

Healthy Democracy Needs Philanthropy

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When those who speak for regular folks - you, me and everyday working people - are outspent in Washington, even the most welcome legislation tends to serve the rich and powerful. As the country anticipates President Obama signing financial reform legislation, the scorecard is so starkly out of balance that it's shameful. While a coalition of national and community-based organizations was able to raise \$3 million to advocate for average people, the financial industry was spending \$1.4 million a day on lobbying efforts.

Americans for Financial Reform, a broad coalition of local, state and national organizations, took up advocating for a financial system that's for the people, one that's accountable, fair and equitable. Despite the enormity of what's at stake - jobs, economic security and the future of millions of Americans - a new report from the Institute for American's Future makes it all too clear how much the coalition has been severely outspent by larger, better-funded interest groups.

If financial reform, or any reform, is ever to serve the interests of the people, the balance of power - which is to say, the ability to generate vital lobbying resources - must shift.

Our nation's 70,000-plus grant-making foundations - which steward half a billion dollars of partially public money - have an opportunity to help solve pressing social problems by investing in grassroots civic engagement and advocacy. Their commitment to democracy can save it; their failure may well doom it.

The recent passage of health care reform shows that David can win against Goliath, especially when foundations help out. Thanks in large part to efforts of Health Care for America Now (HCAN), a broad coalition of advocates, Americans now have the beginnings of a better, more accessible and affordable health care system. HCAN would not have been as successful as it was, however, without the impressive support it received from numerous foundations, including the largest advocacy grant in history, provided by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

HCAN raised and spent some \$40 million in its effort to represent health consumers in the debate. Sure, its spending was dwarfed by the spending of health industry interests. But at least HCAN had enough resources to mount a strong fight. That fight clearly demonstrated that the nation's private and community foundations are the perfect vehicle to ensure that voices of our communities are heard.

A recent study on the effect of foundation support to nonprofit organizations involved in advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement in Los Angeles County demonstrates conclusively that it makes a world of difference. In greater L.A., over a five-year period, foundations invested \$58 million in the advocacy work of 15 grassroots organizations. This handful of groups trained more than 14,000 community leaders, generated more than 40,000 new members and drew close to 55,000 people to public events focused on critical civic issues. By promoting democratic participation in this way, their efforts resulted in nearly \$7 billion in tangible benefits for families and communities - benefits like higher wages, better access to health care, expanded civil and human rights, and a cleaner environment.

Given the remarkable impact this modest investment in democracy delivered, there is little doubt that vigorous support for advocacy and policy engagement will help counter rising corporate influence on our democratic debates.

The Los Angeles experience is not unique. Similar studies in Minnesota, New Mexico and North Carolina reveal the same result - where foundations support civic engagement, democracy grows dramatically stronger.

Sadly, too many nonprofits that seek to broaden citizen participation in the policy process are underfunded. Efforts to bring voices of ordinary Americans into policy debates need more support from the philanthropic sector to balance out the efforts of other interest groups. We need a concerted, concentrated commitment from local, state and national foundations to support the broadest possible participation in the discussions.

Democracy and the future of America are at stake. Philanthropy can open - and keep open - the door to more vigorous, thoughtful and creative debates about who government serves: corporations or individual citizens.

[Read the piece here](#) .

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