

RESEARCH PAPER

Promoting Greater Civic Participation through Open Government

Introduction

[Silicon Valley Community Foundation's mission](#) is to focus on the community's most challenging problems, convene private- and public-sector leaders and initiate policy discussions at the regional, state and national levels.

In 2017, after a [comprehensive community review process](#), SVCF's board approved five new grantmaking strategies: ensuring the safety and security of immigrants; advancing financial stability by improving access to public benefits; accelerating student success in the Common Core education standards; increasing affordable housing and public transit opportunities; and promoting greater civic participation through open government.

This research paper outlines our rationale for why promoting greater civic participation through open government is critical to improving public policy and advancing the common good.

The Opportunity

A healthy democracy is dependent upon all community members' being able to participate in the public policy process and having influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Yet studies have shown that those with more time, money and political know-how are better able to engage and express their needs and wishes in the halls of political power.¹ A statewide analysis of voter and civic engagement data showed significant disparities in participation between whites and people of color, between those with higher and lower income and education, and between older and younger generations.² The consequences of these disparities are serious and far-reaching, resulting in a democracy that does not represent all of California's diverse voices and perspectives.

The open government movement has the potential to change these patterns by transforming the ways in which residents engage with government. Since President Obama's December 2009 directive to put government data online, open government has attracted an enormous amount of public attention. The open government movement is based upon the idea that governments function better when residents play an active role in creating policy. In general terms, an open government is one with high levels of transparency, as well as public access to government-held information and proceedings. More recently, the definition has been broadened to include resident participation and collaboration in proceedings through the use of modern, open technologies.³

¹ University of California, Riverside, School of Public Policy. Advancement Project. (2016). Unequal Voices, California's Racial Disparities in Political Participation.

² [Ibid.](#)

³ Opensource.com website. Retrieved from <http://opensource.com>.

Taken together, these practices are seen to produce a variety of benefits for society, including more evidence-based policymaking, increased transparency and accountability and greater public trust in government institutions.

The open government movement has gained traction at the same time that advances in technology are spurring citizen engagement, improving communities and making government services more effective. This new field of “civic tech” has grown exponentially in the past few years. According to a Knight Foundation report, the number of organizations dedicated to civic tech grew by 23 percent from 2008 to 2013, with \$431 million in private and philanthropic investment in these organizations between 2011 and 2013.⁴ Cities across the country are partnering with these organizations to engage citizens, improve services and drive economic growth. Here in Silicon Valley, the County of San Mateo and City of San José have made explicit commitments to civic hacking and open data initiatives, while the County of Santa Clara has a three-year strategic plan to make its services more accessible and mobile friendly.

Open government, combined with advances in technology, presents a tremendous opportunity to engage more residents in public problem-solving and decision-making.

Description of Grantmaking Strategy

Since governments do not have the resources or capacity to address all of the economic, political and social challenges that exist, it is crucial that residents engage in the betterment of our communities. SVCF will make strategic investments in projects that promote greater civic participation through open government efforts. A cornerstone of these efforts will be to support models of participation that engage diverse groups — in particular, those with lower incomes, people of color, immigrants and youth. In addition, we are excited to support innovative models of participation that use technology-based tools to challenge conventional standards of practice and allow for meaningful, two-way communication between residents and public officials. “SeeClickFix,” for example, is a communications platform that allows residents to report nonemergency issues, such as potholes and light outages, and for government officials to track, manage and reply to those reports. These seemingly small fixes have been shown to have a significant impact on community well-being and vitality.

Another important area of investment is making government data open so that it can be freely used, reused and dedicated to the public domain or made available through an open license. Cities across the country are implementing open data initiatives to equip residents with previously unavailable data and activate them to use that information to address a range of community issues. This enables everyone in the community to have fair and equal access to the same baseline information, making it more difficult for “alternative facts” to take hold. SVCF will be intentional in its efforts to support projects that ensure fair and equal access to this information by marginalized groups.

Finally, we recognize that civic knowledge and skills are necessary for people to understand how to participate effectively and to feel a sense of political efficacy. Therefore, we will invest in civic education programs that are readily accessible to the community, including youth.

⁴ John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (2013). The Emergence of Civic Tech: Investments in a Growing Field. Retrieved from <https://www.slideshare.net/knightfoundation/knight-civictech>

The latter group is particularly important given that millennials in the United States are less convinced of the value of democracy compared to older generations: More than two-thirds do not consider it essential to live in a country that is governed democratically, according to data in the World Values Survey.⁵ We believe there is an opportunity for mutually reinforcing work and complementary impact by aligning civic education, open data and innovative engagement models with SVCF's other grantmaking strategies focused on education, housing and transportation, immigration and financial stability. Therefore, in evaluating proposals, SVCF will give special consideration to projects that can demonstrate such alignment.

Rationale for Strategy

Civic participation is critical to a healthy democracy. However, a statewide report on civic engagement, done in 2004, concluded “those who are white, older, affluent, homeowners, and highly educated have a disproportionate say in California politics and representation in the civic life of the state.”⁶ According to a more recent June 2016 report, this imbalance remains, with significant racial disparities in voting and nonvoting forms of political participation. For example, fewer than one in 10 blacks and only about one in 20 Asian Americans and Latinos, had contact with a public official to express their opinions, compared to nearly one in six whites. Similarly, 15 percent of whites had attended meetings where political issues were discussed, compared with participation rates of 11 percent among blacks, 7 percent among Asian Americans and 6 percent among Latinos.⁷

Throughout California and in our region, policy and planning decisions on key issues are underway and will continue over the next several years. For instance, every school district needs to engage parents, educators, employees and community members every three years to create annual plans as part of the Local Control Funding Formula. School administrators and elected board members must develop and adopt processes to ensure that all parents and community members can participate and be heard. Recently passed tax measures in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties will result in hundreds of millions of dollars of affordable housing funding and require resident oversight committees to have a say in how those funds are spent. Similarly, forming partnerships between communities and local transit agencies will yield transportation policies that provide quality service for the most disadvantaged riders and yield multiple health benefits and decongested highways.

These policy decisions come at a time when elected officials are embracing open government practices and budgeting to spend money on technology solutions that can transform the way they operate, serve their constituents and make decisions. In fact, local and state government spending on civic tech has grown 14 times faster than spending on traditional technology and reached \$6.5 billion in 2015.⁸ From hack-a-thons and apps to open data initiatives, the possibilities are endless for governments to work with their constituents in new ways to solve community problems.

⁵ Bershidsky, L. (2016, October 23). Democracy Turns Off Millennials. It Doesn't Have To. Bloomberg Views. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-10-23/democracy-turns-off-millennials-it-doesn-t-have-to>

⁶ Ramakrishnan, S. K. & Baldassare, M. (2004). The Ties that Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California. Retrieved from http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_404KRR.pdf

⁷ University of California, Riverside, School of Public Policy. Advancement Project. (2016). Unequal Voices, California's Racial Disparities in Political Participation.

⁸ McCann, B. (2014, December 5). Civic Tech Spending in U.S. to Reach \$6.4 Billion in 2015. Retrieved from <https://civsourceonline.com/2014/12/05/civic-tech-spending-in-us-to-reach-6-4-billion-in-2015>

Anticipated Impact

There are 125 county, city, school and special district offices in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. At the institutional level, the anticipated impact of this grantmaking strategy is for at least 20 percent of these offices to commit to open government practices and engage more residents in local planning and problem-solving. We are particularly interested in assessing which engagement tools and strategies are most effective in reaching diverse segments of the community (including low-income residents, people of color, immigrants and youth). At the individual level, the anticipated impact of this grantmaking strategy is to increase the civic knowledge and skills of residents that participate in SVCF-funded civic education programs. We hope to find ways to capture whether some of these residents are then motivated to participate in civic or political activities, such as volunteering, public meetings or voting.

Promoting civic participation through open government is a brand new area of investment for SVCF. Therefore, we are open to seeing what works and what does not, with the ultimate goal of determining how the civic participation efforts that we fund can be extended, strengthened and sustained over time. We are optimistic that successes in this area will lead to a larger and more diverse range of residents who are civically engaged—with the power to make our economy grow and local communities thrive.

Conclusion

As we develop our specific grantmaking strategies in this area, we expect that we will learn and make adjustments along the way. SVCF intends to invest in this strategy over the next five years, at which point we will conduct a systematic review of our progress. We firmly believe that these efforts provide an opportunity to ensure policymaking in city halls, school boards and county government is accountable to and shaped by the diverse ideas and people that make up our region.