

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Opinion

To Protect Democracy, Tell a Better Story About Why It Matters

Philanthropy leaders recognize the need to counter authoritarian narratives but aren't sure where to begin. Here's a game plan.

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Authoritarians are remarkably effective at deploying weaponized narratives to undermine democracy. They use stories to [shift norms](#), [legitimize autocratic actions](#), [erode trust](#), and [spread misinformation](#) — often under the guise of defending democracy. They imbue their false narratives with clear, relatable messages rooted in values people hold dear, such as honesty and security.

Just this week, using a “security justifies all” narrative, the Trump administration [took over Washington, D.C.’s police department](#) and mobilized National Guard troops, portraying the city as overrun by “bloodthirsty criminals” even though violent crime is at a [30-year low](#).

By contrast, those fighting to protect democracy often [struggle](#) to tell a clear and motivating story about why it matters. They mistakenly assume that people appreciate what it takes to sustain democracy, while relying on technical terms such as “rule of law” or “separation of powers” that can feel removed from people’s daily lives.

This communication gap has created an urgent challenge for philanthropy. Leaders across the sector increasingly recognize the need for stronger pro-democracy narratives but aren't sure what that means in practice. And they grapple with how to invest in countering attacks on democracy while building a positive vision people can support.

The first task is coming to agreement about what narratives work. The second is building the infrastructure to spread those narratives widely.

Over the past three years, with \$4 million from multiple funders, our organizations, [Metropolitan Group](#) and [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#), known as PACE, studied the [global democracy narrative landscape](#). PACE surveyed [perceptions of civic language](#) in the United States. Metropolitan Group examined 12 countries, including the United States, to understand how narratives erode or advance democracy.

Our research found that narratives delegitimizing democracy succeed because they are simple, values-driven, and emotionally resonant. By tapping into people's deeply held values, authoritarians shift norms, behaviors, and policies. Take the case of El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, who has evoked core values of security and representation to justify policies that violate due process and have led to the detention of more than 85,000 people. Claiming to protect people's right to choose whom they vote for, he ran for and won an unconstitutional second term and has now [ended term limits](#).

Story Elements

To push back against such narratives, our organizations have produced a [body of data and evidence](#) that can help grant makers, nonprofit organizations, and advocates communicate more effectively about the essential elements of a democratic society and their role in it. We developed and tested narratives that increase understanding and support for democracy, its principles, and institutions, identifying three critical components.

First, such narratives embrace shared values, especially freedom, which resonates across the political spectrum and is seen as better protected by democracy.

Second, the definition of democracy goes beyond elections, recognizing that authoritarians often claim legitimacy for anti-democratic actions based solely on the fact that they were elected.

Third, democracy's imperfections are acknowledged while the work to improve it is framed as a courageous and collective effort.

In a just-released [national poll](#) that we conducted last month, narratives reflecting these insights proved remarkably effective among Democrats, independents, and Republicans. Fully 89 percent agreed that our country was built on the right to have our voices heard, make our own decisions, be treated fairly by the justice system, and vote in free and fair elections. They also agreed that while these freedoms are central to our nation's democracy, sustaining them requires checks on power and a government that is open, honest, and responsive to its citizens.

This broad support, however, doesn't mean that every group will connect to the democracy narrative in the same way. For example, the poll revealed that even though Democrats and Republicans strongly embrace the concept of freedom, they interpret its meaning differently. Democrats gravitate toward the idea of "securing freedom and fairness for all Americans," while Republicans lean toward "having a say in the decisions that shape your life." Both are essential to a functioning democracy, but they suggest a need for different entry points for more constructive conversation.

Accessible and Adaptable

These findings are a useful place to start. But for effective pro-democracy narratives to take hold, funders need to ensure they are accessible and easily adaptable. That will require building a democracy narrative infrastructure that allows organizations of all sizes and focus areas to embed such messages into their work. That infrastructure should include the following:

Technical assistance. Many nonprofits don't have the capacity or expertise for long-term narrative work so funders should provide the tools they need to link their specific issue area to effective democracy narratives. They might, for example, follow the approach taken by the Kresge Foundation, which funded a [narrative and messaging guide](#) to more effectively advance local and state climate policy focused on justice and equity. A similar approach could be used to bring effective democracy narratives to the higher education and public health sectors, both of which are facing Trump administration efforts to brand them as elite and untrustworthy.

A democracy hub. Grant makers can help establish an online hub of consistently updated, open-access resources about democracy narratives that includes opportunities to connect with peers, share lessons learned, and identify points of collaboration. Resource hubs are common in [other fields](#), but nothing of this kind exists in the pro-democracy arena, leaving the door wide open for philanthropy.

Message monitoring. Democracy narratives need to be regularly evaluated to make sure they're working — and then revised if they're not. Consider, for example, the critical shift from a “right to marry” to a “love is love” narrative that led to the legalization of same sex marriage a decade ago. To ensure democracy narratives are similarly adaptable, funders should invest in ongoing monitoring and analysis of shifts in the political and cultural landscape that necessitate narrative change and in broad dissemination of guidance on how to effectively respond.

Linked movements. In the short time since our research was released, we've seen a hunger to apply the findings from groups far beyond the world of democracy funders and their grantees. We've engaged with and been invited to brief nonprofits, networks, and associations focused on issues such as public health, environmental justice, the arts and pop culture, independent journalism, higher education, and civil rights. While we've heard how helpful the information is, leaders in these fields also tell us they need guidance in how to use it in their own work, including analyzing and strategically responding to authoritarian attacks, advancing messages that don't trigger authoritarian traps, and balancing effective defense and offense with a democracy narrative that diverse groups can get behind.

National networks in these fields already have programs to build capacity, trusted online forums for training and engagement, grassroots connections in every state, active constituencies, and strong local relationships. What they need is help to deliver effective, relevant, and regularly updated narratives. With this support in place, nonprofits would have the tools to unite tens of millions of Americans around a shared story that strengthens support for democracy.

This vision is not a pipe dream — it is within our grasp. But to make it happen, funders need to think differently about narrative, not as messaging but as infrastructure. Now is the time to come together to protect the freedom, fairness, and fearlessness that allow democracy to flourish.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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