

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY.

The Newspaper of the Nonprofit World

Foundations: However Much You Disagree With Trump, Don't Abandon Government

BY Max Stier August 22, 2017

President Trump's controversial remarks after the clash between white supremacists and counter protesters in Charlottesville, Va., prompted many corporate executives to walk away from White House advisory councils, which were subsequently disbanded. Corporate leaders made it clear they wanted to take a public stand against the president's views and deflect any public-relations damage to their companies.

The president's unorthodox approach to governing, his often-inflammatory comments, and his policies on issues such as health care, immigration, and the environment have also prompted many foundations to withdraw from engagement with the administration, for fear that involvement might inadvertently advance an agenda with which they disagree.

Grant makers can reasonably walk away from the president, but our federal institutions need their support. It is important to recognize that our government represents far more than the politics and policies of the day, or of the current occupant of the Oval Office. It is, and will remain, the central institution of our democracy and the primary vehicle for collective action to solve major problems facing the nation.

Step Up, Don't Wait Out

The government is the most significant player on most of the issues that foundations address. Given continued uncertainty facing our federal agencies, this is not the time for philanthropy to wait out current circumstances. Rather, foundations need to step up efforts to help safeguard the government's viability and vitality.

No matter who is in power, the federal government has a responsibility to protect public health, maintain our infrastructure, respond to natural disasters, defend our national security, manage the economy, pursue foreign-policy interests, and maintain the rule of law. The government provides the most important enforcement mechanism for equal opportunity, and it is the largest provider of services for the most vulnerable and needy Americans.

Grant makers can and should continue to spotlight issues central to their missions, and they are doing so. The Chronicle [recently reported](#) that the 20 largest foundations have shifted some of their grant-making priorities and committed more than \$700 million since the election to help outside organizations counter Trump administration policies on climate change,

family planning, health care, immigrant and refugee rights, civil liberties, social justice, and other issues.

Foundations, however, cannot fully replace the government as a provider of core services or protector of the national interest. They lack the public imprimatur, and the resources, to do so. But they can and should find innovative ways to use their influence and dollars to strengthen our government and help serve the needs of the American people.

There is some history to back up this approach.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, has worked closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on a variety of global-health efforts, including working to eradicate polio and stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. The Open Philanthropy Project, among other ventures, has worked with the Department of Agriculture to support innovative approaches to food and farming challenges. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has collaborated with numerous foundations to assist communities on issues ranging from housing and neighborhood improvements to transportation needs and economic development.

Other leading grant makers have funded nonprofits that work with government, including my organization, which has focused on federal leadership development and finding ways to improve government efficiency.

There is much more to be done, and some of it involves ensuring that government has the capacity and ability to serve the public good.

‘Politics Isn’t Government’

The federal government has pockets of excellence where customers are well-served, but overall it falls short of what citizens expect and deserve. Foundations can help government improve how it delivers services and adopts technological advances now used by business, academe, and other parts of society.

Code for America currently receives foundation money to apply practices and tech tools common in the consumer world to local governments. In a June [opinion piece](#) in The Washington Post, Jennifer Pahlka, the nonprofit’s founder and executive director, wrote about her decision to take part in a White House meeting with tech leaders even though she found some Trump administration policies “deeply disturbing.”

“Politics isn’t government, and governing isn’t someone else’s problem,” she said.

Foundations can also work with colleges and universities and other organizations to encourage graduates to pursue public-service careers.

Currently, only 6 percent of full-time federal workers are under the age of 30, compared to about 24 percent of all employees in other spheres. The government has five times as many full-time information-technology workers over 60 than in their 20s. And two-thirds of those in the Senior Executive Service — the career leaders in government — are eligible for retirement this year.

Finding ways to encourage public service among millennials and bring highly skilled people into government in all fields is not just an issue for the next three and a half years; it has consequences for a generation.

Philanthropy can also fund pilot projects to learn what social innovations work so government can take them to scale. It can back research that paves the way for new approaches to solving persistent problems, invest in organizational effectiveness, promote transparency and use of data analytics, and support those seeking to hold federal leaders accountable as stewards of the public trust.

Working with government has its difficulties, even aside from the political challenges of the day. There are onerous rules, regulations, and bureaucratic processes that can limit flexibility, not to mention cyclical shifts in budget priorities and conflicting expectations.

But at a time like this, grant makers cannot simply sit on the sidelines.

Foundations and their leaders need to engage with and invest in our government. Such support is not partisan and transcends policy choices. It is an opportunity to strengthen and preserve our most essential democratic institution to meet the important needs of the American people, and of people around the world.

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