

Executive Summary
Democratic Trust and Participation Interview Report
Erin Casey
3.13.24

This report synthesizes interviews with 16 leaders who bring their own unique perspective, experience, knowledge, and strategy in building a multi-racial, participatory democracy. The purpose of the interviews was to enrich the development of William Penn Foundation's (WPF) democracy portfolio by soliciting feedback on draft objectives, assessing their relevance, and gauging their feasibility. Interviewees were selected based on their expertise, stakeholder representation, and potential to offer valuable insights aligned with the strategic goals of WPF. This selection process ensured a diverse mix of perspectives, including both established leaders with existing relationships with WPF and fresh voices new to the foundation, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the strategic landscape. This feedback provides important data to WPF's larger strategic planning process that is exploring formalizing WPF's support for democratic participation in Pennsylvania.

Leaders recognized that our democracy is facing an unprecedented number of challenges, and that vulnerable and marginalized communities are most at risk from these attacks. It will take a multi-layered approach to solve them. The leaders appreciated the important step WPF is taking to support efforts to build a multi-racial, participatory democracy. Creating a democracy portfolio will help to fill a critical resource gap that is necessary to increase trust and participation by underrepresented communities.

One theme that was consistently raised is the need to invest in a strong civic engagement infrastructure of trusted organizations that focus on engaging, organizing and mobilizing individuals and communities to be part of the political process. The work of these organizations is focused on building a more just and equitable democracy that incorporates all voices, specifically communities of color, in both elections and policy making. This work needs to happen year-round and go beyond electoral engagement alone. The civic engagement infrastructure would have a multi-level strategy of power building and active, engaged communities. It is important to emphasize that these organizations need to be reflective and responsive to the individual community needs with a focus on organizations led by people of color and leaders from underrepresented communities.

The majority of interviewees expressed overall support for the objectives with some suggestions for reframing them, and provided ideas for what success would look like. Interviewees emphasized the need for investment in a strong civic engagement infrastructure, stronger alignment of philanthropy, civic and voter education, combating mis|disinformation and integrating democracy into all aspects of WPF grantmaking.

The interviewees ranked increasing turnout and accountable local government as the top two objectives. By achieving these objectives, it will demonstrate an increase in people's belief in the value

of government and that they have a voice and ability to shape the outcome of it through their participation.

The census and redistricting objectives were well received whether the interviewees worked directly on these issues. Respondents recognized that the work the groups did leading up to the decennial census and redistricting was extremely successful and expressed it is important to continue to build and expand on that work. The interviewees highlighted the success of the interconnected work between the census, electoral engagement, and redistricting and stressed the need for funding to directly build and strengthen these organizations.

The objective that focused on increasing the faith in elections did not resonate with most of the interviewees. Some of the interviewees said this objective wasn't feasible to achieve because of the many outside influences that can shape and impact people's perception and beliefs. Additionally, they felt that what drives people's faith in elections varies based on their own experiences and beliefs. This is likely to be different for voters of color and white voters. Interviewees wanted to know more about the reasons why people don't have faith in the elections to know how to increase it. The interviewees highlighted the importance of addressing voter suppression, voting access, election administration, and mis|disinformation as critical problems that directly impact people's faith in elections. The recommendations focused on reframing the lack of trust in the election to a focus on improving county-level election administration, addressing mis|disinformation and increasing civic and voter education.

Another theme that interviewees expressed is that a declining level of civic knowledge has a direct impact on individuals' trust and participation in our democracy. Many of the interviewees mentioned the general lack of understanding about how government works, and the responsibilities of elected officials specifically at the local and state level as an underlying contributor to the lack of trust and participation in the democratic process. The interviewees highlighted the need for investment in civic and voter education. The lack of seeing the value of government and understanding the various roles of government is part of what impacts active and engaged citizens. The leaders see this education as critical so that individuals can understand their role in a participatory democracy and become fully engaged in it.

In addition to a strong civic engagement infrastructure that is led by people of color, leaders highlighted the need to have stronger philanthropic alignment in Pennsylvania and with national funders. The challenge to our democracy is so great we need a more unified approach to building a strong democracy that is centered by voices, specifically people of color.

The response was overwhelmingly positive from the interviewees. The final strategy and objectives that WPF establishes will fill an important gap in the state ecosystem of building a stronger more representative democracy. The leaders expressed interest in building on this collaboration and establishing a shared democracy learning space where leaders (grantees) and funders can learn and strategize together.