

Control, Disruption and Democracy: Philanthropy's Role in Inclusive Civic Engagement

By Gara LaMarche

The following is adapted from the keynote speech at the Funders Committee for Civic Participation conference in Washington, D.C., on October 6, 2015.

In *Citizen*, the poet Claudia Rankine, writing about the abandonment of Black lives after Hurricane Katrina – a signal event in the shift toward the current political moment – says “the fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place.”

To overcome the fictions we tell ourselves requires us to acknowledge that the way the criminal justice system operates for Black and brown people, like the way our national security system has operated since 9/11, and the way our immigration system has functioned for virtually all of American history, is to restrict and confine participation in American democracy – to squelch civic engagement in the most literal sense.

Many funders are leading the way toward a broader approach to civic engagement that narrows the (too-often racial) divide in our approach to social justice issues. Admirable as this is, this broader approach should acknowledge two ideas. First, that the way the criminal justice system works should be seen by philanthropy, as it is clear it is seen by those taking to the streets, as a core democracy issue; and second, that tactics and approaches that advance democracy also can be found well outside the ballot box.

To that end, our civic engagement framework must make room for the growing use of direct action tactics and the role they play in sparking a more responsive democracy. It's important to note that, beyond providing more core, flexible, rapid response support for the new, emerging infrastructure of, say, The Movement for Black Lives, philanthropists cannot control how direct action tactics are used. But we can control our responses to direct action and disruption.

As Washington State Senator Pramila Jayapal wrote in response to disruption by Black Lives Matter protestors at a recent Bernie Sanders rally in Seattle:

“If we want to win for ALL of us on racial, economic and social justice issues, we need multiple sets of tactics, working together. Some are disruptive tactics. Some are loving tactics. Some are truth-telling tactics. Some can only be taken on by white people. Some can only be taken on by people of color. Sometimes we need someone from the other strand to step in and hold us up. Other times, we have to step out and hold them up.”¹

While, of course, it can be an unsettling experience to be blocked from speaking, as Sanders was, the angry reaction of his largely white supporters reveals a great gulf in priorities. To be told this is not your time or place to speak is toxic to the cross-movement solidarity

needed to achieve social justice for all.

In that same vein, in the last several years, many more traditional progressive activists have decried the failure of movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter to take a form they see as familiar and effective. Among the questions they ask are: “Who are the leaders?” “What are their specific demands?” and “Why don't they work through the system and mobilize for elections like the Tea Party does?” If a movement does not emerge in a form they easily recognize, they'd do well to ask, “Is the fault with us and not the movement?”

Moreover, let's be blunt and recognize that the direct action tactics of Occupy, the Dreamers, the fast food workers and carwashers and Black Lives Matter, while not taking a traditional civic engagement-electoral form, have achieved the philanthropic Holy Grail of impact at least as much as any other campaigns, electoral or otherwise, of recent years. Administrative relief from deportation, body cameras on cops, the shift of an entire public discourse around the economy and policing – these are real and tangible achievements and must never be minimized or discounted even as longer-term campaigns and strategies develop. How we, as funders, make space in our thinking and planning for the resurgence of effective and coordinated direct action will vary, as is always the case given the pluralism of philanthropy.

At the Democracy Alliance, which, like all institutions, has a far from per-

New and Renewing Members

Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE)

Barr Foundation

Blue Shield of California Foundation

Common Cause

Deaconess Foundation

Fund for New Jersey

Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation

Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

Foundation for Child Development

Foundation for the Mid South

Hagedorn Foundation

Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc.

Max M. & Marjorie S. Fisher Foundation

Mendelsohn Family Fund

Native American Rights Fund

National Birth Equity Collaborative

Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Perrin Family Foundation

Saint Luke's Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Tecovas Foundation

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation



Black Lives Matter activists disrupt an August 2015 Bernie Sanders rally in Seattle. CC image by Tiffany Von Arnim.

fect history where race and gender are concerned, we have infused a race and gender lens across our new priority areas of economic justice, democracy and climate change. Among other reasons, if civic engagement strategies don't take account of the urgent concerns of people of color, young people, women and others for many years left out of the political process, and if they are not present at every key decision-making table, how can those strategies possibly succeed in bringing about the robust participation essential to progressive victories and to holding those we put in power accountable?

I want to return as I close to the three words in the title, which I chose for a reason.

Control, because those who fear a full participation democracy have many ways to control civic participation. This must change.

Disruption, because I want to embrace the more positive ring it has as a Silicon Valley buzzword, where disruption shakes up businesses and sectors and brings about a more productive

economy. I hope the civic engagement sector will start to see this kind of disruption in the same way.

And **democracy**, because every definition of it I have seen centers on a system of government in which power is vested in the people.

We need to make sure, always, that all the ways in which people challenge and exert their power are reflected in the way we think about and talk about civic participation. ■

Gara LaMarche is president of the Democracy Alliance. He is also vice chair of the board at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

Notes

1. Pramila Jayapal, "Guest Editorial: Why Saturday's Bernie Sanders Rally Left Me Feeling Heartbroken," *The Stranger*, August 9, 2015, <http://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2015/08/09/22671957/guest-editorial-why-saturdays-bernie-sanders-rally-left-me-feeling-heartbroken>.