

# Building a Movement for Reflective Democracy

## *A Guide for Funders*

This guide intends to inspire and support our funder colleagues who share a commitment to a system of government that reflects the full range of talent and experience in our society.

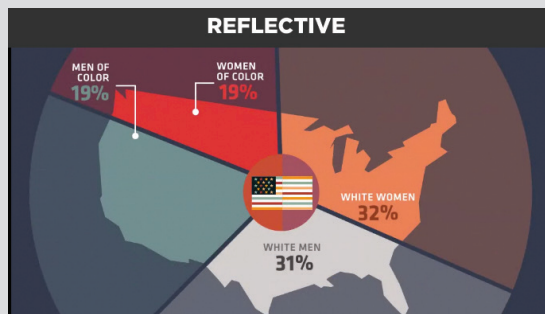
**Inside, you'll see our ideas about the following funding strategies:**

- Mobilize Community Power
- Clear a Path for Citizen Leaders
- Transform Voting Systems
- Confront Economic Barriers

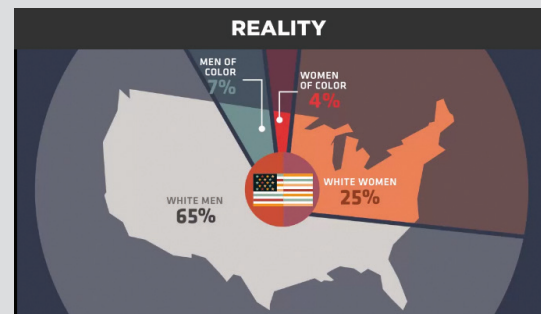
**Thanks for joining us on this journey.**

In a reflective democracy, elected officials reflect the diverse identities and experiences of their constituents. Since our launch in 2014, the Reflective Democracy Campaign has learned definitively that our democracy is anything but reflective. From the federal level to the county level, white men, at just 31% of the population, represent two-thirds two out of every three candidates on a ballot, and two out of every three elected officials.

If the candidates on our ballots and our elected officeholders reflected the American population, they would look like this:



**But our research reveals that they actually look like this:**



Addressing this disparity is not just an issue of fairness and equity – it's core to the functioning of our democracy.

While revealing the depth of the problem and its implications, the Campaign is also confronting the barriers to reflective democracy, including the invisible and potent role gatekeepers play in deciding who gets on the ballot, the limitations of our voting systems, and the economic obstacles to seeking and holding office. Progress towards reflective democracy will require rebuilding deeply flawed structures, if not the creation of completely new systems.

Interest in reflective democracy is growing, from the New York Times and CNN, to the American Bar Association and Netroots Nation, to the Democracy Alliance and the Funders for Civic Participation. The momentum among activists, advocates, academics, and funders is coalescing into an emerging movement.



# Mobilize Community Power

## Re-imagining community organizations as gatekeepers

Our research shows that when women and people of color run for office they succeed – and fail – at the same rate as white men. The problem is they are not even getting on the ballot, due to the often-unexamined role of gatekeepers – party insiders, major donors, and other power brokers – who wield major influence over endorsements, financial contributions, campaign resources, and ultimately who runs and wins.

Funders can support upstream approaches that hold gatekeepers accountable to their communities and build grassroots alternatives to the role that established gatekeepers currently play, including community-based efforts working to:

- Advocate for more transparent endorsement processes.
- Disprove the myths that women and people of color are “un-electable” or lack political ambition.
- Strengthen the ability of community-based organizations to cultivate leaders who can successfully pursue elected office.
- Maximize the impact of 501(c)(3) candidate training programs by engaging networks that can serve as alternative gatekeepers.

### REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY INNOVATORS

#### New Pathways to Power

Jessica Byrd's Pathway Project is creating alternative gatekeeper networks that promote the political leadership of people of color. Chrissie Castro's Advance Native Political Leadership is creating a Native American candidate development program. Oakland Rising is working to identify, recruit, and support diverse community leaders as potential candidates.

# Clear a Path for Citizen Leaders

## Accessing the hidden power of appointed boards and commissions

Elected officials are not the only ones guiding how government impacts our lives. From urban planning to law enforcement and water policy, appointed boards and commissions play a powerful role in setting public policy and allocating government resources. While these positions may be highly politicized, they rarely reflect the communities they serve. In some jurisdictions, political pressure has resulted in more balanced and representative appointments, but overall, women and people of color remain under-represented in these powerful positions.

While 501(c)(3) funders have to be mindful of bright lines related to electoral politics, there are no limitations on supporting the ability of communities to advocate for fair representation on appointed boards and commissions, including:

- Mapping the level of reflective representation on boards and commissions
- Enhancing the ability of community organizations to cultivate and promote leaders for appointments
- Demanding greater transparency in appointment processes
- Creating guidelines for reflective representation

### REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY INNOVATORS

#### Building Community Power

Texas Organizing Project Education Fund is developing a new project to promote diverse candidates for appointed seats on boards and commissions, a crucial site of power and a potential pathway to elected office.

# Modernize Voting with a Reflective Democracy Lens

## Changing electoral structures to advance reflective democracy

Ideally, our voting systems would facilitate the ability of a diverse range of leaders to achieve political office. In fact, at-large elections, partisan primaries, off-year elections, voter registration policies, and other elements of our voting systems tend to promote the status quo rather than opening the system to candidates and elected officials who are reflective of the communities they serve.

While policy advocates and civic engagement organizers are actively working on these structural issues as a means of democratizing the electoral process and shifting policy outcomes, adding the lens of reflective democracy to this work is a new and emerging strategy. Activating this strategy will require:

- 1. Research & Analysis.** We do not yet fully understand the impact of voting systems on reflective democracy. Do district elections improve access for people of color? Do women fare better in open primaries? Our Reflective Democracy Innovators are starting to address these questions, but there is more to explore.
- 2. Policy Priorities – Road Maps to Reflective Democracy.** As we gain a greater understanding of how voting systems influence reflective electoral outcomes, we need to support the translation of that knowledge into a set of policy priorities that can be applied at the local, regional, and statewide level.
- 3. Integration of reflective democracy with advocacy for electoral reform.** In addition to supporting advocacy efforts directly focused on electoral systems change, we need to support the integration of those efforts with a reflective democracy lens.

### REFLECTIVE DEMOCRACY INNOVATORS

#### Vital Research & Analysis

To increase understanding of which electoral systems correlate to officeholders more reflective of their communities, Fairvote's Election Rules & Reflective Local Democracy Project compares the demographics of elected officeholders against factors such as nonpartisan ballots, at-large elections, timing of elections, and voter eligibility rules. In *Who Runs and Who Wins?*, political scientists Paru Shah and Eric Gonzalez Juenke explore how partisan support, political contributions, electoral structures, and campaigns impact the success of reflective candidates.

# Confront Economic Barriers

## Challenging the economic realities of seeking and holding elected office

Amid growing concern about the influence of corporate money and unfettered third party expenditures in major elections, little attention has been paid to the economic barriers to seeking – and holding – elected office. Due to the high costs of campaigns and the low or non-existent pay of most elected positions, pursuing elected service requires free time, personal wealth, rich friends, and a uniquely flexible job.

While helping any single individual to overcome the economic barriers to seeking office is not the domain of 501(c)(3) funders, we can support structural interventions. Here are some approaches we hope the funding community will consider that have the potential to change the political playing field from one reserved for a rare few to one that is open to citizen leaders who hold jobs and are not personally wealthy:

- **Promote citizen leader-friendly employment policies.** We can develop and promulgate workplace policies – especially in the nonprofit sector – that provide employees the flexibility they need to seek and hold positions of public leadership.
- **Advocate to increase compensation for elected officials.** Increased compensation for public service where it is currently underpaid can enable citizens to balance their financial needs with the time commitment necessary to serve. Advocacy for levels of pay that enable citizen leaders to serve can help to overcome the perception that proposals for pay increases are simply legislators' attempts to serve their own interests.
- **Support public financing of campaigns.** Public financing of campaigns will allow more diverse candidates to seek office by minimizing the extreme burden of fundraising.

## The Role of Funders:

# Investing in Reflective Democracy

Philanthropy can play a vital role in building the movement for reflective democracy, but funding this movement requires expanding our definition of civic engagement. While the ultimate outcome we seek is more representative elected officials, funding the movement for reflective democracy requires that philanthropy do what it does best: catalyze structural systems change. Fortunately, the levers of that change live far away from the bright line of 501(c)(3) funding. In the era of Super PACs, philanthropy can make a difference in changing the political system. Building the pathway for inclusive political leadership is a way for 501(c)(3) funders to tackle entrenched systems.

**Through our work, we have developed five operating principles essential to funding the emerging reflective democracy movement:**

### **1. Embrace a sense of urgency, a willingness to experiment, and a long-term commitment.**

In 21st century America, what are the consequences of a political system in which white men are two of every three names on a ballot and two of every three elected officeholders? Waiting for the status quo to adjust itself is not an option. Meeting this imperative requires an immediate and deliberate commitment of resources from funders willing to embrace risk, invest in experimentation, and stay in it for the long haul.

### **2. Be intersectional.**

Many activists, funders, and pollsters warned the Campaign of the pitfalls of linking the political representation of women to the representation of people of color. An intersectional approach does present challenges, but our work has revealed that the structures reinforcing white male political power impact both women and people of color — and the strategies to dismantle those structures are aligned.

### **3. Map the problem and the structures that cause it.**

As we continue to conduct research that maps the extent of the problem, we also must understand the system that contributes to it. As we uncover outrageous facts — 95% of elected prosecutors are white! — we need to be guided by an understanding that such outcomes are not necessarily due to racist voters or even racist power brokers; they are the result of structures that perpetuate the status quo.

### **4. Capture interest and inspire action.**

The public dialogue about politics, race, and gender has never been more active. How do we translate this interest into action? As funders, we can invest in communications efforts to inspire activists, advocates, and the public to take concrete action to promote reflective democracy.

### **5. Demand structural solutions.**

Distinguish between work aimed at helping individuals clear existing barriers within the current system and work that seeks to systemically remove those hurdles. The field needs to pursue a fundamental shift toward efforts that change the system itself. At this nascent stage, those solutions require nimble, creative, and catalytic funding.

## Build the Movement for Reflective Democracy

- Support the Reflective Democracy Campaign
- Apply a reflective democracy lens to your own funding
- Stay in touch with the campaign and its ongoing work

Learn more at [WhoLeads.US](http://WhoLeads.US)

or contact Campaign Director Brenda Carter: [rdcampaign@womendonors.org](mailto:rdcampaign@womendonors.org)