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How Philanthropy Can Help Fix Democracy

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Eric Cantor

Last week's defeat of Eric Cantor, the U.S. House majority leader, in Virginia's Republican primary sent a powerful message about how polarized American politics is, and also about the important role the drawing of district maps plays in reshaping Congress and all federal policy making.

That role is a key reason why a growing number of philanthropic organizations have been turning their attention in recent months toward efforts to change the system by which states draw their district boundaries for both state and federal governing bodies.

Changing redistricting practices could be one of the most important steps we take to make sure the federal government starts working again. It might also be a key way to move forward on issues the philanthropic world cares about, from service delivery to taxes and regulations to long-standing matters of justice and inequality.

Ever since 1810, when Elbridge Gerry, the governor of Massachusetts, and his Democratic-Republican Party redrew a state Senate district into a salamander-like shape to weaken the Federalist Party (hence the name "gerrymander"), redistricting to protect incumbent lawmakers and gain partisan advantage has been common practice. However, over the past 60 years, gerrymandering has steadily become more extreme, according to an analysis by The Washington Post's Christopher Ingraham.

In most states, the districting process is largely controlled by elected officials who stand to gain—or lose—from the way the lines are drawn. Many of these processes lack essential transparency and participatory mechanisms, leaving the public out in the cold while politicians and special interests divvy up communities behind closed doors in ways that further their own agendas, whether party or personal.

Allowing politicians to pick their voters not only contributes to the partisan entrenchment that bogs down every American community but also results in districts that are far from representative of the country as a whole.

A serious consequence of these unrepresentative districts is skewed policy outcomes that do not necessarily reflect the priorities and preferences of the electorate as a whole.

For example, in the 2012 election, only about half—or 49 percent—of Pennsylvanians voted for a Republican House candidate, yet the congressional delegation is 72 percent Republican (13 Republicans and 5 Democrats). Based on the statewide share of voters in North Carolina who are Democrats, the party should hold roughly seven congressional seats in that state, but it won only four. In both examples, an outsized share of Democratic voters was redrawn into highly-gerrymandered districts, and in both instances, policies passed by these engineered majorities have failed to reflect the desires and needs of the people.

Gerrymandering is not an unchangeable reality. As Mr. Ingraham points out, "states can actually control the extent of gerrymandering."

New York, for example, created an independent advisory commission in 1978 to recommend redistricting plans, and gerrymandering has been declining ever since. In more recent times, progress has been made in California and Florida.

Californians rallied for change because they saw that gridlock in the state legislature prevented basic public services from getting much-needed money. The state created an independent, impartial commission to redraw districts, a strong approach to dealing with the problem.

Other bipartisan redistricting efforts are bubbling up in some of the most gerrymandered states.

A new coalition called North Carolinians to End Gerrymandering Now is led by the former mayor of Charlotte, Richard Vinroot, a Republican, and the former mayor of Raleigh, Charles Meeker, a Democrat.

Jane Pinsky, head of the North Carolina Coalition for Lobbying and Government Reform, says that the coalition plans to recruit other locally elected officials to pressure the state legislature to make the redistricting process fair and transparent.

In Michigan, the League of Women Voters is bringing together a robust, nonpartisan coalition to advance redistricting changes in 2016. The coalition is considering options for creating an impartial, independent commission. Efforts in Virginia and Wisconsin are also promising.

However, despite victories and hopeful signs, the road to reform has been arduous.

In Florida, where the FairDistricts Now coalition brought together a wide range of players and passed constitutional amendments that placed strict redistricting guidelines on the legislature, elected officials failed to adhere to those rules and the state's maps remain mired in litigation.

In Ohio, proponents of change are struggling to regroup after a hard-fought campaign in 2012 failed.

In all too many cases, the potential leaders of redistricting overhaul in the states lack the money and the skills they need to take on the challenge and so end up turning to other causes.

Philanthropy has an important role to play in changing the system, but it too faces challenges.

Foundations are diverse and approach the redistricting issue with very different perspectives. Some seek changes to promote fairness; others desire a more competitive electoral system that would increase the quality of those elected to serve; still others seek to revamp the system to ensure that America delivers on the promise of equality enshrined in the one-person one-vote guarantee. At times it seems that these interests are competing—and sometimes they are.

Increases in competitiveness are not always favorable to equality, and the definition of fairness often differs. But these interests and the values that underlie them are not fundamentally at odds, and collaboration remains possible even when goals differ.

Further, because redistricting happens in the states, we don't have to limit ourselves to just one approach. Just as foundations are diverse, so are the communities in which we seek to effect change. It is essential to support strategies that come from local groups making their own choices about what is best.

For instance, though California pursued a citizen's commission, Florida chose to pursue strict guidelines for map drawing. Foundations should listen to the desires of these local groups and resist the temptation to gravitate toward one solution.

To be sure, we need more than just redistricting changes to repair America's struggling democratic system. We need a comprehensive vision that links redistricting with the need to make changes in campaign finance and the election system itself, goals grant makers must continue to focus on but tie together.

Although 2020 and 2021, the years when the census and redistricting take place, seem far off in the future, the reality is that work must start now. In states that permit redistricting issues as a vote on the election ballot, 2016 is a crucial time for taking action. In other states, proposals for change must take a longer and more challenging journey through state legislatures, and that will require sustained public pressure and investment.

Public understanding about the redistricting process is limited. Foundations need to invest in state-level nonprofit organizations to give them the money and other resources they need to conduct research, develop and use technology, pursue lawsuits, build coalitions, run advocacy and organizing campaigns, and educate. The payoff for putting money into such work now will be significant.

Some efforts have already begun, with the support of forward-thinking grant makers, advocates, academics, and former elected officials. For nearly a year now, a group of roughly two dozen grant makers has been discussing how to stimulate changes in the redistricting system.

At the end of last year, nearly 60 grant makers, advocates, and academics came together to consider ideas.

And this week, the Bauman Foundation, Ford Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Proteus Fund, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund, with assistance from the Funders' Committee for Civic Participation, are bringing together a group of 70 people—roughly half grant makers and half advocates and academics—to think critically about strategies and opportunities.

It is difficult to talk about redistricting without also focusing on the census, which is crucial to the distribution of federal resources and to the drawing of districts.

Tense debates over undocumented immigrants combined with a lack of awareness that the census is supposed to and needs to count every resident—citizen or noncitizen, legal or not—threatens to dampen the response rates among the very people who should get more access to power as the nation's demographics change.

Foundations must work to ensure that the Census Bureau, which faces budget cuts, and local nonprofits have the resources to educate their communities and get them counted.

We should be thinking creatively about the vast array of outreach and communications tools at our disposal and how those can be deployed to bolster response rates among the poor, minorities, and others who too often are ignored. And we must start work on ways to connect the census and redistricting so that organizations can carry the relationships they build during census outreach into the redistricting phase.

Redistricting must become a substantial focal point in philanthropy. Without question the current system favors those with power who will fight to maintain the status quo. Although it will not be easy to create change, this is a crucial moment for philanthropy to support efforts to restore our democracy to its fullest potential.

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