Philanthropy and Polarization: Ten Ideas from a Foundation Leadership Retreat

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July 2026

"There are countless things we could do about the problem of polarization. But an important question to ask is what can we, in philanthropy, do better than anyone else?"

Polarization has large parts of the world in its grip, and philanthropy is no exception.

But how exactly is philanthropy affected by polarization, and what is philanthropy best placed to do in response?

This past spring, we convened the presidents of 13 large global foundations for a leadership retreat to discuss just this. The retreat – which also included global leaders from South Africa and Colombia – generated compelling insights not only on philanthropy's role, but also on the nature of polarization itself.

This article outlines ten key ideas from the retreat. Together, they herald a forward-looking agenda on how to understand and tackle the 'hyper-problem' of polarization. They build on related material developed through the Global Initiative on Polarization.

1

Act on causes *and* consequences

"Polarization is not the result of discrete political disagreements, but rather a symptom of deeper structural and civic breakdowns that transcend national borders."

Just as wars and dictatorships have root causes, so does polarization. Depending on the place, the causes can include anything from growing inequality to bad leaders, anxious populations, social media, deindustrialization, mis/disinformation, legacies of abuse, generational divides, perception gaps and institutional dysfunction. Such root causes deserve philanthropic attention.

But a focus on causes alone only makes sense before the onset of polarization. Once in place, the problem of polarization – a spiraling process of viewpoint radicalization and group separation – requires its own attention.

2 Engage at micro *and* macro levels

"Polarization extends beyond mere opinion differences. It involves group processes where strong attachments form because collectives construct members' social identities, delivering recognition, belonging, and emotional sustenance."

There is something emotionally rewarding in the experience of polarization. It feeds the dark passions and more tribal urges hardwired into the human psyche, producing hardened in-groups and out-groups.

As such, depolarization strategies must operate up and down the chain of human psychology and social interaction. The interactions that occur in workplaces and neighborhoods can be as critical as those in the halls of power; the impact of one-on-one confidence building can be as consequential as a national dialogue; cultural and sporting interventions can be as impactful as political mobilization.

Draw on peace *and* democracy know-how 3

"Across contexts, we see that polarized groups have less and less contact, moving further apart and hollowing out the middle. That's the general dynamic. And it keeps going until, in the worst-case scenario, it explodes into violence."

The experience of places like South Africa, Colombia and Northern Ireland in confronting polarization offer a mix of inspiration and caution and show how the problem exists at the intersection of democracy and peace.

South Africa's negotiated democratic transition entailed active depolarization and inclusion strategies to avoid collapse into civil war; Colombia experienced a peak in polarization after an elected government reached a historic peace deal as the peace eliminated a previously unifying 'enemy'; and Northern Ireland needed both a pact on political power sharing and a medley of peacebuilding measures to end political violence.

In none of these places did the dangers of polarization vanish. Rather, they reappeared in waves that required proactive response and a preventive mindset on the part of key leaders and sectors, including philanthropy itself.

4

Attend to contextual *and* universal dynamics

"Many of the best solutions to polarization will be found 'on the ground' and we want to empower future partners to find and develop them."

For any depolarization effort to succeed, a baseline assessment of the context – including who is polarized and why – is the necessary first step. Without it, a realistic path for prevention or mitigation isn't possible.

At the same time, there are rules of thumb that should inform any strategy. For example, when polarization is already present in a society or political system, there will be less room for out-group dialogue (because there isn't a receptive 'other side'); less likelihood that factual clarification can overcome mis/disinformation (because the radicalization and simplification of beliefs has already closed people's minds); and less scope for institutional reforms (because building cross-group coalitions will be much harder). Being aware of these and other rules is as important as understanding the nuances of the specific case.

5

Balance past *and* future demands

"As long as people don't see a good life for themselves in the future, they're going to be seduced by people who are pitting us against each other."

Conflict entrepreneurs and divisive leaders will often find fertile ground to sow polarization in societies and political systems marked by traumatic histories, standing injustices, or lost status.

The risk is especially great in places where social or political violence ends through vanquishment rather than negotiation, as this reduces the instinct and incentive to promote the kind of coexistence, reconciliation and political moderation that keep the specter of polarization at bay. Philanthropy needs to take this into consideration in countries with deep conflict histories.

6

Engage in digital *and* physical spaces

"Much of the animosity driving polarization is manufactured, not felt. That suggests philanthropy may have more leverage than we assume."

Across the world, lives are lived physically *and* digitally. But as the digital component of human life has increased, so has polarization.

This dynamic is especially strong in the case of social media and its outrage-incentivizing algorithms, which make societies or political systems appear more polarized than they really are. The advent of ubiquitous AI has the potential to complicate things further.

But there is a mounting pushback to regulate and redirect social media and AI toward human flourishing and a growing effort by philanthropy to invest in human connection initiatives – including through new national service programs and the restructuring of living environments and civic education.

7

Invest in the short *and* long term

"While there are surely things that must be done to blunt the consequences of polarization in the short term, a lasting fix must recognize the underlying causes and seek to show people a better way by reimagining the institutions that enable us to live well together."

A retreat participant described the strategic niche of philanthropy in one simple phrase: "near-term agility and long-term perspective."

Applied to the problem of polarization, this could imply *in the short term* investing in professional associations of judges, lawyers and election officials that safeguard democracies and the rule of law; supporting independent local media; and funding quiet dialogue initiatives. *Over the longer term*, it could imply investing in reforms that lessen economic inequalities; supporting institutional reforms that lower the incentive to polarize; creating permanent depolarization bodies (e.g., Kenya's National Cohesion and Integration Commission); funding depolarization research and global convenings; and much more.

8

Support experimentation *and* evidence

"The time for theoretical debate is over. We must take these ideas out of faculty lounges and bring them into the real world, relying on the expertise of the people and communities who make our democracies work."

Philanthropy has a justified interest in scaling what works. But for that to happen, there needs to be a robust body of peer-reviewed evidence.

When it comes to polarization, this is a challenge. Although there is a growing and important body of (mostly US-focused) depolarization research, there is not yet an organized 'global field.' As such, efforts to understand, measure and overcome polarization remain limited, meaning that philanthropy will need to continue funding many tests, pilots and experiments while at the same time building deliberate mechanisms for sharing and accelerating learning.

Model *and* fund

9

"Philanthropy must approach this work with humility, openness, and a commitment to dialogue – ensuring that we genuinely contribute to bridging differences, rather than reinforcing them."

Philanthropy is affected by polarization, but it is also an agent: its own actions and decisions may make polarization better or worse.

This self-awareness was strongly present at the retreat. Foundation leaders recognized that polarization isn't simply a problem 'out there' but can also be one 'in here': i.e., in the processes, actions, and thinking within philanthropic institutions themselves. They identified the need for more training programs and tools for each foundation to be able to assess how what they are funding (and modelling) might be perceived by those with very different viewpoints.

10

Work separately *and* together

"The more we can have each other's back and be thinking about each other – not to do the same thing but to understand that we're part of a shared enterprise – the better it will be for all."

There is much that philanthropic foundations can do individually to stem polarization, but there is even more when efforts are coordinated.

Three overarching principles emerged that could potentially guide collective action. First, cultivate a 'good enough' shared understanding of how polarization works and a global framework for how to reduce and contain it; second, using that framework, develop clear hypotheses about how to reduce polarization, including the selection of a few entry points for testing the hypotheses (recognizing that not all funders would use the same entry points); and third, create a process for sharing evidence, including with grantee partners, to allow rapid learning and feedback loops.

Conclusion

"The trends are long term, so the solutions to polarization are likely to be too. The Gilded Age did give way to the Progressive Era."

With the collapse of international aid and the steady erosion of the twentieth century liberal international order, global expectations of philanthropy are rising in *parallel* with growing polarization.

Through a combination of local testing of solutions, global research and practice convenings, there is scope for philanthropy to play an outsized role in fostering and investing in the new ideas, models, hubs and relationships to prevent and mitigate the worst perils of polarization.

About the Authors

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