



The Strategy of the Madison Initiative

Initiative Goal: To help Congress work more effectively in our polarized age.

The purpose of this paper is to share the strategy of the Madison Initiative in order to inform interested parties and solicit their feedback. After tracing the Initiative’s origins and development, we turn to how we have adjusted our course in the wake of the 2016 election. Next, we outline the three main objectives of our strategy—supporting bipartisan problem-solving, strengthening Congress as an institution, and improving campaigns and elections. In the final section, we describe how we envision the changes we seek coming about and how we will track our progress.¹

I. Origins and initial development of the Madison Initiative

A functioning democracy in America matters—not only here in the United States, but also globally given the leadership role our country has long played in world affairs. It was this consideration that prompted us in early 2013 to begin an exploration that eventually became the Madison Initiative. At that point in time, Freedom House had just reported that we were in the seventh straight year of a global “democratic recession,” with more countries seeing significant declines in the political rights and civil liberties of their citizens than had experienced gains. The poor example being set in the United States hardly helped matters. Indeed, later that same year, political brinksmanship over appropriations in Congress led to a shutdown of the federal government for three weeks, prompting President Obama to lament that, “We’re the United States of America—this is not some banana republic!”

Our exploration was not entirely selfless. The problems in Washington, especially those borne of worsening polarization, threatened to undermine the Hewlett Foundation’s other work. Obviously, we cannot always count on our grantees persuading government to adopt policies we favor in our different program areas. But our grantmaking in many fields—mitigating climate change, for example, or reforming education in the United States—presumes a minimally

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rational and effective policymaking process in our nation's government. This is true for all funders, left and right: Whatever role one envisions for government requires that it be capable of absorbing information and acting rationally based on that information and voter preferences. If it cannot, we all lose.

In March 2014, with these considerations in mind, we formally launched a three-year, \$50 million initiative to determine whether the foundation could do something to alleviate several problems associated with political polarization, including the yawning ideological gulf separating the two major parties, hyper-partisanship in the ongoing battle for control of the federal government, and rising levels of legislative gridlock on many salient issues.

To ground the inquiry, we decided to focus our efforts on Congress, the first branch of government in our representative democracy, where these problems were most prominently on display, and from which they were infecting other parts of the political system. We set out to ascertain the feasibility of an audacious goal: Given the complex and dynamic nature of our political system, and the constraints within which a nonpartisan, charitable foundation such as ours operates, could we help to create conditions in which Congress and its members might productively deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in ways that more Americans support?

Given the preliminary nature of our exploration, we initially chose to spread a series of small bets across a wide range of potential interventions to learn where and how we might have a positive impact. We did, however, identify a number of important principles to guide us during the initial exploration, and they continue to inform our work:

- First, this is a huge undertaking that requires collaboration among funders, both programmatically and at the institutional level. We have, accordingly, engaged with other foundations and their leaders from the outset of the Initiative.
- Second, as in any field, the assessment of key problems and how to address them must be based on the best evidence available. To that end, we have invested in and relied on the work of leading social scientists, even when their research findings run counter to the conventional wisdom cited by pundits and reform-minded activists.
- Third, given how closely divided we are as a nation, we cannot expect to make progress without support across the political spectrum. We have, therefore, worked with leaders and organizations who share our goals whether they come from the right, left, or center.
- Fourth, and perhaps most important, the Madison Initiative is decidedly agnostic about policy outcomes (except for democracy enhancing reforms themselves). To proceed otherwise would miss the point. Any assessment of a democracy's effectiveness should depend not on the adoption of particular policies, but on whether its representative institutions are addressing problems in ways the public can support.

During this experimental phase of our work from 2014-2016, we tested a long list of hypotheses about where the foundation might make a difference. We winnowed these down to three objectives that we concluded warranted deeper investment: (1) supporting bipartisan

problem-solving, and the kinds of leaders and relationships that make it possible; (2) strengthening Congress as an institution by bolstering its rules, norms, and processes, and staff capacity; and (3) improving campaigns and elections for Congress, with a particular focus on campaign finance and electoral rules that provide for better and more responsive representation. However, as we prepared to propose to our foundation board a renewal of the initiative that would focus on these objectives, the 2016 presidential campaign upended the political landscape.

II. Adjusting course amid the current political tumult

When we first launched the Madison Initiative in early 2014, we had noted that unless the mounting tribalism and dysfunction could be tempered, democratic government in the United States would eventually encounter more fundamental challenges. But we were thinking this might happen in one or two decades rather than one or two years. During the run-up to the 2016 election, we were struck by the political ferment that was manifest on both sides in the campaign. It underscored the urgency of our task. We observed how several issues tied to globalization—the disparate effects of free trade, rising economic inequality, immigration pressures, refugee crises, and terrorism—had roused radical as well as populist and illiberal forces and leaders in the United States, much as they had in Europe. We recognized that the problems we had set out to address—polarization, hyper-partisanship, and gridlock—were combining to nurture and feed these forces, creating an audience for ever-more disruptive voices. As responsible planners, we developed and assessed a scenario in which Donald Trump would win the presidency. But until November 8, 2016, we saw this as a remote possibility. Like others, we were caught off-guard by the outcome. It prompted us to assess whether we were on the right track.

From a global perspective, the challenges that motivated the Madison Initiative have persisted and, in many ways, worsened. We are now more than a decade into the global democratic recession. Developments in the United States fit a broader pattern of democratic struggles, with situations alarmingly like ours emerging throughout our sister democracies in Europe: increasingly polarized political parties; the waning influence of pragmatic elites; politicians on the left demanding sweeping reforms to reduce economic inequality; and xenophobic appeals by right-wing nationalists and populists to the white working class. From Berlin to Paris to London, as in Washington, incumbent parties and leaders are struggling to respond to these developments, even as unconvinced voters increasingly treat them as the source of the problem—concluding that the “game is rigged,” to use a battle cry heard from both the right and the left in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Dissatisfaction in the American electorate is clearly deeper and more widespread than either party has yet recognized or addressed, gridlocked and distracted by internecine warfare as they have been. Just as clear is the connection between congressional inaction and voters’ anger. Doing nothing has plainly exacerbated deep-seated frustration in a large part of the electorate, many of whom feel that Congress is fiddling while the nation burns. Nor is this frustration confined to those who supported non-traditional candidates like Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders in 2016. Even voters willing to stick with more conventional politicians openly express

their disdain and cynicism and say there is little reason to expect things to improve. Without parties that are more responsive to widespread public concerns, and without a national legislature capable of doing something about those concerns, leaders calling for illiberal or radical solutions will continue to gain followers. As we took stock of these developments, we concluded that the Madison Initiative remained more important than ever. So did the Hewlett Foundation's board, which approved a five-year, \$100 million renewal of the Initiative in the wake of the 2016 election.

At the same time, amid the aftershocks of the electoral earthquake, we also became convinced of the need to help shore up newly vulnerable aspects of our democracy that lay outside the scope of our strategy. We thus made a discrete set of one-time grants toward these defensive ends. To counteract the potentially harmful effects of the now-disbanded President's Commission on Electoral Integrity, which was formed following false claims of widespread voter fraud, we supported a nonpartisan group of scholars and experts in election administration to counter any distortions, falsehoods, and pernicious policy recommendations emanating from the commission. Along similar lines, we have also joined with other democracy funders to consider how to buttress a related bedrock of our representational system, a full and accurate decennial census, which the Government Accountability Office has noted is at high risk of failure in 2020 due to inadequate appropriations, unsteady technology, and maladministration. Another risk to our democracy stems from the unprecedented intermingling of the president's official activities with the Trump organization's private business, and the equally unprecedented withholding of information about his and his family members' personal finances and conflicts of interest. Some of our grantees who do work in this area have seen a surge in demand for their watchdogging efforts, and we have augmented our grants to these organizations to help them meet it. We are also supporting an effort to monitor and counter efforts by Russia and other adversaries to undermine liberal democracy in the United States and Western Europe via cyber-attacks and fomenting tribalism via social media, etc. Finally, we have helped launch scholarly efforts to better understand the causes and consequences of the growth of populism around the world and to monitor the health of our own democracy to track whether, where, and how it may be backsliding.

This set of one-time defensive actions represents our immediate response to the 2016 election. Looking ahead to how we may need to adapt our ongoing work, we have also felt obliged to reconsider and redefine the core problem we are seeking to address. Four years ago, we zeroed in on one set of norms in democratic politics—the willingness to deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in crafting and enacting legislation—believing that the erosion of this disposition was the heart of the problem we were trying to solve. We now realize that was too narrow a conception; more than just this set of norms has atrophied. Indeed, in their important new book, *How Democracies Die*, political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt point out the risk to two broader meta-norms, “soft guardrails” that have long served to keep American democracy on track but are now breaking down. The first guardrail is the very notion of informal norms and restraints whose ongoing observance is more important than any particular ideological battle. The institutional forbearance entailed by this guardrail is meant to restrain the behavior of majority and minority parties alike. This is faltering in the face of partisans on both sides resorting to “win-at-all-costs” politics. We are also witnessing the

gradual abandonment of the related but distinct guardrail that presupposes and reaffirms a degree of respect for the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints in a representative democracy. Tribal forces require us instead to see our political opponents as enemies. Watching political parties and leaders—particularly, but not only, Donald Trump and the Republican Party—repeatedly barrel into and weaken these guardrails has clarified for us the imperative of bolstering them.

In this regard, we need to go beyond another anchoring premise of the Madison Initiative: that mitigating the effects of polarization can only happen if there is buy-in from the right as well as the left. With this in mind, we have worked conscientiously to build a grantee, co-funder, and partner network that spans the political spectrum. While that remains necessary, events of the past year indicate that, underneath this left-right divide, and the polarization that is intensifying with it, there is an even more fundamental divide on which we also need to focus. This divide lies between actors seeking to work within and shore up the values, norms, and institutions of the Madisonian system, on the one hand, and those who seek to undermine them, on the other. This constitutional divide will loom large in the years ahead. It is one we are at liberty to—indeed must—take a side on, in ways that are nonetheless consistent with our agnosticism about policies that do not bear on the health of our democratic process.

This does not mean that we are now simply joining forces with liberals and progressives in the “resistance.” For example, among our grantees, several on the political right have been perhaps the most determined and outspoken critics of candidate and then President Trump. We will continue to support them, not due to the criticism, but because of the values, norms, and institutions they are upholding. Moreover, this same stance leads us to reject the departures from longstanding values and norms that we have observed on the left, including recent instances of intimidation and physical attacks against conservatives and administration supporters exercising their freedoms of speech and assembly on campuses, or the unstinting obstructionism that has set in among many Democrats that rules out any form of cooperation with the administration, even in areas of shared concern.

One other question has dogged us in the wake of the 2016 election: What if anything could and should we do to help foster media more conducive to liberal democracy? The “post-truth” environment and “fake news” allegations of 2016 refocused attention on longer-standing concerns about echo chambers and filter bubbles. The problem of truly fictitious news is likely to be solved without philanthropic intervention, because media platforms have financial incentives to address this themselves. The more serious problems are the spread of disinformation and propaganda, both of which are fueled by and exacerbate polarization. Many citizens are psychologically predisposed to share and receive news that reaffirms their pre-existing beliefs and tribal identities. This creates obvious adverse incentives for commercial social media platforms that want to keep people on their sites. Over the past year, we have undertaken a wide-ranging exploration of this phenomenon and what, if anything, we might do in response to it. Given how little we know about what is actually happening, we have concluded that supporting systematic research into the problem is an essential first step. We are now in the process of identifying a research agenda and potential grantees and co-funders to help advance it, and will be bringing the question to our board later this year.

III. Main objectives of our strategy

The one-time and ongoing adjustments described above reflect a broadening and deepening of our original strategy, but not a fundamental change. Ultimately, we are convinced that the Trump phenomenon is a symptom of myriad failures in U.S. democratic institutions, many emanating from, and most reflected in, the dysfunctional national legislature. We turn now to the three main objectives that we will continue to work toward to redress those failures.

A. Supporting bipartisan problem-solving.

Bipartisanship has been a central tenet of our work from the outset. But we have come to appreciate that “bipartisanship” is a problematic concept if it refers to a lowest common denominator compromise or settling for a policy midpoint that no one favors—both of which are increasingly impractical approaches in our polarized age. To a growing number of people, moreover, bipartisanship is just plain wrong if it entails going along with demagogues or hyper-partisans pushing illiberal agendas.

However, when we talk about supporting bipartisanship, we refer to a broader concept and approach to governance. Proper bipartisanship begins with shared commitment to the values and norms underpinning liberal democracy. It thus includes an acceptance of opponents’ different views as a normal and legitimate feature of a democratic political system. It also includes at least some recognition by politicians and parties that, whether they are in the majority or the minority at any point in time, that the tables will eventually turn; they need to exercise a modicum of forbearance when it comes to manipulating the rules of the game in the quest for short-term advantage.

In addition, bipartisanship properly understood presumes that, beyond the claims of party, legislators can and should bring to bear the particular needs, interests, and viewpoints of their constituents; their practical and professional experience; and their own policy agendas. In a functioning Congress, members’ political identities are not wholly defined by party or cabined by party discipline, leaving space for bipartisanship to manifest itself in give-and-take among fluid, short-term, and shifting cross-party coalitions.

However much the idea of bipartisanship may be disparaged as idealistic or obsolete in the current climate, it remains a brute necessity for national policymaking. Virtually no bill becomes law without some degree of bipartisan support, and the vast majority of bills that become laws continue to be supported by a majority of members in both parties.² This is no accident—the bicameral structure of Congress, and the different constituencies and terms of office for members of the House and Senate, their committee systems, and elaborate internal processes all work to ensure that most bills that are enacted have broad support on both sides of the aisle. Like it or not, there is no escape from bipartisanship.

² 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.

Thus, we see support for bipartisan problem-solving as a necessary if insufficient contribution toward the realization of our overall goal. Toward this end, we fund a number of organizations that work in different ways to cultivate relationships and connections across party lines in Washington. We believe that elected officials and the staff on whom they rely are more likely to engage in productive give-and-take of the sort needed for effective policymaking if they have personal relationships and a basis for mutual trust with peers in the other party. Such relationships are much rarer today—partly because polarization has eroded opportunities to develop them, but also because most members spend little time in D.C. and, when there, they are pre-occupied by party business and fundraising. Our grantees work to fill this void by coordinating seminars, briefings, dinners, retreats, and delegations, as well as by sponsoring ongoing caucuses with participants from both parties. Some of these efforts focus on substantive policy issues, others on shared experiences or practical matters pertaining to different legislative roles. In some instances, family members participate.

Bipartisanship requires not only relationships across the aisle but leaders who are ready, willing, and able to practice it. Several of our grantees operate networks that recruit, engage, and support such leaders at all levels of government—local, state, and federal—helping to build a pipeline that will bring more pragmatic leaders into our national institutions. Politics already offers plenty of incentives to act in highly partisan ways; these grantees work to counter that tendency by encouraging and reinforcing a disposition toward bipartisanship that would otherwise be left to wither.

Other grantees have developed publicly available indices that track the extent to which members of Congress are behaving in a bipartisan fashion, and how effective they are in advancing a legislative agenda. As with our work building a talent pipeline, this is an exercise in alternatives. Plenty of scorecards and litmus tests exist to assess whether legislators are toeing a particular partisan line. To date, there haven't been similar measures to identify and commend legislators for working productively across the aisle. Our grantees are changing that.

Finally, we support bipartisanship by underwriting the work of a select set of think tanks that advance policies by promoting solutions and approaches likely to garner bipartisan support. As philanthropy has polarized, funding for organizations like these has dried up, with money flowing to ideological policy shops that treat accommodation with the other side as neither necessary nor helpful. As a result, the well of plausible, well-developed ideas for lawmakers who want to work in a bipartisan fashion has run dry. These grantees are replenishing it.

B. Strengthening Congress as an institution.

The need to strengthen Congress is more important than ever. Polarization and hyper-partisanship have undermined the ability of Congress to carry out its constitutional responsibilities, from law-making and exercising the power of the purse to overseeing the administration of policy. The institutional feebleness of Congress has increasingly left it unable to serve as political counterweight in balancing the other two branches of government, each of which has used the ensuing vacuum to greatly extend its power. Only in Congress can the many different interests, ideas, and agendas in the country be represented and reconciled in a democratically accountable fashion. This cannot happen in the White House or the Supreme Court; indeed, making unilateral policy decisions in these other branches aggravates rather than

alleviates polarization. Hence, we want to help strengthen the institution by improving the rules and norms, core work processes, and staff capacity of Congress so that it is in a better position to play its central role as the first branch of our government.

Examples abound of ways in which the degradation of rules and norms hamper Congress: the increasingly routinized bypassing of committees and the minority party in the drafting of major legislation, excessive use of the filibuster by both parties when they are in the minority in the Senate, and the anti-majoritarian constraint of the so-called Hastert Rule observed by Republicans in the House³. We recognize that both the gradual evolution in rules and norms as well as sudden changes in their use are inherently political and driven by the contest for control of both houses of Congress. There are limits to what researchers and advocates can directly do to inform how these rules and norms are observed and adapted over time. Yet external advocacy for change can have an effect, as past experience clearly shows; simply having thoughtful proposals generates some will to act by serving as a focal point around which debate can arise and take shape. Several of our grantees are formulating ways for Congress to adapt the legislative process to improve its output—everything from a five-day legislative work week to strengthening committees to reigning in abuse of the filibuster.

We believe there is more room for our grantees to contribute to broader improvements in the recurring institutional processes of Congress. For example, we want to help Congress regain its ability to properly exercise its budgeting, taxing, and spending powers. These powers of the purse represent the institution's most central functions—but they are also, increasingly, its most polarizing. Yet legislators on both sides of the aisle recognize the importance of fulfilling their budgetary and fiscal responsibilities, making this a potentially promising place to begin building new norms for cooperation. Reform in this area will not magically fix deep disagreements over taxing and spending priorities. But if Congress is going to meet its Article I responsibilities, it needs to find a way to negotiate and compromise more effectively in this mission-critical set of institutional processes. Moreover, fixing sticky issues around process may help also by providing a place to begin rebuilding the muscles for cooperation that could be applied to sticky issues of substance.

Another process used to aggravate partisan warfare that can be improved is congressional oversight of the executive branch. Several Madison Initiative grantees, led and staffed by experienced practitioners, provide training and technical assistance to members and staff from both parties on how to conduct more productive oversight. Other grantees have been working to elevate the importance of congressional oversight in the Washington policy community and to develop new approaches (or highlight time-tested ones) for how it can and should be conducted.

We have also launched an effort to help members of Congress and their staff learn to conduct legislative negotiations more productively. Between sustained dysfunction and high turnover (more than half the members in both chambers were not serving eight years ago), there are fewer members or staff who remember or know how Congress is supposed to work. Legislative negotiation has become something of a lost art. We seek to change that dynamic by

³ Under the Hastert Rule (it is really a norm observed by House Republicans), a Republican Speaker will only bring up bills for a vote when they have the support of “a majority of the majority.” In the current Congress, on complex legislation like health care and tax reform, this anti-majoritarian norm has evolved to the point where the Speaker will only bring up major bills for a vote when they can garner a majority on the floor solely with Republican votes, so as to avoid having to compromise with Democratic legislators.

supporting the development of training programs and supporting materials and curriculum that are tailored to the legislative context.

One might think it obvious that Congress cannot play its appointed role in our constitutional system without adequate staff capacity, including the expertise needed for research, analysis, and policy development. Absent such resources, Congress is at the mercy of what it can glean from the executive branch or what it is told by lobbyists. Alas, Congress has in recent decades been worse than miserly in equipping and funding itself to carry out its core functions. Several Madison Initiative grantees are leading the charge for Congress to provide sufficient funding for the institutional, committee, and office staff resources it needs to discharge its responsibilities effectively. This is, of course, more than a matter of simple headcount: as important are the quality of congressional staff and the diversity of perspectives they bring to the institution. Other grantees are working to enrich the capacity of the institution along these qualitative lines.

If successful, these efforts should strengthen the constitutional position of Congress vis-à-vis the other branches, as well as give members more leeway to represent the particular interests and agendas of their constituents in the face of polarizing headwinds. We are already seeing signs of progress: Congress is investing more in its own staff capacity and expertise, and at least some committees have risen to the occasion and begun overseeing, checking, and balancing the executive in ways that have the public taking notice. Our grantees also continue to lead the Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group, a bipartisan group of advocates, think tankers, and academics that engages regularly with members and staff in Congress to support “institutionalist” approaches and reforms.⁴

C. Improving campaigns and elections

What happens in Congress also depends, of course, on who wins elections and what legislators feel they must do to remain in office. Therefore, improving the rules of the electoral game are critically important also. The democratic reform field has a great many single-issue advocates and funders who believe that, if we just adopt the particular electoral reform they champion, dysfunction will disappear. Assumed but often left unsaid is that this preferred reform can be enacted in a critical mass of states and that it will have only the beneficial consequences intended. We do not believe any such silver bullet exists. Hence, we are working for something we believe is more realistic: ways to improve the odds that the legislators winning office will have more desire and latitude to recognize the legitimacy of their political opponents and be inclined to negotiate and compromise with them. Based on the available research, as well as state and local reform efforts now bearing fruit, there are some measured and discrete adjustments to the rules of the game that we believe could, over time, do just that.⁵

⁴ See www.legbranch.com. See also Casey Burgat, “Eight Pieces of Good News About Congress,” www.fixgov.org post, May 30, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2017/05/30/eight-good-pieces-of-news-about-congress/>. The June 8, 2017 Senate Intelligence Committee hearing with former FBI Director James Comey, an exemplary session of a broader bipartisan investigation, had 19.9 million television viewers, and millions more online.

⁵ Experience and research has likewise led us to reject sustained investment behind a number of reforms routinely advanced by pundits as solutions to polarization, most notably nonpartisan districting and open or “top two” primaries. Substantial evidence refutes the conventional wisdom that favors these reforms, suggesting not only that they do little to reduce polarization and hyper-partisanship, but that they may in fact exacerbate it. See Bruce Cain,

One area ripe for improvement is our current system of campaign finance. We see several problems with how the system operates that make it relevant for our work. The first is prosaic, but critical: many Members of Congress must spend so much of their time raising money (upward of 50 percent for some) that everything else—including their legislative responsibilities, roles, and relationships—gets short shrift. The second problem is that, in raising this money, whether from large or small donors, members end up spending a disproportionate amount of time with their most partisan and ideological supporters. This exacerbates hyper-partisanship through cognitive osmosis. Then there is the legitimacy problem: the current system of campaign finance, even if not actually involving quid pro quo corruption, appears to do so in the eyes of voters, undermining public trust in Congress and the electoral process. Critics also say that campaign finance drives inaction—lawmakers let problems continue rather than support policies to which major donors stand opposed.

Dissecting the problem of campaign finance is easier than figuring out how to improve it. One focus of our initial grantmaking has been to illuminate ways in which campaign finance is rapidly evolving—through the rise of independent expenditures, super PACs, and “dark money” for example, or the shift from television to social media-based political advertising. This is important because any workable solution needs to be based on the latest and best data about how campaign dollars are actually flowing. Another focus of our early grantmaking has involved encouraging the development of bipartisan support for reform. Any viable reform proposal will require legislative enactment and sustained support as it is implemented, so it is essential for any reform to have support on both sides of the aisle.

We have not yet found a specific campaign finance reform agenda that we see as *the* path forward. Some interesting experiments in public financing are underway in New York City (which matches small donors six-to-one up to \$175) and Seattle (which gives each registered voter four \$25 vouchers to contribute), and we are supporting grantees who believe approaches like these hold promise and who are researching their effects. We are also supporting grantees working to put political parties back on equal footing with outside groups when it comes to campaign finance. The theory behind this work—which is supported by history and political science research—is that, because parties are responsible for aggregating interests and assembling workable majorities, they can play a moderating role in campaigns and campaign finance.

Although they represent longer shots for adoption, we also see promise in the development of alternatives to our standard first-past-the-post, winner-take-all electoral format, which worsens polarization by failing to represent the full diversity of opinion in the electorate. The use of single-member, winner-take-all districts for the House of Representatives, for example, forces voters to make binary choices that misrepresent the actual preferences of a district’s electorate, and they lead to state delegations that are often wildly skewed. The problem is greatly intensified when the same winner-take-all system is used in primary elections in which only a small subset of the most ideological and partisan activists vote: Whichever candidate

Democracy More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Nolan McCarty, “Reducing Polarization: Some Facts for Reformers,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 2016.

prevails in the general election is now likely to be far to the left or right of the district's voters as a whole, a result confirmed by research.

We are exploring electoral innovations that can avoid these distortions. One is ranked choice voting (RCV), whereby voters order their preferences across all the candidates for a given office. This provides a finer-grained register of public opinion. It also produces more constructive campaign dynamics, as candidates must worry about appealing to voters for whom they may not be the first choice. A number of cities presently use RCV for municipal offices, and voters in Maine decided via ballot measure in 2016 to use it in both primary and general elections for Congress as well as for governor and the state legislature.

Another way to avoid the corrosive dynamics of a winner-take-all system is to use multi-member districts, potentially (though not necessarily) in combination with some form of proportional representation. This is less alien than it may seem. Multi-member districts and at-large elections 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 (a bill was recently introduced in the House that would overturn this legislation).

To be clear, we know that electoral innovations like RCV and/or multi-member districts face steep odds. Yet the benefits of such changes, were they to be adopted, are significant enough that we believe continued investment is warranted. As with any philanthropic strategy, it makes sense to include some long shots alongside safer bets, especially as few organizations outside philanthropy have the means or incentives to pursue them.

IV. How do we expect the changes we seek will come about?

How will our pursuit of these three objectives move us closer to our overall goal, namely, to help Congress work more effectively in our polarized age? Is progress even possible amid the apparent rapid deterioration of our democracy? These are valid—and daunting—questions we have faced from the outset of our work. We were chagrined but not entirely surprised when the Madison Initiative was singled out early on by one philanthropic commentator as the “big foundation bet most likely to fail.”⁶ We recognize that our work may not succeed, especially in the face of mounting headwinds. Nevertheless, we remain cautiously optimistic that we can make progress toward our ambitious goal. This section outlines how we see these changes coming about, how our work will help advance them, and how we will be tracking our progress.

A. Shifting political dynamics

As several critical friends of the initiative have pointed out, polarization is not so much a cause as it is a consequence of deep-seated historical and cultural forces. We agree. These forces include, first and foremost, the political realignment set in motion 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

⁶ David Callahan, “Philanthropy Awards, 2014,” Inside Philanthropy blog, December 31, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2014/12/31/philanthropy-awards-2014.html>.

this re-sorting were then intensified by the persistent and entrenched political conflict over the expanded size and scope of government in the 1960s and 1970s, a battle 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 party 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, which will resolve the chronic political conflict arising from what Frances Lee has termed “insecure majorities” as well as the decades-long impasse over the proper role of government. Such developments are largely beyond the legal and practical capacity of private foundations and their grantees to shape in any fundamental way.

That said, polarization is not simply an effect of outside forces that may someday change. It has also become a cause in its own right — a state of affairs that is eroding the institutional health of Congress, and our democracy writ large, by spawning beliefs and behaviors that reinforce and aggravate negative consequences in a classic downward spiral. While we are not addressing the root causes of polarization per se, we are seeking to interrupt the negative cycle it has set in motion through our pursuit of the three main objectives of our strategy.

We do this in part by supporting efforts to uphold and expound the values, norms, and institutions that are at once essential for our democracy and at risk of being diminished by this negative cycle of polarization. Most prominent among these ideals are the two “soft guardrails” of American democracy that we referred to earlier—the meta-norms of political toleration and institutional forbearance being undermined by tribalism and hardball politics.

Realism also requires that we pay due heed to the incentives that shape the beliefs and behaviors of leaders, rank and file members, and candidates for Congress. Currently, many of these incentives spur partisan if not hyper-partisan behaviors. To help offset them, we underwrite programs that enable and induce principled bipartisanship in Congress, open up new avenues for constructive action by ambitious legislators, and reform the rules governing campaigns and elections to set the stage for more problem-solving in Washington.

Our focus across the three objectives of our strategy on upholding ideals and changing incentives addresses the problem of polarization in two ways. On the one hand, the efforts we support can help Congress and the broader political system cope more effectively with polarization while it persists. On the other hand, if and when the cultural and ideological trends that have disrupted our politics shift to giving parties and leaders more room to maneuver, these same efforts will make for a quicker and deeper recovery.

To be clear, 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 necessarily have the positive impact we have envisioned. But we are persuaded that, in aggregate and over time, the changes we seek will have beneficial cumulative effects. After four years of exploratory work, 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.

B. Building the field

Many of the political shifts described above are ones that a private foundation like Hewlett can only indirectly influence, proscribed as we are by law from supporting or opposing any candidate, party, or ballot measure, and from earmarking funds for or engaging in legislative lobbying. Ultimately, the direct impact we can have comes from working with and through our grantees and other funders in civil society. We have great confidence in the partnerships we have developed in this realm; securing and enhancing this network in the democracy field is an integral part of our theory of change.

Because any success we enjoy will ultimately come through the efforts of our grantees, we have intentionally sought to structure our relationships with them in ways that maximize their effectiveness. Thus, we provide the bulk of our funding in the form of unrestricted, multi-year grants. Our goal is to increase the sustainability of the organizations and programs we support, and to optimize their degrees of freedom when it comes to taking the initiative and/or responding to new developments in an especially dynamic environment.⁷

Beyond our support for individual grantees, we also strive to establish links between and among them. Given the range of discrete but related fields that we fund, and our engagement of grantees across the political spectrum, the resulting network has proven to be especially helpful to most participants. The subsequent collaborations and partnerships that grantees have formed with each other make the whole of the network's contributions much greater than the sum of its parts. There is a resilience and heft to the collective set of enterprises that serve as force multipliers for all those involved.

Even with a grants budget of \$20 million annually, we recognize our funding amounts to just a small fraction of the total foundation funding to support democracy in the United States, so another element of the network-tending role we seek to play involves working in partnership with other funders. To date, we have collaborated with more than 20 foundations across the left, right, and center of the political spectrum. Collectively, these partners make grants totaling more than \$150 million annually to support democracy-related work.⁸ With our closest partners, we offer detailed input into each other's strategies, share multiple common grantees, jointly host convenings, and more. Cooperation of this sort is facilitated by shared goals, a belief in the need to work with partners on both sides of the aisle, and initiatives at roughly the same stage of development. Other funding partners, in contrast, may have different goals, are committed to working exclusively with partners on either the progressive or the conservative side, and/or have developed grantmaking strategies they have been following for years. While

⁷ For more on our approach, see Daniel Stid and Jillian Misrack Galbete, "Streamlining a Foundation's Grant Practices," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, November 7, 2017, retrieved from https://ssir.org/articles/entry/streamlining_a_foundation_initiatives_grant_practices.

⁸ The philanthropic institutions we have partnered with to date includes the Arnold, Bauman, Bradley, Ford, Irvine, Joyce, JPB, Knight, MacArthur, Open Society, Peterson, Rodell, Rita Allen, Sandler, Smith Richardson, and Wyss foundations as well as the Carnegie Corporation, Democracy Fund, Pew Charitable Trusts, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Searle Freedom Trust, and Wellspring Advisors.

this can make it harder to find common ground, we have managed in multiple instances to make it work.

Finally, given the size and complex nature of the problems we are tackling, we have prepared for a longer journey and want to recruit and enable others to come along with us. Thus, we spend approximately 10-15 percent of our budget to fund infrastructure and information that, while not exclusively focused on our strategic objectives, sustain and inform collective work in the field. We are, for example, a co-founder and anchor sponsor of [Foundation Funding for U.S. Democracy](#), a publicly available database that tracks who is funding whom to do what in the field. We participate in and underwrite several funder affinity groups. We fund the gathering, analysis, and public dissemination of key data on demographic trends and public attitudes about politics and polarization so others can incorporate it into their work. We support national academic programs that improve the quality of scholarship on the problems facing democracy and help bring it to bear in informing the public debate. Finally, we make grants to improve media coverage of democracy and reform issues, both through influential journals aimed at policy and political elites in Washington, and through solutions-oriented explanatory journalism.

C. Tracking progress

A philanthropic strategy presumes a clear goal; a theory of change, informed by the best available evidence, for how that goal will be realized; and measures that can be used to evaluate progress and enable course correction when warranted. How will we know if we are making progress toward our goal of helping Congress work more effectively in our polarized age?

This question is complicated for our work in a couple of ways. First, given the size and complexity of the problem we are addressing, we are not presuming that in the near term, e.g., over the next three to five years, that we will see observable outcomes in the political system resulting from our work. To be sure, from the outset of the Initiative, we have used third-party evaluators to assist with the development of our strategy, focus areas, and grantee portfolio, and we will continue to do so. But this ongoing evaluation, by dint of its focus and the early-stage time frame, is primarily meant to support the development and refinement of our strategy in the democracy field, not to assess the results produced by it in the political system we want to change. Second, now that the specter of democratic backsliding has emerged as a real possibility in the U.S., we also need to be tracking whether, where, and how this may be occurring. As noted earlier, we have funded networks of scholars that are now monitoring the systemic health of U.S. democracy on an ongoing basis, and we have additional investments planned to track this information in a comparative context.

All that said, in the long run, over five to 10 years, we will need some way of knowing whether the affirmative goal we have set for our work is being realized. Given the complexity of the national political system, of which Congress is in effect a keystone, not to mention the interdependency of its many sub-systems, no one outcome will, by itself, be dispositive. We need something more like the vital signs a doctor examines at the outset of a medical consultation: body temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, breathing patterns, and so on. Each of these provides useful information about a patient's health, but collectively they tell a lot more—especially when compared with longer trends in the patient's medical records.

We are already in a position to track some relevant indicators in this regard. Several of our grantees—including the Bipartisan Policy Center, the Lugar Center, and the Brookings Institution, along with other analysts working in and around Congress—have developed indices to follow Congress’s work and monitor such things as its use of the committee process and regular order, the openness of floor debate in both houses, bipartisanship in lawmaking, legislative productivity and gridlock, and public approval of Congress.

We view this last indicator—public approval of and confidence in the institution, over and above opinion on any given policy—as an especially important aggregate measure of progress, albeit a messy one with many factors feeding into it. Congress has never been an especially popular institution given citizens’ ambivalence about the politicking and partisanship that necessarily color its activities. Even during periods in which Congress produced successful compromises—e.g., with immigration and tax reform in the 1980s, welfare and budget reform in the 1990s, or the response to the Great Recession—approval has fluctuated in the 30-50 percent range. That may seem like a low bar to shoot for, but over the longer run we believe it would be a reasonable proxy for whether we are realizing our goal. Indeed, this level of support would be three to five times higher than the anemic 10 percent at which Congress’s approval rate currently hovers. When it comes to improving the functioning of representative democracy in the United States, and the confidence that those being represented have in the system, there is clearly ample room—as well as a profound need—for improvement.