman and her early infatuation with Twitter, I saw only exciting upsides. It didn’t turn out that way. Instead, we’ve gone from *Bowling Alone* to Angry Birds, and on to Pizzagate and Unite the Right rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Technology today: breaking rather than binding

Technology has not invigorated civic life; it has ravaged it. My Gen-Xers are now middle-aged, and have been supplanted by a generation even more entranced by technology. Today’s social platforms—Twitter, Facebook, and all those comments sections spiked with death threats—have replaced discourse with dispute, reason with rage. The promise I wrote about 20 years ago is broken. Instead, these new tools keep us on screens, and away from our communities and even our friends. That voluntary sequestration has stoked anger, fortified tribalism, and mobilized online mobs.

We are now a nation of suspicious minds. Only one-third of Americans **say they have “very great”** or even a “good deal” of trust and confidence in the political wisdom of their fellow citizens. Only 18 percent of them **trust the government** to “do the right thing.” This mistrust breeds inaction: Only about 29 percent of eligible Americans **voted in the 2016 presidential primaries**. And that makes sense; underlying this suspicion and inertia is widespread civic ignorance—only 43 percent of Americans **can name a single Supreme Court Justice**, and 37 percent **cannot name even one** of the five rights guaranteed under the First Amendment.

All this dysfunction **has led to an alarming surge** of political animosity. The irony is that in animus lies opportunity, because anger

can spur action. The problem is that anger can start things, but rarely gets things done.

Teaching civics for a civil society

My radical proposition: You want civility, teach civics. The challenge—and the hope—is that we can leverage this political anger into something productive for our democracy by rebuilding civic knowledge, skills, and agency. A good civic education builds all three—it equips young people with an understanding of democracy, the skills to effectively put that knowledge to work in their local communities to solve problems, and the confidence that their efforts will make a difference.

Civic education has been neglected in K-12 for a generation, but last September, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, [iCivics](#), and other organizations [called for its revival](#), pushing a campaign to assure access to quality civic education in every school. At the September 2017 Democracy Now Summit, 20 organizations [publicly committed](#) to increasing civic knowledge, service, and voting participation in young Americans. As a part of that event, we at the College Board committed to creating a “civic certificate” for students who complete the civics project requirement in the redesigned Advanced Placement US Government and Politics course. That action followed the 2016 redesign of the SAT Suite of Assessments, where the Reading section of every test asks students to read and analyze a passage from US founding documents (such as the US Constitution) or a conversation they inspired (such as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#) or the Seneca Falls convention).

We believe the ideas at the heart of America’s founding are as vital today as they were more than 200 years ago; it is our task as educators to make them vivid once more. The College Board is therefore also partnering with groups including [Generation Citizen](#) and [We.org](#) to help educators and students design projects

relevant to their lives and their communities. We are also working with the National Constitution Center's [Interactive Constitution](#) to bring the best constitutional thinking on both the right and left to teachers and students for free.

Of course, civics is not just for kids. A broader civic engagement campaign could get the rest of us to step away from our screens, reconnect with our common story, and bolster civility. Organizations such as [Better Angels](#) and [Difficult Conversations](#) bring individuals together for civil conversations about complicated issues. National service organizations such as the [Service Year Alliance](#), which wants to increase the number of students doing a year of service from 65,000 to 100,000, and bring diverse young people together to work on tough community problems.

Civics, like civility, can sound like a quaint artifact in this age of “anger video games,” but don’t try telling that to Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of the musical *Hamilton*. We may be the country that invented Twitter snark and Facebook misinformation, but we’re also the country that [turned the story](#) of an 18th-century US Treasury Secretary into the most popular rap-musical in a generation. The country whose greatest basketball player [spends his free time](#) creating vibrant new schools. The country where Supreme Court justices [inspire memes](#). Civics has always been a deep-rooted part of our culture. It’s time to get it back into our classrooms.



Stefanie Sanford is chief of global policy and external relations at the [College Board](#), a mission-driven nonprofit clearing a path for all students to own their future. She served more than 10 years in senior roles at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and she is the author of *Civic Life in the Information Age: Politics, Technology and Generation X*.

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Volunteerism and US Civil Society

By Susan N. Dreyfus

Everyone in the public and nonprofit sectors has a role to play in fostering volunteerism, and engagement can pay dividends for all.

In 1831, French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States to research and study the American penal system. Over the course of his nine-month tour of America, he was inspired to write about the broader workings of American society, including the uniquely American tendency toward volunteerism. In his seminal *Democracy in America*, he notes:

In the United States, as soon as several inhabitants have taken an opinion or an idea they wish to promote in society, they seek each other out and unite together once they have made contact. From that moment, they are no longer isolated but have become a power seen from afar whose activities serve as an example and whose words are heeded.

As a former public sector leader now working in the social sector, I have witnessed the tremendous impact volunteerism has on American society—on both the people providing social services and the people receiving them. These altruistic interactions often serve a broader purpose: They bond together neighbors and communities in a common cause, and enable us to see and appreciate each other's humanity. When we recognize the humanity in each other, we lay the foundations of understanding, empathy, and compassion. These then form the building blocks of a healthy civil society in which

citizens are more likely to focus on what unites us than what divides us. For these reasons, I firmly believe that everyone in the public and nonprofit sectors has a role to play in fostering volunteerism, and that engagement can pay dividends for all.

The decline of volunteering

Volunteerism **has been a unique part** of American culture and democracy, and a hallmark of American civic life, since our nation's founding. In 1736, Benjamin Franklin founded the first volunteer firehouse. In the 1800s, the rise of the social reform movement around issues like poverty, temperance, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery mobilized a new generation that had not previously been involved in civic life, including women and young people. This led to the founding of the YMCA, Salvation Army, American Red Cross, and the United Way—institutions formed largely to connect this new volunteer force to social services that improved the lives of others.

Social scientists have long noted that volunteerism plays a significantly larger role in American civic life than it does in other countries. In fact, Americans **are 15 percent more likely** to volunteer their time than the Dutch, 21 percent more likely than the Swiss, and 32 percent more likely than Germans.

And yet, despite these statistics, they have begun to raise alarm bells about a decline in US volunteerism. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, volunteerism **peaked between 2003 and 2005**, when 28.8 percent of Americans reported having volunteered the previous year. Today, that number is 25.3 percent.

This decline is consistent across every single age and education group, representing a loss of millions of volunteers. What's more, as the number of volunteers has decreased, the need for them has grown. The nonprofit sector, which relies heavily on volunteers as

a strategic resource, **has grown by 25 percent** in the past decade, according to researchers.

The nonprofit sector must reverse these trends and do more to increase the engagement of the communities we serve—particularly in the human services sector, which relies heavily on the support of volunteers to fill the gaps in federal, state, and local funding. A University of Pennsylvania study **found that community-based, human-service organizations** are the third-most reliant on volunteer staffing behind the religious and education sectors.

The impact of volunteering

Volunteerism not only supports the impact of community-based organizations in the places where they serve, but also connects individuals to one another and to the issues facing their community. It has the power to unite people of different races, ages, religions, and sexes together for a common cause. We saw this phenomenon in the outpouring of volunteerism after the tragedy of the September 11 attacks, when tens of thousands of people from across the nation came together to support victims of terrorism. Just two and a half weeks after the attacks, the American Red Cross **reported processing 15,570 new volunteers** from among 22,000 offers of assistance.

Studies **have also long touted** the mental health benefits—including feeling more socially connected, warding off loneliness and depression, and lending a greater sense of purpose to life—for those who contribute their time, and more recent studies have begun to examine the physical health benefits of volunteering. New research from Carnegie Mellon University, for example, **notes:** “Older adults who volunteer for at least 200 hours per year decrease their risk of hypertension, or high blood pressure, by 40 percent.” The study suggests that working as a volunteer could be a non-pharmaceutical option to reducing cardiovascular disease

caused by hypertension, which affects nearly 65 million Americans and is a leading cause of death.

Finally, a culture of volunteerism also opens up opportunities for communities traditionally closed off from employment, such as persons living with disability and older adults. For example, the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, recently launched [Second Acts for Strong Communities](#), an initiative to help our network of human-services organizations leverage the time and expertise of older adults who want to positively impact their communities. Through a cohort model led by senior fellows, the Alliance is gathering knowledge, creating replicable tools, and building a network of ambassadors to support the sector. We are also a partner of the Gen2Gen campaign, an effort to encourage older adults to “show up for kids” in volunteer roles. The campaign, which has a goal of mobilizing one million older adults in the next five years, even [offers a toolkit for other organizations](#) interested in mobilizing older volunteers.

Other online resources include [VolunteerMatch](#), [Twenty Hats](#), and [Points of Light](#), all of which aim to match volunteers with appropriate organizations in their communities. Special events also offer a way forward. For example, United Way Worldwide [is working to increase volunteerism](#) through its annual United Way Day of Action event—one of the largest, single-day, volunteer mobilization projects in the United States and around the world.

As I mentioned at the beginning, government also has great opportunity to help foster US volunteerism—indeed, it has historically played an important role. In his first inaugural address, President Kennedy issued a call for public service by asking Americans to, “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” President George H. W. Bush established the Points of Light Foundation, likening volunteers to “a thousand points of light,” to help create a culture that en-

courages volunteerism and offers ways to connect volunteers and organizations. President Bill Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act into law in 1993, launching a new national service corps for America known as **AmeriCorps**.

Yet AmeriCorps, and other government-funded civic and volunteer programs, may be in jeopardy. President Trump's 2019 federal budget proposal **eliminates funding** for The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that funds programs such as **AmeriCorps**, **Senior Corps**, the **Social Innovation Fund**, and the **Volunteer Generation Fund**. These programs all help promote volunteerism by connecting Americans to service opportunities, connecting nonprofits to volunteers, and raising awareness about the benefits of volunteerism.

If we are to continue to see the benefits of volunteerism, we will need a focused and concerted effort from the public, philanthropic, and private sectors to promote and foster the continuation of our national volunteer movement. I urge all leaders to continue to nourish the American spirit of volunteerism, which lies at the heart of a free, just, and civil society. For, as Tocqueville so eloquently noted, "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens."



Susan Dreyfus is president and CEO of the **Alliance for Strong Families and Communities** and chair of **Leadership 18**, a coalition of nonprofit human servicing organizations that collectively serve 87 million people. Previously, she served as secretary for the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

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Conclusion

Equity, Power-Sharing, and Renewal of Civil Society

By Dan Cardinali

The United States can restore the trust that allows civil society to flourish by emphasizing the values that have long bound us together and by adopting the newer values of shared power and racial equity.



(Illustration by iStock/smartboy10)

It's been a year since *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and Independent Sector completed the series "Civil Society for the 21st Century." The series wasn't conceived as a book, but when I read it that way, I'm filled with a kind of clear-eyed hope. Yes, American civil society has its shortcomings and its blind spots, but it is a living thing that grows and evolves.

For the past 50 years or so, the trend has been to tear down the systemic barriers that discouraged so many people from participating in civil society based on race, class, gender, sexual identity, and more. The barriers have not gone away, but I believe they are lower than ever before, and as a result we see unparalleled diversity among those actively engaged in civil society through giving, voting, volunteering, and organizing.

Difference is a good thing, but it's also complex by definition. We spend decades tearing down walls to include more voices and viewpoints in civil society, and only then does the truly hard work begin. If civil society is "private action in pursuit of the public good," then the definition of "good" must necessarily shift each time we expand our concept of the "public." We innately know what's good for the groups we identify with, but a diverse civil society asks us to consider other identities and other "goods"—and that can be exhausting.

We get tired of tearing down walls (or defending them, for that matter). We get tired of explaining ourselves and justifying our views. We get tired of trying to understand those who are "other" in appearance or identity or belief. Managing all of this difference can be exhausting, and so there's a strong temptation on all sides to retreat to our tribes, point fingers, draw lines, make assumptions, and create a list of enemies.

Civil society, in other words, can start to verge into civil war. If you simply read the headlines with no sense of perspective, you might think that's where we are today. And so, we publish this e-book to offer fresh perspectives on civil society and a reminder that despite a flawed history, American civil society has always managed its growing pains and emerged stronger as a result. In the United States, as soon as several inhabitants have taken an opinion or an idea they wish to promote in society, they seek each other out and unite together once they have made contact. From that moment, they are no longer isolated but have become a power seen from afar whose activities serve as an example and whose words are heeded.

Everything Old Is New Again

Throughout the series we offer perspectives that harken back to **Alexis de Tocqueville**'s *Democracy in America*, but in this concluding essay, I'd like to shorten that perspective a bit to discuss how civil society has weathered more recent storms—storms that many of us have experienced firsthand. I'll start with a lengthy quote that was a revelation to me:

Political extremism involves two prime ingredients: an excessively simple diagnosis of the world's ills and a conviction that there are identifiable villains back of it all...Blind belief in one's cause and a low view of the morality of other Americans—these seem mild failings. But they are the soil in which ranker weeds take root—political lunacy, terrorism, and the deep, destructive cleavages that paralyze a society.

There used to be only a few chronically angry people in our national life. Today all seem caught up in mutual recriminations – [black] and white, rich and poor, conservative and liberal, hawk and dove, Democrat and Republican, labor and management, North and South, young and old...

Extremists of the right and the left work with purposeful enthusiasm to deepen our suspicion and fear of one another and to loosen the bonds that hold society together. The trouble, of course, is that they may succeed in pulling society apart. And will anyone really know how to put it back together again?

The cohesiveness of a society, the commitment of large numbers of people to live together and work together, is a fairly mysterious thing. We don't know what makes it happen. If it breaks down, we don't know how we might go about repairing it.

Some might say, "What's so interesting about that? I read essentially the same editorial at least once a week in every major paper." But this

quote was penned by **John Gardner**, the co-founder of Independent Sector, nearly 50 years ago in his 1968 book *No Easy Victories*.

It's encouraging for me to be reminded that today's problems aren't really new, even if they are expressed differently or take a different form. And it's encouraging to me that Gardner could be so clear-eyed about the difficulties and dangers, and yet still be a fighter, a builder, a changemaker, and an optimist. After discussing the forces that threatened to tear society apart, here are the final words that he penned in *No Easy Victories*:

We built this complex, dynamic society, and we can make it serve our purposes. We designed this technological civilization, and we can manage it for our own benefit. If we can build organizations, we can make them serve the individual.

To do this takes a commitment of the mind and heart—as it always did. If we make that commitment, this society will more and more come to be what it was always meant to be: a fit place for the human being to grow and flourish.

The book—and Gardner's entire life—were about strengthening and rationalizing the institutions that could improve the lives of individuals, knit people together, and make the world a better place. He founded Independent Sector because he believed that civil society was just as important as government and business in advancing that vision of a better world.

But today, there are signs that maybe that vision is not so widely shared. Independent Sector is partnering with Edelman to refine their well-known **Edelman Trust Barometer** to fully measure and analyze what drives trust or distrust in civil society. The findings, however, are not always encouraging. For instance, when Edelman asked people in the United States: "Which one of the following institutions do you trust the most to lead the world into a better future?"

- Only 9 percent cited the nonprofit sector
- Only 11 percent cited government
- Only 18 percent cited business
- And 35 percent—a plurality of respondents—said “None of the above”

That’s a pretty bleak view. But I wonder, how different the results might be if we polled *SSIR* readers. I’m not sure that even those of us working in the nonprofit sector see our sector leading the way to a better world. We keep talking about division and cynicism and polarization as if those are external problems that need fixing before we can achieve our respective missions. But here’s the thing about civil society: It isn’t external. It isn’t other. It’s us, all of us who occupy the space between business and government, all of us who do what we can to create better communities and a better world. So when people express a lack of trust in civil society, they are essentially saying that *they themselves* feel unable or inadequate to lead the way to a better world.

That kind of pessimism is at odds with the optimism of the 1970s and 80s, when our sector was just discovering itself and coming into its own. What has happened over the past 40 years that might explain this change? Like any big problem, there’s no one answer, but let me offer an important contributing factor: The individuals in civil society feel disconnected from the institutions of civil society.

We discovered this a couple of years ago when we started organizing for Upswell LA. One of our first steps was to invite community activists and community stakeholders to a meeting in Skid Row where we laid out the vision for a three-day national convening that was deeply rooted in community. We asked these activists for their input, and their overwhelming response was: “Who are you, why are you coming into our backyard, and what difference can you possibly make?” We

represented institutional civil society, and the community said to us, essentially, “We don’t know you, we don’t trust you, and we’re not sure that we need you.”

Repairing the Disconnect

Even as institutional civil society grows increasingly disconnected from communities, community members are becoming more connected to each other thanks to social media and other technologies. As they gain self-awareness and critical mass, communities are taking up their rightful role in civil society—making their voices heard and expecting real input into decisions that institutions often make on their behalf. There is a clear clarion call for institutional leaders to pay close attention to two things that communities are demanding:

- **Power** – To borrow the language of my friend Henry Timms, “**Old Power**” or establishment organizations will only thrive and survive when they find ways to partner authentically with community-based “New Power” drivers of change. Who is at the table and what actual power do they have to influence the allocation of community resources? These questions have the potential to fundamentally disrupt the work of Old Power nonprofits, including membership associations like Independent Sector (IS). While the financial support of members is an important way to sustain IS’s operations, it has over the years evolved into conversations about individual member value and ROI (return on investment) linked to dues. Over time these calculations eclipsed IS’s commitment to be aggressively engaged with the widest range of civil society leaders and institutions. Instead, the power to shape policy and name the important issues of the day became limited to those who could afford to pay dues. The IS board has courageously taken on this issue, and others will need to do the same in order to shift power to the broader community, where it belongs.

- **Equity** – Institutional civil society needs to analyze and accept that our power was built in part—sometimes in large part—within inequitable systems. Most of us operate within inequitable organizations and all of us operate within an inequitable system. So the work of equity is both inward facing and outward facing: We have to address equity within our organizations and at the same time build it into the work we do in the world. Equity is a posture, a disposition, a tenacious commitment. Do all people have what they need to fully flourish? That posture is universal, but in the American context – given our history of slavery and Native genocide – you can’t promote equity without taking on racial equity, specifically.

But we can’t simply name these things and think that our work is done. For the institutions of civil society, the task of devolving power to the community and adopting a racial equity lens in all that we do will be difficult and messy. Let me give you another example, this time from Upswell Chicago where we worked with the leaders of the local nonprofit establishment to help define and design a racial equity framework in housing. This process was driven entirely by our partners, and we spent months building consensus around the vision and the process for such a framework, including a rather elaborate plan for focus groups organized and led by community organizers who had deep neighborhood roots. But then, just on the eve of our first focus group, one of our community partners said, “Wait a minute, we work in the Hispanic community and what we see here is a plan focused on and architected by the black community.”

That was a moment of reckoning for us, and many of us lost some sleep as we scrambled to make things right. But throughout that process, I learned that four essential character qualities are needed as the institutions of civil society seek to rebuild trust with individuals and communities in civil society:

- **Humility** – We looked at the plan for housing equity in Chicago again, swallowed our pride, and said, “You know what, you’re right. We need to re-think and re-design.” When you try to foster a conversation rooted in equity, you have to start with the assumption that there’s a lot you don’t know and that the goal of the conversation is mutual learning and growth. And then you have to be willing to change and adjust to move towards greater equity.
- **Transparency** – We decided to write about the journey in real time, trying to give a warts-and-all view of what it looks like to do this work. We shared the setbacks with our funders and our followers. For those critics who pointed out our blind spots, we invited them to share their frustrations with our audience, in their own words. It’s painful to be transparent about your shortcomings, but it’s essential to building trust.
- **Grace** – This is difficult work for everyone, and we have to be gentle with each other. In this particular case, our community partners showed grace when they accepted a national actor as a partner in exploring what a racial equity framework might look like. Fully aware that other institutional actors in the past made promises to the community that they couldn’t fulfill, our partners were willing yet again to take up this work. That’s grace, and it’s crucial.
- **Patience** – We once hoped to have a racial equity framework ready for unveiling at Upswell Chicago in mid-November, 2019, but instead what we have is a work very much in progress. And that’s probably a parable, of sorts: The work of sharing power and turning the curve on equity has to be done urgently, but it can’t be done quickly. It’s going to be a work in progress for a long time. But a work in progress is still progress, and that’s what matters.

Looking to the Future

Today there are powerful cultural changes taking place in civil society. The birthing process is painful but also beautiful and full of potential. If we as a sector can model how to authentically share power and create equity, imagine what that might mean for:

- **The future of the planet** – We are facing a clarion call, an existential moment. None of us can be disconnected from the environmental crisis, and we in civil society must wrestle with our role. Regardless of how pristine our theory of change may be around a particular mission, we must be sure at the very least that our work doesn't exacerbate the crisis. Ideally we can go further and ask how each of our organizations might contribute to mitigating the crisis, even if our primary mission area seems far removed from climate change. The future of the planet should be woven into the core mission of every civil society institution.
- **The future of democracy** – In the United States, democracy is the way in which communities come together to wrestle and progress. We can't get to societal solutions around anything—especially climate—without the democratic institutions that help get us there. We used to presume that democracy was a given in our theory of change. Now it looks to be stalled or even broken, requiring us to address it directly. But I would caution that the work of strengthening democratic institutions requires some difficult questions about our values and how we live them. Take voter registration for instance: If we say that's something we value, but we work to support voter registration only in targeted Red or Blue areas, then we might actually be contributing to the problem and further eroding trust.

To sum up my argument: If we as a nonprofit sector can figure out how to share power and create equity in such a way that more

individuals begin to put their trust in the institutions of civil society and feel connected to those institutions, then we just might be able to ensure the future of the planet and the future of democracy.

I realize that may sound unrealistic or even Pollyannaish, but I would argue that's exactly the kind of optimism that we need at this moment in history. We have to view our sector from the perspective of its assets and strengths, and to be able to then tell that story better. We have to be honest about the trends we are facing but view them in terms of potential, not problems. We have to recognize that the role of civil society is very much a self-fulfilling prophecy: We can only accomplish as much as we believe we can accomplish.

At the risk of hagiography, let me come back one more time to John Gardner. More than 30 years after *No Easy Victories* was published he wrote the foreword for the book *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*. He's near the end of his life now, he's seen massive social and political changes, he's seen problems morph and multiply even as the nonprofit sector has enjoyed unprecedented growth—and yet through it all, he maintains the optimism that marks a true changemaker:

Societies that keep their values alive do so not by escaping the process of decay but by powerful processes of regeneration. That we have failed and fumbled in some of our attempts to achieve our ideals is obvious. But the great ideas still beckon – freedom, equality, justice, the release of human possibilities...

When the American spirit awakens it transforms worlds. But it does not awaken without a challenge. Citizens need to understand that this moment in history does in fact present a challenge that demands the best that is in them...

We are capable of so much more than is now asked of us. The courage and spirit are there, poorly hidden beneath our surface pragmatism and self-indulgence, left somnolent by the moral

indifference of modern life, waiting to be called forth when the moment comes.

I believe that's a sentiment that Tocqueville himself would approve of. The challenges we face today are enormous, but the stakeholders in civil society are more numerous and more diverse than ever before. By emphasizing the values that have long bound us together, and by adopting the newer values of shared power and racial equity, we can restore the trust that allows civil society to flourish.



Dan Cardinali is president and CEO of **Independent Sector**, the only national membership organization that brings together nonprofits, foundations, and corporations seeking to advance the common good. Known for his commitment to performance management and measurable impact, Cardinali's work at Independent Sector is focused on em-

powering organizations to work collaboratively to improve life and the environment for individuals and communities around the world.

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