

## Civic Participation Framework

### **Civic Participation Impact Strategy**

Seattle Foundation has adopted a set of Impact Strategies as vehicles to drive forward policy change aligned with the pillars of the Blueprint for Impact. With the Civic Participation Impact Strategy, we seek to further A Just Democracy by advancing community-driven policy measures that foster a strong civic infrastructure through more inclusive representation, fair and accessible electoral systems, and deliberative democratic processes. The cornerstone of this work is organizing—building community and civic power within underrepresented and marginalized groups, particularly Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and communities of color, to influence decision-makers and public policy.

We believe everyone has a stake in our democracy and that focusing on individuals and communities who are most underrepresented and marginalized within public, civic, and political systems, ensures we truly have a democracy that works for all. Our approach is designed with an eye towards long-term systems change and recognition that working towards a more equitable democracy requires concurrent strategies and investment in representation, access, inclusion/belonging, and narrative change. Our approach supports not just the formation and passage of new policies, regulations, and legislation, but also the sustained backing to ensure these community-driven priorities are fully implemented.

### **Representation – We must support equitable representation of communities that determine the allocation of resources and access to systems of power.**

#### *Our Challenge:*

- Communities of color are often underrepresented in nation-wide and regional governance and democratic systems that impact their lives. People of color are historically undercounted in the census leading to fewer federal resources and more limited political representation.<sup>1</sup>
- People of color, low-income people, women, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and young people are underrepresented at all levels of government - in both elected and appointed positions.<sup>2,3</sup> They face economic, racial, and systemic barriers in running for office, leading to low representation of candidates who are reflective and accountable to diverse communities.
- More than half of Washington Healthy Democracy Index 2019 respondents reported that they have never spoken to an elected official about a legal or policy issue.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Our Approach:*

- Foster and support participation in public processes that have implications on representation, resources, and power including census and redistricting, to inform the establishment of districts that truly represent constituents.
- Increase community representation in elected office and government decision making bodies through civic engagement, education, and training efforts.
- Promote more government accountability and community influence by formalizing more accessible processes like participatory budgeting and deliberative democracy.

**Access – We must promote a fair electoral voting system and broaden access to democratic participation.***Our Challenge:*

- Every year, tens of thousands of Washingtonians are unable to exercise their right to vote due to restrictions on voting for individuals who were incarcerated or in community custody.<sup>4</sup>
- Despite the passage of the Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA), lack of compliance allows gerrymandered districts to remain in minimizing the voting power of communities across the state.<sup>5</sup>
- Limited language access along with convoluted and legalistic ballot language that severely depress voter participation.<sup>6</sup>

*Our Approach:*

- Advance voting rights policies including supporting rights restoration for disenfranchised individuals including those who were formerly incarcerated and under community custody.
- Support the implementation of the Washington Voting Rights Act and other voter access policies and electoral systems that ensure more fair and equitable representation, such as pre-registration, democracy vouchers, and Rank Choice Voting.
- Uplift language justice efforts and simple ballot wording to reduce barriers to voting and help voters better understand who and what they are voting for.
- Partner on and invest in the Voter Education Fund to support community rooted organizations deliver nonpartisan voting information and education in culturally and linguistically specific ways.

**Inclusion/Belonging – We must change inequitable systems that have historically and intentionally excluded communities from civic life and processes to create a more inclusive democracy.***Our Challenge:*

- Through legal action, mass incarceration, and deportation, groups of people have been historically, systemically, and intentionally removed from accessing democratic processes.
- Black, Native, and Latinx populations are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. These individuals experience structural barriers that limit their civic participation.<sup>7</sup>
- Due to federal laws, immigrant and refugees in King County and across the country are facing increasing barriers to exercising their voice, attaining residency, and citizenship.<sup>8</sup>

*Our Approach:*

- Support criminal justice and mass incarceration reform that enables currently and formerly incarcerated to vote and to engage in and benefit from our democracy.
- Support equitable immigration reform policies that enable immigrants and refugees to participate in democracy, attain residency, and pursue pathways to citizenship.
- Advance tribal governance through honoring treaties and elevating Native representation.

**Narrative Change – We must strengthen efforts that counter disinformation and shift culture and public perception in order to protect and promote a just democracy.***Our Challenge:*

- Culture and public perception impact the practices and policies that shape democracy. However, there is vast distrust of institutions and government which is facilitated by news and popular cultural narratives. Overwhelmingly, Americans express divisive narratives as a big problem facing the nation.<sup>9</sup>
- Communities who are exercising freedom of speech and protesting in response to inequitable policies and injustice are experiencing censorship and violence.
- News media and journalism play a large part in a transparent democracy; however, research has shown a growing distrust in the news media.<sup>10</sup>This challenge is exacerbated by economic and political factors that current threaten traditional news and journalism.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Our Approach:*

- Protect freedom of speech, and the right to organize and protest.
- Strengthen mass communications infrastructure for dissemination of accurate information, which informs public perception and promotes an open government with high levels of transparency.
- Support culture-making efforts through media and arts that enable communities to tell their own stories and lift up the inherent value of a working democracy and functional government.
- Promote community efforts focused on building everyday customs and habits around engaging in civic life, including: registering to vote, staying informed about policy issues, regularly voting, encouraging other to participate, and participating in broader public governance decision making processes.

In executing our commitment to Civic Participation, Seattle Foundation invests in research, advocacy and policy, convening, and coalition building as well as storytelling. We work across sectors in partnership with institutions and philanthropists to realize greater impact together.

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