

# *Contributing to a Stronger American Democracy*

Essay by Robert L. Gallucci, MacArthur Foundation President

America is in trouble. We face serious, large-scale problems: the nation's fiscal future, energy policy, climate change, the education of our children, economic competitiveness, immigration, and more. And yet our political system appears to be unable to address them in a timely or effective way. Elections, even presidential elections, do not appear to be potent enough to alter this intractable situation.

Can a foundation make a meaningful contribution to strengthening American democracy?

MacArthur does not advocate for political positions, beyond a strong support for democratic norms. Nor have we typically addressed America's political system. Our bias has been toward well-informed, evidence-based public policy that, in our view, promotes the general good.

But in recent years, we have felt the need to think more deeply about how our democracy is working and the complex relationship between policy and politics.

In this essay I will share some of our thinking and the work we have supported as a result.

## The Current Crisis

Observers from across the political spectrum have decried the current state of America's politics. Strident and partisan discourse, a deadlocked Congress, and short-term thinking are among the common complaints.

What would the ideal representative democracy look like in contrast? Begin with better elections in which well-informed voters are motivated and equipped by their education to think critically and make informed decisions. They would not base their votes on 15-second negative advertisements or the politics of personal attacks. They would be capable of separating evidence-based analysis from emotionally charged claims. The electoral process in which they participated would be transparent and efficient. There would be genuine choices among candidates. Elected representatives would interact with civility and work toward bipartisan consensus. The policies they adopted would deal with issues of the highest concern, reflect the best contemporary thinking, and aim for concrete results. And the nation would prosper.

The real world is not so simple—but we need not, and should not, accept the present state of affairs.

MacArthur has some working assumptions about what brought America to this present impasse.

The first is that there is a deep problem with our political culture. We live in a federal republic characterized by devolved responsibilities and separated powers. For this system to function, political leaders have to make deals and compromises. But, at present, many of our leaders (and their supporters) see compromise as an unacceptable betrayal of principle or party loyalty. The result is polarization, wrangling, and paralysis. Many individuals and organizations think there must be ways to



MacArthur Foundation President  
Robert L. Gallucci

improve this culture and get the business of politics moving once more; MacArthur is among them.

The trouble goes beyond politicians. Voters do not have good-enough information about national issues. Far too many have been poorly prepared by our educational system to fulfill their role as informed citizens, or are simply not engaged. With all the ideological battles, there is far too little attention to what works in practice and not enough policymaking that focuses squarely on empirically verifiable evidence of success or failure.

Finally, there are long-term trends that are changing American society in significant ways. Our demographic profile—race, ethnicity, and age—is shifting. But we are also becoming a less equal country, and one that may offer less opportunity.

## Electoral Reform

Over the last few years, MacArthur has explored ways to strengthen our democracy with leading thinkers and practical, on-the-ground actors.

We discussed the role of highly partisan primaries, gerrymandering of political districts, changes in campaign finance, how our elections are run, and how citizens are informed, among other issues.

We focused on a few—in particular, the role of money in campaigns and its ultimate impact on policymaking and our system of voting, particularly the right to vote and the modernization of voting systems.

To help provide information about campaign spending, we supported the Center for Responsive Politics and the National Institute on Money in State Politics; to provide legal expertise about campaign finance to states and localities, we supported the Brennan Center for Justice's Democracy Program, the Campaign Legal Center, and Democracy 21; to encourage fresh perspectives, we made grants to the Committee for Economic Development, a business organization, and Justice at Stake, which works on how judicial campaigns are funded.

---

VOTERS DO NOT HAVE GOOD-ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT NATIONAL ISSUES. FAR TOO MANY HAVE BEEN POORLY PREPARED BY OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM TO FULFILL THEIR ROLE AS INFORMED CITIZENS, OR ARE SIMPLY NOT ENGAGED.





Voting mechanics, voter registration, and access to the ballot were also serious concerns. We funded the Verified Voting Foundation to improve voting security, the Common Cause Education Fund and Advancement Project's Voter Protection Program to promote fair election practices, and the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law to help overcome obstacles to voting.

To promote more constructive discussion among members of Congress, we funded the Aspen Institute Congressional Program, which invites serving members from both parties to discuss policy issues with experts from think tanks and universities. We also provided support for the Congressional Research Service's orientation, which brings freshman members of Congress together across party lines to learn about the issues they will confront as elected officials.

---

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, MACARTHUR HAS EXPLORED WAYS TO STRENGTHEN OUR DEMOCRACY WITH LEADING THINKERS AND PRACTICAL, ON-THE-GROUND ACTORS.

These contributions were aimed directly at political actors and the systems they operate in. The body politic, however, comprises all citizens.

## The Voting Public

True citizenship requires active, informed participation. Yet many Americans either do not vote or vote with partial and inaccurate understanding of the issues at stake.

MacArthur has for decades supported public media and high-quality documentaries that explore current events and contemporary problems with depth and nuance. We have continued to award grants to investigative reporting and news programs that offer sound analysis and reasoned discussion in political life, including *All Things Considered*, *PBS NewsHour*, and *FRONTLINE*, and the investigations of ProPublica, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and the Center for Public Integrity.



To stimulate broader engagement, in 2013 we funded the Illinois Humanities Council to launch Looking@Democracy, a nationwide competition for digital media pieces about strengthening American democracy.

All of these efforts presume an audience of voters that is educated and interested enough to make use of them. But we know that too many students, particularly in large urban school systems, are not being adequately equipped for the responsibilities of citizenship.

MacArthur is helping to shape a new movement that aims to transform both how young people learn and how our institutions of learning operate—and to enable young people to become more active participants in society.

The Foundation had worked in traditional school reform without great success in earlier years. Seven years ago, we decided to take a different approach altogether, looking instead at how their experience of digital media was influencing how young people learn and engage with society.

The field is fluid and rapidly changing, but we think key principles are emerging. MacArthur-supported research found that young people are deeply involved in online activities, mostly out of school; they are learning in an often self-directed way, closely connected to peers with similar interests. Interest and engagement are powerful motivators that, connected to the traditional aims of education, can redefine pedagogy.

At the heart of this work is the notion of “connected learning,” which says that the most robust learning occurs at the intersection of young people’s interests, their peer culture, and academics, or when connections are made among them. While digital media certainly is not required for “connected learning,” it facilitates it and makes it available for many more youth.

---

TOO MANY STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY IN LARGE URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS, ARE NOT BEING ADEQUATELY EQUIPPED FOR THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CITIZENSHIP.



We have funded work to enable and study these possibilities. In New York City and Chicago, we support schools that use the principles of game design, systems thinking, and, when it makes sense, digital platforms. Through a large-scale partnership with the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, we are supporting spaces in cultural institutions across the country where kids can engage with mentors and use equipment, books, and music to experiment and “geek out” together. And in Hive Learning Networks in an increasing number of cities, cultural institutions, schools, out-of-school programs, and online spaces are coordinating projects and programs for young people.

This notion of “connected learning” holds promise not only for learning, but also for engaged citizenship. It is at the core of the efforts of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics, which is exploring how new information and communication technologies can prepare students to be informed, engaged, and effective actors in public life and what it means to be a contributing citizen in the 21st century.

Early findings from the network’s national survey show that substantial numbers of young people across racial and ethnic groups are engaging in acts of participatory politics—acts that are interactive, peer-based, not guided by deference to formal institutions, and that address issues of public concern. This is promising, as we seek to encourage young people to take part in their communities and work to improve society more broadly.

## Evidence-Driven Policy

Educational programs are held accountable and rigorously tested—as the debates over No Child Left Behind and the new Common Core curriculum bear witness. But this is not the norm in public policy. Sometimes, legislators fund social programs based on ideological sympathy, interest group lobbying, fashion, or simple precedent rather than evidence about what works.







To encourage more considered and effective public policy, we are investing in a joint initiative with the Pew Charitable Trusts. The Pew-MacArthur Results First initiative works with states to implement an innovative cost-benefit analysis approach. It identifies policies and programs that are proven to work in the most cost-effective way. We hope it will encourage political debate that begins from a platform of agreed-upon data, rather than opinion. And, of course, we would also wish to see more investment in what performs well—and the end of wasteful spending on failure.

Over the long term, Results First aims to change how states budget, taking into consideration both benefits and costs to individuals and society over the long term. The program is projected to be active in 20 states within the next three years.

## Significant social change

All politics and policymaking occur in a social environment and, as I noted, American society is undergoing profound changes. To us, the most concerning of these are the uneven concentration of wealth and income and the growth of economic inequality.

While this is happening around the world, the phenomenon is particularly acute in America. Between 1983 and 2010, almost 75 percent of the increase in wealth went to the top 5 percent of Americans. But even that understates the imbalance—almost 40 percent went just to the top 1 percent, and 20 percent to the top one-tenth of 1 percent. To relate that to numbers of people, some 300,000 got 20 percent of the increase, while 180 million others had to share 13.5 percent.

Such extremes undermine the solidarity of a society, hollow out the middle class that fueled the nation's prosperity in the middle of the last century, and raise fundamental questions of justice. The consequences for American society may be far-reaching. If our richest citizens are isolated from the rest of the country, they become detached from its institutions (like

public schools and state universities) and from its infrastructure (like highways and transportation). Worse, this situation will tend to undercut social mobility and limit opportunity.

The American Dream—that hard work, determination, and playing by the rules will lead to financial success—has become less and less a reality. Already, among all OECD nations, the United States now has the least social mobility. That fundamentally alters America’s perception of itself.

There are many explanations for how this shift has happened. Many economists point to a globalized economy in which innovations reap world-class gains. Sociologists point to changes in family structure, significant returns on education, and the rewards of a meritocracy. And, in truth, there are probably theories from many disciplines that have merit.

One of the most disturbing notions is that given by some political scientists. They trace the growth of a political system that has become overly dependent on money for campaign contributions (and simple electoral survival). This creates a tendency in both parties to protect the interests of the most generous donors, put in place policies that further their agenda, and so fuel a vicious cycle that disadvantages ordinary citizens and privileges the already privileged.

MacArthur is only at the early stages of considering this issue. We know that the phenomenon is gaining attention and that more needs to be understood. But we expect, in due course, to make a contribution to bolstering a fairer social order.

---

THE AMERICAN DREAM—THAT  
HARD WORK, DETERMINATION, AND  
PLAYING BY THE RULES WILL LEAD  
TO FINANCIAL SUCCESS— HAS  
BECOME LESS AND LESS A REALITY.

## Conclusion

Foundations do not have the resources to solve problems as significant as those I have discussed. But they have an important role in drawing attention to them, supporting the most creative people and organizations who seek to address them, and testing possible solutions.

MacArthur is an American foundation with an abiding commitment to the ideals and the well-being of the United States. As an organization that invests in more than 60 nations, we are also keenly aware of the importance of the United States internationally. Dysfunction at home compromises both our leadership in world affairs and national security. MacArthur hopes to make a contribution to a more responsive and effective government in this country and in doing so, to improve the life chances of Americans, strengthen U.S. global credibility, and build a future worthy of America’s promise.

## About the MacArthur Foundation

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In addition to selecting the MacArthur Fellows, the Foundation works to defend human rights, advance global conservation and security, make cities better places, and understand how technology is affecting children and society. Nigeria is one of four countries where MacArthur focuses its international grantmaking and maintains offices, including India, Mexico, and Russia.

For more information or to sign-up for news and event updates, please visit [www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org).

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

140 S. Dearborn Street

Chicago, IL 60603-5285

Phone: (312) 726-8000

TDD: (312) 920-6285

E-mail: [4answers@macfound.org](mailto:4answers@macfound.org)



[macfound.org](http://macfound.org)



[twitter.com/macfound](https://twitter.com/macfound)



[youtube.com/macfound](https://youtube.com/macfound)