

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

FAIR ELECTIONS

More Than 110 Philanthropists and Foundation Leaders Call for Secure Elections and a Peaceful Response to the Results

By *Alex Daniels*

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SERGIO FLORES, GETTY IMAGES

As threats of voter intimidation are on the rise, 115 philanthropic leaders representing a range of ideological viewpoints have signed a letter pressing for safe elections with all votes tallied and the result respected peacefully.

The letter cites a “small but increasing number of partisans across the spectrum” who are willing to use violence and declining trust in government, plus a new breed of hyper-partisanship in which political opponents are viewed as enemies.

Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn signed the letter, as did [Nicole Taylor](#), president of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and [Kathryn Murdoch](#), who is president of the Quadrivium Foundation and the daughter-in-law of media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Rachel Hoff, policy director of the Ronald Reagan Institute, also signed the letter, along with Larry Kramer, head of the Hewlett Foundation, and Cathy

Cha, who leads the Evelyn and Walter J. Haas Fund. (The Hewlett Foundation is a [financial supporter](#) of the *Chronicle*.)

“These are giant warning signs for American democracy, for civil society, and for most of the issues about which philanthropy is concerned,” the letter says. It urges politicians, civil-society leaders, media companies, and everyday Americans to ensure “the sacred right to vote is upheld and the norms of representative democracy transcend partisanship.”

The letter was circulated by the Democracy Funders Network, a coalition of grant makers, and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement and was published on [Medium](#).

Specifically, the letter calls for a halt to “unfounded claims about voter fraud or the illegitimacy of the election” and urges leaders to spread messages about the integrity of the voting process. It asks for a condemnation of all election-related violence and asks them to commit to a peaceful transition or continuation of power, depending on the outcome of the election.

Pooled Fund for Last-Minute Gifts

Separately, the Democracy Funders Network last week created a pooled fund it will manage called the Election Integrity Fund to steer any late-in-the game charitable donations to groups including Election SOS, which supports journalists handling election coverage, and the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, which runs a voter protection coalition.

[Mike Berkowitz](#), executive director of the Democracy Funders Network, says the fund is an ideal place for donors who have not given to support safe elections before but feel moved to do so because of reports of voter intimidation.

There is not much time before the elections for individual donors to vet organizations, and the situation in many states is fluid, he says, explaining that a pooled fund with a set of expert advisers could make people feel comfortable their donation will make a difference.

Alan Davis, president of the Leonard and Sophie Davis Fund and creator of the [Crisis Charitable Commitment](#), an effort to get individuals and donors to give more, says he will contribute an additional \$500,000 for each \$5 million donated to the fund by October 31.

The fund has received donations, but Berkowitz declined to provide an amount.

Surging Support

The warning call follows a surge in giving by foundations and individual donors to support peace and accuracy at the polls. Some of it, like a \$100 million commitment from Facebook co-founder [Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan](#), and gifts to democracy groups that were part of a \$1.7 billion round of gifts announced by [MacKenzie Scott](#) came this summer, relatively late in the four-year presidential election cycle.

One of the recipients of Scott's gifts was the Campaign Legal Center, which finances court battles to protect voting rights.

Jason Jaffery, the center's development officer, declined to say how much Scott gave the group. In the months leading up to the election, he says, the organization has received more philanthropic support than in previous years, but he declined to provide specific donation numbers.

But a campaign run by the center to raise money for an Election Defense Fund has attracted \$2.8 million since July, surpassing its \$2 million goal. And several donors have increased their support, including Michael and Anne Golden, who donated

\$200,000 in recent months, and the Stuart Family Foundation, which made a grant of \$125,000.

A portion of Scott's gifts also went to the State Infrastructure Fund, a pooled fund run by NEO Philanthropy that supports groups working to increase voter participation and safeguard the vote. Lisa Versaci, the fund's director, declined to say how much Scott gave.

Since 2017 the State Infrastructure Fund's members have more than doubled, to 31, and the \$64 million it has attracted during the current two-year election cycle is about double the amount it raised the previous election cycle.

Versaci said much of increase in support has come over the past year from foundations worried that a safe and fair election was under threat. She said big gifts have also been coming from individual donors as the election draws near, but she declined to provide details.

In addition to Scott's gift, the fund has also received new grants this year from the Langeloth Foundation, which dedicated a total of \$10 million to democracy groups in September, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation.

The Logan Family Foundation historically supports the arts and documentary journalism. In March, it decided to break its precedent and sent \$7.6 million in grants to help ensure trustworthy elections.

In addition to the State Infrastructure Fund, grantees included the Center for Democracy and Technology, the Fair Elections Center, and the Voting Rights Lab. This month the foundation added a \$25,000 grant to the Trusted Election Fund and a \$50,000 grant to Take Back the Courts, which was spurred by the death of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, according to Susanne Zuerbig, Logan's director of operations.

“We can’t go one way or another, Democrat or Republican,” Zuerbig says. “We just want to make sure elections are fair.”

Broad Range of Missions

The MacArthur Foundation closed a grant-making program dedicated to democracy three years ago when it narrowed its focus on a few “big bets” and [shifted some of its democracy funding](#) to its media and journalism program. When deciding how to use proceeds from a bond offering it made this summer, jumping back into the fray made sense, according to John Palfrey, MacArthur’s president, because election integrity groups held the promise of using grant money to have a very big impact in the short term.

Other issues that matter to MacArthur, like criminal justice, hinge on a trusted voting process, Palfrey says.

“If this election does not go well, it is an existential threat to our democracy,” Palfrey says.

In addition to the State Infrastructure Fund, MacArthur made grants to the Campaign Legal Center, the Democracy Docket, and the Protect Democracy Project, as well as about a dozen groups focusing on voter education.

As MacArthur put together its plan and interviewed potential grantees, one nonprofit Palfrey declines to identify turned away a grant, saying that the influx of cash had given it all it needed to fulfill its mission.

A September review that the State Infrastructure Fund completed on the funding needs of nonprofits working to ensure a safe, representative vote found that some groups don’t need any more cash to meet their goals.

What that doesn't take into account, says Tanya Clay House, senior program officer for voting rights at the fund, is that those groups could expand their reach and that many other groups are struggling for cash.

The difficulty of getting out the vote during a pandemic, the prospect of voter intimidation, voter suppression, or violence, and the likelihood that election results will be challenged in court make the need for more support more crucial, she says.

"We haven't closed all the gaps," she says.

Correction (Oct. 20, 2020, 11:06 a.m.): In a previous version of this article, Jason Jaffery's name was misspelled.

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

FOUNDATION GIVING



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