



# The Madison Initiative Strategy

June 2018

## INTRODUCTION

If you could ask America’s founders what they saw as their cardinal achievement, their answer would not be establishing liberty or equality. It would be republicanism—by which they meant popular government or what we today call democracy. The idea that a nation on a continental scale could be created and governed based on the consent of its people was political heresy in their time, running contrary to two millennia of wisdom and experience.

Yet making popular government work, they believed, was the way—the only way—to achieve liberty and equality. The founders also understood that democracy entailed more than just elections. It required a great many things—including robust institutions and informed citizens—and still does, though these requirements seem to be getting lost in the angry shouting of today’s hyper-partisan, win-at-all-costs politics.

In response to these problems, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation launched the Madison Initiative in 2014. The initiative is named for James Madison, who warned against and sought to alleviate “the mischiefs of faction.” The Hewlett Foundation board has authorized the initiative to fund \$150 million in grants through 2021. Our goal is to uphold U.S. democracy in an age of polarization. In support of this goal, we focus on five underlying objectives:

- ***Revitalize key democratic values.*** These include pluralism, political toleration, institutional forbearance, negotiation and compromise, as well as the centrality of Congress for realizing these values in our system of government.
- ***Strengthen Congress as an institution.*** Congress must be able to legislate solutions that address national problems, exercise its constitutional powers of the purse and oversight, and equip itself with the staffing and expertise required for these tasks.
- ***Improve campaigns and elections.*** With different incentives, our elected representatives can become more responsive to the full range of opinion and interests in their constituencies, and be less beholden to polarized agendas and special interests.
- ***Combat digital disinformation.*** Any progress made in repairing politics will ultimately be pointless if citizens are misled or misinformed about what is happening and how they should respond to it.

- *Support the democracy field.* We fund research, data, media, and collaborations to inform and improve the work of philanthropists, scholars, advocates, journalists, political reformers, and elected officials.

The Madison Initiative is nonpartisan and supports organizations across the ideological spectrum, including academic researchers, advocacy groups, think tanks, media platforms, infrastructure providers, and civic leadership organizations who share our goals and seek to uphold the democracy that Americans have inherited and—if they are diligent and fortunate—will pass on to future generations.<sup>1</sup>

## ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MADISON INITIATIVE

The Madison Initiative started with a question we began exploring in early 2013: could philanthropy (and Hewlett in particular) help untangle a cluster of problems associated with political polarization, including the widening ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans, hyper-partisanship, and gridlock. These problems had come to confound national political institutions, especially Congress, which struggled to address a growing number of issues Americans were anxious and frustrated about, e.g., jobs, health care, taxes, and school shootings, to name a few. Public confidence in what is ostensibly the people’s branch had plummeted, further reducing legislators’ ability to negotiate and compromise. The idea of a loyal opposition, perhaps the lynchpin of representative democracy, had fallen by the wayside as each party came to think the worst of their rivals.

Informed by this initial inquiry, in March 2014 we launched a three-year, \$50 million initiative to test our hypothesis that we could do something to address polarization. We decided to focus on the keystone institution of Congress, where the problem was most clearly manifest, and where it was metastasizing to other parts of the political system. We zeroed in on some basic questions. Could we help to create conditions in which Congress and its members could deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in ways that more Americans support? Were there solutions and approaches we could fund, and grantees and foundations we could work with?

Over the next three years, during this exploratory phase of grantmaking, we were able to answer these questions in the affirmative. We identified and built productive relationships with more than 50 grantee organizations working across the ideological spectrum. These organizations shared our goals and were advancing promising solutions for supporting bipartisanship, strengthening Congress, and improving campaigns and elections. We also developed collaborations with more than 20 other foundations making grants totaling more than \$150 million annually in areas of mutual interest.

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with applicable law, we do not support or oppose political candidates or parties. Additionally we do not engage in or earmark grant funds for legislative lobbying efforts.

At the same time, the period of 2014-2016 left us daunted. From a global perspective, the challenges that motivated the Madison Initiative persisted and in many respects worsened. During the run up to the 2016 election, we observed how several issues tied to globalization—the disparate effects of free trade, rising economic inequality, immigration, refugee crises, and terrorism—were upending politics in the United States and Europe. The United States fit into a broader pattern of democratic struggles: increasingly polarized political parties; the waning influence of pragmatic elites; radicals on the left demanding sweeping reforms to reduce economic inequality; and populists on the right stoking resentment among the white working class. Dissatisfaction in the American electorate was deeper and more widespread than either party had acknowledged, gridlocked and distracted by internecine warfare as they had been. We saw a clear connection between congressional inaction and voters' anger. Without political parties prepared to work together to respond to widespread public concerns, and without a national legislature willing and able to debate and forge responses to them, leaders claiming the system is rigged will keep gaining followers.

We thus concluded in the aftermath of the 2016 election that the Madison Initiative was more important than ever. The Hewlett Foundation's board approved a five-year, \$100 million renewal of the initiative through 2021. This amounted to a 33 percent increase in our annual grant funding. But we also realized that we needed to revisit the core assumptions and focus of our strategy and adapt them if necessary.

Our understanding of the problem of polarization had already begun to evolve. In our initial conception, we saw it as primarily a function of ideological polarization among elites. We came to see instead how much of it is driven by old-fashioned political and institutional combat. The two parties are bogged down in an unusually protracted battle for control of Congress. Traditionally, one of the two parties has dominated for extended periods of time with comfortable majorities in both houses. The other party, relegated to the minority position, has gone along to get along. The past 25 years, in contrast, have seen intermittent periods of red or blue control, with much narrower majorities. Each party senses it is one election away from gaining or losing power, and thus does everything it can to make the other side look bad.<sup>2</sup>

Turning from government to the electorate, the contest for control at the national level has coincided with and accelerated a sorting of the electorate into two hostile camps. Divisions of race, religion, and region as well as the social identities bound up with them increasingly reinforce each other. As with polarization in Congress, the intensity of the divide in the population is not primarily about ideology. Rather, more people see themselves as a members of one political tribe at war with another in what social psychologists term affective polarization.

Taken together, the never-ending and hyper-partisan contest for control of Congress, and the accelerating descent into tribalism in the electorate, have pushed and pulled leaders to transgress longstanding, albeit informal, norms that constrained their behavior and resort instead to win-at-all cost tactics, notwithstanding the corrosive effects on our institutions. President Trump's norm-busting leadership on the way to and in the White House is not the proximate

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<sup>2</sup> Frances Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Permanent Campaign* (University of Chicago Press 2016).

cause of our current discontents but a symptom of them. The temptation President Trump offers—and many are succumbing—is to see him as the prime mover in the polity, and to stand for or against him in ways that further erode norms of behavior and discourse. For our part, we believe supporting deeper remedies for strengthening Congress and improving campaigns and elections in the mid- to longer-term is the path through which our philanthropy can do the most good.

That said, we have adjusted our work in two ways. The first is that we have expanded our initial focus on negotiation and compromise in Congress to encompass a broader set of endangered values that must hold sway for our democracy to prosper, including pluralism, political toleration, and institutional forbearance.<sup>3</sup> This doesn't mean Americans shouldn't have sharp disagreements. In fact, the United States probably needs more debates given the pent-up demand for policy settlements. But they should happen in ways that acknowledge democratic politics is an ongoing process of problem solving and not a singular, apocalyptic conflict. We also have decided, not least because of our institutional heritage and location in Silicon Valley, to see if something can be done about the polarizing impact that internet technology platforms are having on democracy. In the absence of greater understanding of and timely solutions for these problems, democracy in any form, in the United States or elsewhere, will be hard-pressed to survive. We turn now to review how we are focusing our current grantmaking in more detail.

## THE FOCUS OF OUR GRANTMAKING

As we noted at the outset, the overall goal of the Madison Initiative is to uphold U.S. democracy in an age of polarization. To support this goal, we focus on five underlying objectives. The table below conveys how our current funding, totaling \$48.4 million in active grants,<sup>4</sup> is allocated across them:

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE	PERCENT OF FUNDING
Revitalize key democratic values	10%
Strengthen Congress as an institution	40%
Improve campaigns and elections	20%
Combat digital disinformation	9%
Support the democracy field	21%

The remainder of this section fleshes out these objectives, how they fit together, and the ways in which our grantees are working to advance them. While this document outlines our initia-

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<sup>4</sup> As of June 15, 2018. Note this total includes multiyear grants. The Madison Initiative will distribute \$25 million in new grants in 2018, then \$20 million per year over the next three years.

tive's strategy, we know that any positive impact we have will ultimately be through the grantees we support. Rather than overwhelming the discussion below with long lists of these grantees, we provide information on our 50 largest active grantees in an Appendix below.

## **Revitalize key democratic values**

There are many important democratic values—liberty, equality, justice, citizenship, participation, transparency, and accountability, among others. Democratic politics is in effect a running debate over the extent to which these values should be reflected in what government does. Democracy-focused philanthropy typically aims to realize different combinations of these values that in turn are tied to different conceptions of a good society.

For our part, the Madison Initiative seeks to uphold a key set of democratic values that will allow these debates to play out and reach some resolution in the face of deep divisions in our society. For us, a working democratic process is itself the end goal. Thus the values we focus on include pluralism, political tolerance, institutional forbearance, negotiation and compromise, as well as the central role of Congress in our system of government. These values are critically important and increasingly imperiled in our polarized age.

Pluralism presumes that a free society invariably encompasses multiple beliefs, agendas, and interests that, while legitimately held, are often in conflict and in some instances incommensurate. We rely on politics to determine how to weigh and balance, if not reconcile, these competing concerns. While there may be some prevailing tendencies, coalitions should form, dissolve, and reform along different lines from issue to issue, reflecting the multifaceted identities of citizens and politicians. The framers of Constitution built this conception of politics into our republic by extending its sphere to encompass a greater diversity of peoples and ideas and interests, reducing the risk that any one faction would permanently gain the upper hand.

An essential corollary to pluralism is the legitimacy of political opposition—the notion that dissent and organized disagreement are not only inevitable in a free society, but also beneficial because they hold those in power to account and surface alternatives for citizens and leaders to consider. Democratic politics depends on political toleration, an agreement to disagree, and to do so with the civility needed to keep the ongoing debates in bounds. This agreement breaks down if members of one party come to see those belonging to another not as political opponents who happen to be misguided or wrong, but as enemies who cannot begin to hold power legitimately. Alas, as we have noted, this is increasingly the case today.

Another essential corollary presumed by our constitutional inheritance but endangered today is the necessity of forbearance, negotiation, and compromise in our political institutions. Our system of government separates, checks, balances, and decentralizes power to limit the extent to which one faction can predominate over time. This complex structure means that for our government to function, officeholders within it need to observe certain norms of restraint in how they exercise their power, and to avoid perpetual win-at-all-costs partisanship.

Given the often-sharp disagreements channeled into our complex system, our elected representatives ultimately need to negotiate and compromise with each other—not because they

are naturally inclined to do so, nor because the resulting compromises always yield the best or most elegant answers, but to keep our system from coming apart at the seams.<sup>5</sup> As Senator John McCain recently put it, “I’m a champion of compromise in the governance of a country of 325 million opinionated, quarrelsome, vociferous souls. There is no other way to govern an open society, or more precisely, to govern it effectively.”

There is one additional principle our work supports: the central importance of Congress as the locus where these other values need to play out. Congress is the only branch in which the full diversity of the country can be represented in a democratically accountable fashion. The Constitution vests the lawmaking power in Congress, not the courts or the presidency, for that very reason. However, Americans have come to look to the Supreme Court or the president to make landmark decisions for our society. These shortcuts take us in the wrong direction. In a polarized society, laws that are made (or unmade) in the other branches, rather than being hashed out in Congress, inflame rather than alleviate our divisions. In particular, laws made by a president waving a phone and pen, saying he will no longer wait for Congress to act, can just as easily be undone by the phone and pen of the next president, further roiling politics and policy.

Of course Americans have long found it easier to dismiss Congress than to uphold it as a unique venue for the expression of democratic values, and to ensure that those they elect to it serve accordingly. Congress is where what Americans like least about politics takes place out in the open: partisan infighting, divisive debates, unseemly haggling, and convoluted processes. Bismarck’s observation that “laws are like sausages—it is better not to see them being made” applies in spades to the U.S. Congress.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, however, the repudiation of Congress, for all of its maddening imperfections, is a repudiation of representative democracy itself.

Grantees in our portfolio are selected in part because they operate in ways that reflect and reinforce these key democratic values. We also presently spend approximately 10 percent of our budget to support grantees directly focused on revitalizing them. Some grantees are devoted to defending pluralism, civility, and the legitimacy of political opposition in a democratic society. Others seek to understand and bolster norms of mutual forbearance, negotiation, and compromise in the context of our system of checks and balances. Finally, several grantees are actively exploring whether and how Congress could once again stand as the first branch of government, in spirit as well as name.

## **Strengthen Congress as an institution**

We cannot expect to snap our fingers and think most Americans will express confidence in Congress when only one in ten do so today. But we envision and are determined to work toward a Congress that would earn their trust. The first step, outlined above, is to recognize and affirm the essential role that only Congress can play in our system of government. The second

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<sup>5</sup> See Jonathan Rauch, “Rescuing Compromise,” *National Affairs*, Fall 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes Toward American Political Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

step is to strengthen the institution itself so that it functions in ways that more Americans can support. This step is the central thrust of the Madison Initiative. We devote 40 percent of our budget to grants that seek to help Congress develop a pragmatic, problem-solving culture; retain and fully exercise the power of the purse; conduct effective oversight; and provide for the staffing and expertise it needs to carry out its responsibilities.

Pragmatic, cross-party problem solving on the major issues of the day is essential for an effective and responsive Congress. While there have been some notable exceptions in recent years, the vast majority of legislation that actually becomes law passes with substantial bipartisan majorities.<sup>7</sup> And major laws passed without bipartisan support in our polarized environment tend to generate ongoing, highly contentious, and destabilizing debates, as we have seen with the Affordable Care Act and could well see with 2017's Jobs and Tax Cuts Act. Legislating in a bipartisan fashion is more likely to take into account all relevant perspectives, achieve enduring policy settlements, and build support for Congress. Such lawmaking presumes a critical mass of legislators who want to engage in it and can do so; working relationships based on trust between and among these members and staff; and institutional norms, practices, and rules that reinforce it.

Our grantees take different tacks in their efforts to help establish this problem-solving culture in Congress. Some engage legislators from both parties in substantive discussions with an eye to developing relationships and connections across party lines. Others seek to recruit and support rising leaders in both parties who have demonstrated a knack for problem solving at the local and state levels of government, building a talent pipeline to bring more pragmatic legislators to Congress. Multiple grantees have developed recommendations for norms, practices, and rules that would help bring about and reinforce positive culture changes in Congress. Several grantees have developed scorecards and indices that enable the public to track the institutional health of Congress, the extent to which legislators are working in a bipartisan fashion, and how effective individual members are in advancing their legislative agendas. Finally, we provide funding to a select set of think tanks that develop and promote policy solutions that are meant to be acceptable to legislators on both sides of the aisle.

A second emphasis of our work in this area is to help Congress re-establish a serviceable budget and appropriations process. The Constitution deliberately gives the powers of the purse to the legislature. These are arguably the most critical powers of Congress, as they enable legislative problem solving as described above, as well as checking and balancing the executive by withholding appropriations for actions Congress does not support. In recent years, however, the exercise of these fiscal powers has been waylaid by polarization and hyper-partisanship. Getting this recurring core process back on track will enable Congress to get beyond the frequent disruptions, stalemates, and midnight-hour fiscal showdowns over taxing and spending

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<sup>7</sup> Madison Initiative grantees Frances Lee and James Curry, political scientists at the University of Maryland and the University of Utah, respectively, have found that for all enacted laws over the past 30 years, on average 75 percent of House members (including 62 percent of the minority party) and 86 percent of Senators (including 79 percent of the minority party) have cast supporting votes on final passage. There is not a statistically significant downward trend in these patterns over this period.

issues. Being able to exercise the powers of the purse once again via predictable, consistent, and timely passage of budgets and appropriations legislation will raise the public's esteem for Congress and free up time for legislators to address other important issues.

Our grantees working on Congress's powers of the purse span the political spectrum, yet they hold many goals in common. They recently participated in an 18-month process led by the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution to get to consensus on a framework for fixing the budget process.<sup>8</sup> The report and subsequent testimony by members of the Convergence coalition have directly informed the Joint Select Committee established by Congress in March of 2018 to develop recommendations on budget and appropriations process reform.

The third aspect of our work in this area aims to help Congress conduct effective, bipartisan oversight of federal programs and agencies as well as problems in the private sector. Such oversight is a critical prerogative and responsibility of Congress, enabling it to hold its own vis-à-vis the executive branch and gather the information it needs to legislate. Oversight can be used to heighten polarization, or to govern better in spite of it. Even when there is a willingness to conduct bipartisan oversight, it cannot be done without knowledge of the tools and experience in the processes involved. Because of the prolonged period of polarization, legislators' commitment to this kind of oversight, as well as the institutional knowledge and experience to conduct it, have atrophied from lack of use. They need to be re-established. Several grantees, led and staffed by experienced practitioners, provide training, information, and technical assistance to members and staff from both parties on how to conduct more effective oversight. Other grantees have been working to elevate the importance of oversight and to develop new approaches (or highlight time-tested ones) for how to conduct it.

Our fourth and final focus is to help Congress provide itself with the staff and expertise it needs. Congress has beggared itself for more than two decades, reducing the staff resources it has available to support its work—especially policy staff on committees and experts in legislative branch agencies—even as the policy demands on the institution have escalated. While there are many qualified and experienced individual staffers working on the Hill, to function effectively Congress needs more staff with policy and technical expertise, more staff with the ability to negotiate policy resolutions, and more staff bringing diverse perspectives to bear within the institution. Given these challenges, several of our grantees provide training and professional development opportunities to congressional staff. Others undertake surveys and research to ascertain congressional staffing and expertise requirements and advocate for Congress to meet them. Still others seek to bring much needed socioeconomic and racial diversity to the ranks of congressional staff through innovative pipeline and recruitment programs.

## **Improve campaigns and elections**

It will be difficult to revitalize key democratic values and strengthen Congress as an institution without changing the beliefs and behaviors of congressional candidates and the parties under

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<sup>8</sup> See Convergence, "Building a Better Budget Process," March 2018, retrieved from [http://www.convergencepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/B3P-Report-Final\\_4.18.18.pdf](http://www.convergencepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/B3P-Report-Final_4.18.18.pdf).

whose banner they campaign. As a nonpartisan, charitable foundation, we do not get involved in elections. However, we do concern ourselves with the structural incentives embedded in the electoral “rules of the game.” We do not believe there is a silver bullet reform that will make all the difference in this area. But we can improve the odds that elected officials will represent the diversity of opinion in their states and districts and negotiate and compromise with lawmakers representing other diverse constituencies. We devote 20 percent of our funding to improve campaigns and elections along these lines.

The most glaring problem in need of improvement is the current system of campaign finance. Diagnosing this problem is easier than figuring out how to fix it, especially with the profound and ongoing shifts in the landscape as super PACs and other independent groups have displaced party organizations as the conduits for campaign finance, and as more campaign advertising moves from television to online platforms. That said, amid all the flux, there are some obvious and chronic problems that make this issue relevant for our overall goal. The current campaign finance system, even if it does not actually rest on routine, quid pro quo corruption, strikes many reasonable people as doing so, undermining public trust in Congress and the electoral process. As some candid legislators have noted, it is not so much what campaign contributions make happen in Congress, but what they keep from happening that really matters. The system also polarizes politics, as the wealthy donors who have come to contribute the lion’s share of campaign funds, and whom candidates for Congress spend most of their time courting, tend to be highly partisan and ideological in their giving patterns. Finally, many members of Congress planning to run for re-election have to spend so much of their time raising money (up to 50 percent by some estimates for those in competitive seats) that their legislative responsibilities, roles, and relationships get short shrift.

Our grantees are taking on the problem of money in politics on multiple fronts. One set is focused on tracking, compiling, and making publicly available information about how campaign dollars are actually flowing, because any workable reforms will need to be based on accurate data. Others have dedicated themselves to cultivating conservative and bipartisan support for campaign finance reform, given that changes to our system, if they are to be passed and sustained, will require advocates on both sides of the aisle. Still, other grantees undertake litigation efforts to defend existing laws and regulations on money in politics and to establish new lines of jurisprudence that could prod the courts to re-examine this issue in more productive ways. A number of these grantees are simultaneously working to develop new ideas and possibilities for improving campaign finance, ranging from replicating and expanding the innovative experiments in public financing now underway in multiple places to putting political parties back on equal footing with outside groups as conduits for campaign contributions.

Another set of problems is created by elections that use single-member, first-past-the-post districts for the House of Representatives. These force voters to make binary choices that may not fully reflect the preferences of a district’s electorate. But electoral innovations can avoid these winner-take-all distortions. One way is by using ranked choice voting, whereby voters order their preferences across candidates for a given office. This gives voters more choice, ensures that the candidate elected will have the support of a majority, and provides a finer-grained register of public opinion. It also produces noticeably more positive campaign dynamics, as candidates have to appeal to voters and factions for whom they may not be the first choice. A

number of cities presently use ranked choice voting for municipal offices, and Maine is in the process of becoming the first state to do so. Another way to avoid the polarizing dynamics of our current system while giving voters more choices would be to use multi-member districts. This is less alien than it may seem. Multi-member districts were common until the 1840s, and 15 percent of state legislators are still elected in such districts. Some states continued using multi-member districts for the House of Representatives until 1967, when Congress passed legislation requiring single-member districts. Federal lawmakers would thus need to overturn this restriction, and reform-minded representatives have introduced a bill in the current Congress that would do just that.

We appreciate that these reforms, especially the use of multi-member districts, face longer odds of widespread adoption. That said, ranked choice voting—effectively backed by the work of our grantees in this area, and bolstered by the beachhead that reformers have now established in Maine—is getting increasing take-up in the national discussion. And the benefits of these reforms, should they be ultimately adopted, are significant enough that we are convinced continued investment is warranted.

## **Combat digital disinformation**

Any progress that can be made repairing politics along the lines discussed above will be pointless if citizens are routinely misled or misinformed about what is happening and how they should respond to it. A healthy media environment informs citizens and leaders alike. However, the digital media environment is increasingly fostering viscerally negative variants of affective polarization. This of course makes it harder for elected officials to negotiate and compromise—and for citizens to hold those officials accountable for governing. The digital landscape also provides easier pathways for foreign adversaries and others so inclined to undermine faith in democratic institutions—which they not surprisingly do by emphasizing and worsening our political and racial divides. Democracy thus faces a profound new challenge in the form of digital disinformation. The 2016 campaign crystallized its importance for our efforts.

The problem of disinformation is not new. What's new is how it can be distributed. Online social and search platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter are unlike traditional news sources. They have removed the gatekeepers, radically democratizing the production and distribution of information. Suddenly anyone can create and share “news” stories, which are then passed through networks of “friends” and acquaintances. This is especially worrisome in light of research showing that internet users often assess the credibility of information they receive based more on who shared it than on who created it; that readers tend to prefer information that is novel and aligned with their pre-existing worldviews and ideologies; and that they engage with it even more if it is emotionally stimulating (with articles inspiring “outrage” proving especially engaging). Many social platforms also allow or encourage anonymous engagement, which while potentially beneficial in authoritarian contexts, has in western democracies proven problematic. Here anonymity invites angry, uncivil discourse, and enables easy gaming by “bots,” which can artificially amplify extreme viewpoints and make fringe ideas appear mainstream. At the same time, the unprecedented amounts of user data the platforms collect make it possible to target and manipulate individuals in ways that are not yet fully understood. The

speed and scale of online information flows—the phenomenon of “virality”—make the problem all the harder to manage.

While the problem is clearly urgent, some big open questions are bedeviling the search for solutions. The immediate focus of our contribution will thus be to support research that will answer questions such as: what is the supply of and demand for disinformation, and its impact on individuals and society more generally? What potential interventions might help to mitigate its impact? What are the philosophical, legal, and technical constraints on acting, and how might these need to be adjusted to meet the demands of the digital age? We also want to help establish a stronger digital disinformation field, with academic access to data, to translate research to inform real world applications. Presently, nine percent of our funding goes to support grantees working in this area, one that is relatively new for us, but we expect this proportion to increase substantially over the next two years.

## **Support the democracy field**

Given the nature of the problems we are tackling, we have prepared for a long journey and sought to recruit and enable others to come along with us. Toward this end, we currently devote just over 20 percent of our budget to cross-cutting platforms and projects for the democracy field that, while not specifically focused on the objectives described above, support work in all of them and, in addition, help sustain and inform our partners’ work. Several grantees operate media outlets and supporting infrastructure focused on understanding and improving how our democracy functions. Other grantees based in think tanks produce information via surveys, research, and analysis that directly informs these discussions, especially with respect to the problem of polarization and the long-run challenge the U.S. faces of becoming an inclusive, multi-ethnic democracy. Given our commitment to grounding our work in the best social science available, we fund a number of academic initiatives that help university-based researchers tackle questions of interest related to the health of democracy and bring their scholarship to bear on public debates. We also support several philanthropic intermediaries working to foster more concerted action among funders in the democracy field.

More broadly, we endeavor to work collaboratively with other funders in a spirit of diffuse reciprocity. This entails that we periodically support discrete projects proposed by other funders “without demanding or expecting an immediate payback or return, knowing that...others will do the same later and that we’ll all be better off in the long run as a result.”<sup>9</sup> We make one-time investments alongside others in projects that fall outside of the scope of our strategy, but that have been identified and prioritized by multiple funding partners as an initiative worthy of collective action in the field. At present, we have joined (and fully funded the commitments we expect to make) in three such initiatives: improving election administration on a bipartisan basis, preparing for full and accurate 2020 Census count, and planning for the civic education field.

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<sup>9</sup> Larry Kramer, “Collaboration and ‘Diffuse Reciprocity,’” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, April 25, 2014, retrieved at [http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collaboration\\_and\\_diffuse\\_reciprocity](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collaboration_and_diffuse_reciprocity).

## WHAT WE DO NOT FUND

To clarify any strategy, it is always helpful to know what it rules out. Given our focus on Congress, we do not fund efforts focused on community organizing or grassroots participation. While we are focused on the problems associated with polarization, we do not support projects that presume people can or should transcend partisanship and political parties, or that national politics can be conducted in a nonpartisan or post-partisan manner. We see parties as inevitable, necessary, and (when functioning reasonably well) constructive organizing bodies in democratic politics. More broadly, we do not fund work in most of the 18 subfields identified by the Foundation Center’s Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy website, including redistricting, voter education, voting access, naturalization and immigrant civic integration, issue-based and general public participation, civil liberties, open government and transparency, judicial selection and performance, and media access and policy. To be clear, we are not suggesting that work in those areas is not worthy, only that we do not believe it will directly advance our goal of upholding U.S. democracy in an age of polarization.<sup>10</sup> We might also note that a healthy majority of the total funding in the field already flows into these subfields. Conversely, we put approximately 40 percent of our funding into the subfield of legislative branch performance, which draws four percent of the total funding. We thus see ourselves as complementing rather than duplicating the work of other funders, and we want to highlight the ample opportunities for more resources to go toward improving the national legislative process.

## THE RISK OF FAILURE—AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESS

When we first launched the Madison Initiative in 2014, we highlighted a number of risks for our board. The biggest one was that “the accelerating forces of polarization in our political system [could] present increasingly strong headwinds that make progress impossible. This is, essentially, the risk that we will not succeed.” Others agreed. Later that year, the online magazine *Inside Philanthropy* gave us the rather ignominious award of being the “Big Foundation Bet Most Likely to Fail,” noting that “this challenge is too big for even the largest foundation.”<sup>11</sup> Over the intervening years, we have managed to mitigate most of the risks we identified at the outset, but this risk remains. Some would argue it has worsened in recent years. But we still believe that polarization remains exactly the kind of problem that philanthropic foundations— not beholden to other masters, able to stay the course for many years, and nonpartisan by law —have a special responsibility to tackle.

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<sup>10</sup> We trust that most of these roads not taken will make sense to readers in light of our goal, with the possible exception of redistricting given the conventional wisdom that sees it as a major driver of polarization. There are reasonable arguments to be made for nonpartisan redistricting to further other democratic values, but we have been persuaded by the evidence that suggests this line of reforms will have a limited impact on reducing polarization. See Nolan McCarty, “Reducing Polarization: Some Facts for Reformers,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 2016

<sup>11</sup> “Philanthropy Awards – 2014” *Inside Philanthropy*, December 31, retrieved from <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2014/12/31/philanthropy-awards-2014.html>

Polarization is not so much a cause as it is a consequence of deep-seated historical and cultural forces. These forces include, first and foremost, the political realignment generated by the success of the civil rights movement, whose ramifications in ensuing decades changed the parties such that the Democratic Party became uniformly liberal and the GOP uniformly conservative. The effects of this re-sorting were then intensified by the political conflict that began over the expanded size and scope of government in the 1960s and 1970s, one that continues unabated to this day. The resulting tensions have been further aggravated by more recent developments: hyper-partisanship fueled by the protracted electoral contest for control of Congress, and the rise of tribalism among citizens on the right and left who are witnessing, posting, and tweeting these developments via ideologically-fueled media and social networks.

The objectives we are pursuing cannot by themselves reverse these forces. Any reversal will likely need to await a reshuffling of parties at the elite and mass level, such that ideology and party affiliation once again become less correlated. A reversal may also hinge on the emergence of a dominant party in Congress. Such developments are largely beyond the legal and practical capacity of private foundations and their grantees to shape in any fundamental way.

While we are not addressing the root causes of polarization, we do seek to interrupt the negative cycle it has set in motion. The efforts we support can help Congress and the broader political system cope more effectively with polarization while it persists. And, if and when the cultural and political trends that have disrupted our politics shift, giving parties and legislators more room to maneuver, these same efforts will make for a quicker and deeper recovery.

We know the odds are long when it comes to the success of the Madison Initiative. We harbor no illusions that the developments we are supporting are sure to be realized, nor that, if realized, they will have the positive impact that we and our grantees have envisioned. But we are persuaded that, in aggregate and over time, the changes we seek will have beneficial cumulative effects. Five years into this initiative, we now operate with an informed sense of cautious optimism. And we are more convinced than ever that we must at least try to tackle this problem. At such a critical moment for democracy—in the United States and around the world—pulling back and doing nothing presents the bigger risk.

Democracy in America has always proceeded unevenly, taking two steps forward and one step back. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, for all they managed to achieve, did not preclude the perpetuation of slavery. The Civil War salvaged the Union and created the possibility of a new birth of freedom, but at the cost of 620,000 lives, including that of a martyred president. Americans overcame the Great Depression and defeated the tyrants who had conquered Europe and Asia, but not without interning Japanese-American citizens and accommodating Jim Crow. The civil rights movement triumphed after decades of struggle, but their victory for democracy set in motion the polarization that we now must reckon with. Taken as a whole, the story reminds us that ours is not the first generation of Americans to wonder as Lincoln did at Gettysburg whether this nation, “or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” Indeed, many of our forebears have wrestled with this question in graver circumstances. Their cumulative legacy—the imperfect democracy they managed to pass on, improving it along the way as best they could—should inspire us to do our part, in our time.

## APPENDIX: TOP 50 MADISON INITIATIVE GRANT RECIPIENTS

GRANTEE	TOTAL \$ 2013-18	INITIATIVE	OBJECTIVES	GRANTEES ARE	ADVANCING	
		VALUES	CONGRESS	ELECTIONS	DISINFO	FIELD
Bipartisan Policy Center	\$6,305,000	●	●	●		
Brookings Institution / Governance and Economic Studies Programs	\$5,537,176	●	●	●		●
Social Science Research Council	\$2,855,000				●	●
Aspen Institute / Congressional and Rodel Fellowship Programs	\$2,780,000		●			
Project on Government Oversight	\$2,725,000		●			
R Street Institute	\$2,642,500	●	●			
Center for Responsive Politics	\$2,525,000			●		
FairVote	\$2,195,000			●		
Brennan Center for Justice	\$2,122,000	●	●	●		
National Institute on Money in State Politics	\$2,100,000			●		
Campaign Legal Center	\$1,847,000			●		
Issue One	\$1,675,000		●	●		
Federalist Society / Article I Initiative	\$1,500,000	●	●			
National Association of Latino Elected Officials Education Fund	\$1,500,000		●			●
Massachusetts Institute of Technology / Election Data and Science Lab	\$1,400,000					●
New America Foundation	\$1,400,000	●	●	●		
Convergence Center for Policy Resolution	\$1,350,000		●			
National Institute for Civil Discourse	\$1,350,000	●	●			
Millennial Action Project	\$1,345,000	●	●			
University of Texas at Austin / Center for Media Engagement	\$1,260,000				●	●
Take Back Our Republic	\$1,232,000			●		
Third Way Institute	\$1,200,000	●	●			
Partnership for Public Service	\$1,100,000		●			
Niskanen Center	\$1,050,000	●	●			
The Lugar Center	\$1,050,000	●	●			
Solutions Journalism Network, Inc.	\$1,000,000					●
Congressional Management Foundation	\$967,500		●			
Center for American Progress / States of Change Project	\$907,000					●
Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget	\$900,000		●			
Stanford University / Freeman Spogli Institute	\$900,000			●		●
Faith and Politics Institute	\$850,000		●			
Citizen University	\$825,000	●				●
Washington Monthly	\$820,000		●			●
Harvard University / Kennedy School	\$800,000		●			
National Conference of State Legislatures	\$755,000		●			
Oxford University / Internet Institute	\$750,000				●	
Stand Up Ideas	\$750,000	●				
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Inc.	\$700,000		●			
National Affairs	\$675,000		●			●
New York University / Social Media and Political Participation Lab	\$600,000				●	
Ethics and Public Policy Center	\$600,000	●				
University of Virginia / Center for Effective Lawmaking	\$600,000	●	●			
College to Congress	\$600,000		●			
Data and Society	\$600,000				●	
German Marshall Fund / Alliance for Securing Democracy	\$600,000				●	
Former Members of Congress, Inc.	\$600,000		●			
Library of Congress	\$583,000		●			
Carnegie Endowment / Democracy and Rule of Law Program	\$500,000					●
Center for Election Innovation and Research	\$500,000					●
Pew Charitable Trusts / House Chiefs of Staff Project	\$500,000		●			