**Voting Rights Portfolio Review: Outcomes Summary**

The voting rights portfolio review of December 2015 started with a critical incident analysis, at Chris Stone’s suggestion, to examine the voting rights field and our related grantmaking. We outlined two critical points in time—the election of President Obama and the Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*—that motivated us and the field to beat back conservative attempts to suppress the vote of people of color and other marginalized communities and, at the same time, push for affirmative reforms in election administration that would add voters of color to the rolls. The portfolio review itself (and questions posed by Chris and others) focused pointedly on the role of the funder and decisions made by USP’s Democracy Fund staff in furtherance of meeting our then-goal to expand the electorate. Specifically, did we: Make bold decisions? Deal effectively with bad actors in the field? Support mavericks? Have an appropriately long-term funding strategy and view of the field? And who in the field widened rifts or promoted healing? Should we continue to invest in donor collaboratives like the Shelby Response Fund (SRF)?

These questions posed at the review have helped to spark more conversation and thoughts in the Democracy Fund around if, how and when to flex our funder muscles to cut out bad actors and make bigger bets on fewer grantees. To date, most of the grantmanking in the portfolio has funded traditional, longstanding civil rights and good government groups—with grantmaking intermediaries Shelby Response Fund and State Infrastructure Fund affording us the opportunity to become familiar with, and resource, smaller, local and state advocacy organizations necessary to protecting rights in the post-Shelby landscape. Our utilization of SRF as a means to fund local, state and national advocates across the country served its purpose of bringing funders into better alignment and leveraging funds, giving us insight and reach into state and local organizations and helping to avoid duplication.

**CURRENT LANDSCAPE:** With hostile and highly partisan state and national legislative bodies and an unfavorable U.S. Supreme Court poised to rule on voting cases, advocates are still facing an uphill battle. We will continue to place an emphasis on thwarting attacks on voters of color and trying to regain ground lost during the assault on voting rights which followed the election of President Obama and the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision. After a year of Shelby Fund grant-making dockets (and following the late-January 2015 “year in review” convening), we have a glimpse into the capacity and effectiveness of certain advocates in the field whose efforts included litigation, state advocacy and communications. We have begun to analyze what litigation and supportive data collection and expert analysis is needed, which election administration reforms better serve minority voters, which voting rights messages have been effective, and which types of ballot measures may be successful to advance voting rights. All of this work happens as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Selma March and the signing of Voting Rights Act, gear up for the next Census, and embark upon OSF’s 2020 project.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled favorably in the Alabama redistricting case and is expected to rule on the constitutionality of redistricting reform efforts like independent commissions and voter identification laws in June 2015 and 2016.

**STRATEGY IN LIGHT OF GOALS AND LANDSCAPE:** The focus of the portfolio, going forward, will be on voters of color— reducing barriers and fighting suppressive measures which impede access to the polls, increasing ease of registration and access to early voting, and improving odds of electing candidates of choice. Capacity building for national and state-wide people-of-color led and/or focused organizations that litigate, advocate and message will, therefore, be the focus of funding. We will also fund affirmative election reform measures that have been shown to better benefit people of color (i.e. same-day registration and early voting.) Our communications consultancy—scanning the landscape through literature and social media reviews and interviews with thought leaders—together with information gathered from groups from the ”year in review” convening and other learnings, has revealed strong public support for same-day registration and early voting and the ability of litigation to elevate the public’s understanding of voting rights issues and help to shape the narrative. This identification of gaps and potential solutions will help us fund better communications infrastructure, capacity and trainings. Additionally, many state and local advocacy organizations working on voting rights issues also engage in money in politics and fair courts efforts, so investments here benefit other USP portfolios. We will also examine any ballot measures which positively affect voters of color.

**FIRST GRANTS TO BE MADE:**

Census: Working with SIP and OSPC, as part of our 2020 strategy, we plan to fund the work of NALEO, the Leadership Conference, AAJC and Demos who have taken the lead on these efforts. Advocates have about a year and a half to influence appropriations for the Census Bureau, the redesign of racial categories on the 2020 Census instrument and policy regarding how to count persons who are incarcerated. Census topics must be presented to Congress in April 2017 with final questions by April 2018.

Communications: New America Media has been quite effective with the small grant it received from the Shelby Response Fund in generating voting stories in the ethnic media. Funding an ethic media project in advance of the 50th Anniversary of the Voting Rights Act will be an opportunity to educate journalists, connect advocates with ethnic media outlets, and cover current issues as well as history. There is also a great need for communications trainings for advocates and perhaps the establishment of a hub.

Litigation: The Shelby convening report has identified an “exploding” need for litigation funding. OSF, Carnegie, and Ford have been the primary funders of litigation in the field. Carnegie and Ford have yet to commit (although they do plan to support a soon-to-be-held in-person litigation group meeting with follow-up from the Shelby Convening.) 2015 and 2016 will be critical years for the continuation of cases and the bringing of new cases under Section 2 and possible state voting rights acts that are passed—especially since a voter ID case is headed to the Supreme Court will be argued and decided 2015-2016.

**MOST SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES:**

(1)Bad actors in the field cannot and will not be rewarded. We have had conversations with leadership of a national group and will make our position even clearer shortly. (2) We will look for fresh, bold funding opportunities. USP colleagues are joining to take a hard look at Black organizing groups to see if opportunities exist to increase their capacity to work on democracy and racial justice issues.