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To: Interested Parties

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Re: Depolarization Research and Intervention Options

Our nation is polarized: distrust in government is high and the zone of potential agreement between Americans is at an all-time low.[1] We, as a country, are tribally divided into categories of "us versus them." These in/out group categorizations are based on intersecting factors that include geography, demography, class, race, and education level, as well as how we get our news and information.[2]

Polarization is not a new phenomenon in America, nor is it inherently problematic. In a diverse multi-racial, multi-ethnic democracy, there will always be some levels of disagreement. Nonetheless, on January 6th, as we watched the insurrection at the Capitol, we witnessed, in real time, the vulnerability of our democracy. This event, among others, including an election season riddled with mis/disinformation and an attempted kidnapping of a sitting Governor, exposed an urgent need to address the rising levels of negative and affective polarization.[3]

This memorandum provides an overview of potential interventions and approaches to depolarizing the U.S. electorate. The information contained in this document is intended to advise interested parties as they explore funding opportunities by digging into potential interventions to the root causes of polarization.To understand and devise interventions to polarization, our research consisted of: 1) Historical and international case studies that highlighted ways various countries worked to address affective polarization; 2) A high level scan of the current field of depolarization including how current organizations, philanthropy, 501 (c) (4) groups and others in this space are working to define, address, and solve the issue of polarization; and 3) Interviews with experts working to depolarize the electorate within the fields of politics, media, and the economy.

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I. Background

Historical Framework

The United States has previously faced moments of heightened, negative and affective polarization, especially in the 1860s, 1870s, 1890s, and 1920s.[4] Scholars have found that these moments coincided with a rise in economic inequality and increasing diversity and immigration, often leading to authoritarianism. Solutions to unregulated wealth in the Gilded Era brought labor reforms, anti-government corruption reforms, and protections for workers. In the 1930s, the intervention that helped depolarize the country was to address poverty with massive, good government reform programs that built infrastructure and provided jobs and opportunities for out of work Americans.[5]

International Example: Denazification of Germany

The Weimar Republic in the 1920s was a multi-ethnic democracy with a strong civil society and robust civic associations. These robust civic associations were based on "in-group" bonding and ties that reinforced "in-group" identities, as opposed to healthy, positive bonding associations that work to build bridges across different identities. This, in addition to increasing levels of poverty and disillusionment, laid the groundwork for the rise of facism. The emerging Nazi party exploited the lack of positive bonding associations to exasperate existing societal tensions. They argued that "real Germans" were being left behind, a message that was appealing to the struggling middle class, farmers, and shop owners.[6]

In the United States, we've seen a similar trend: the rise of negative and destabilizing associations on platforms and social media, coupled with the rise of nationalist rhetoric, has radicalized Americans and led to troubling instances of political violence and an undermining of democracy. The intervention to depolarize Germany entailed a long-standing process of denazification: a government-mandated shedding of any connection to Nazism whether it be in government, science, art, or the economy.

The process of denazification continues today, with Germans acknowledging and reckoning with their shared past. German art, TV, and film regularly discuss the history of Nazi Germany, the government created public rites of repentance, and memorials to events like Kristallnacht sit at the center of cities.[7] Denazification, while supported by the government, has not been implemented in a top-down, federal manner. Instead, it has been local and centered around active and mandated civic participation.

Political scholar, Susan Neiman, calls for the United States to take a similar approach: create a shared political narrative and reckon with slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, the Jim Crow Era, and the Japanese Internment.[8]

Where We Are Now

We can observe the effects of negative, affective polarization through four elements: the spread of false information, the delegitimation of processes, dehumanization of the opposition, and a rise in authoritarianism.

Democracy depends on our access to reliable and truthful information. This election season, more than four in five Americans, believed they were exposed to misinformation.[9] And although every lawsuit alleging fraud was dismissed by a slate of judges appointed by members of both parties, only thirty-two percent of Republicans say that the 2020 election was free and fair.[10] [11]

Without validated information, Americans are susceptible to propaganda and conspiracy theories that erode trust and faith in our values and our conception of right and wrong. Today, false information is radicalizing people at rates never seen before.[12] Its spread has contributed to the undermining of core beliefs and values: namely the disbelief and mistrust in democracy and its election processes, and in medical and public health guidance as it relates to COVID-19. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that a quarter of U.S. adults believe that there is at least some truth to a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus pandemic was intentionally started.[13] Others allege that the outbreak is not as bad as reported, that a quarter-million Americans have not died.[14] Sadly, this misinformation is deadly – a recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research shows that parts of the country exposed to television programming that downplayed the seriousness of COVID-19 saw a greater number of cases and deaths.[15]

The dehumanization of "the other" has taken a turn for the worse. We've seen this in the rise of anti-immigration discourse, the rhetoric used during the Charlottesville "Unite the Right Rally" in 2017, as well as within our party politics and debates. [16] [17] Today, people have less respect for and are less likely to trust those from the other party than they did four years ago. Similarly, only one in five Trump and Biden supporters say they share the same core American values and goals.[18] The situation extends past the volatility of the political discourse in Washington DC and has led to a resurgence of violent white supremacy.

In the last four years, white nationalist hate groups have grown by fifty-five percent.[19] According to the State Department, white supremacy is on the rise and is spreading across the country.[20] In 2019, the Anti-Defamation League reported more than 2,100 anti-Semitic incidents in the US, a twelve percent jump and the most in any year since it began tracking 40 years ago.[21] This dehumanization has resulted in an increasing acceptance and use of political violence: twenty-six percent of Trump supporters said they would condone some violence if he lost, and twenty-one percent of his opponents said they could condone some violence if he won.[22]

> "For too many of us, the political equality we once had won was meaningless in the face of economic inequality. A small group had concentrated into their own hands an almost complete control over other people's property, other people's money, other people's labor—other people's lives. These economic royalists complain that we seek to overthrow the institutions of America. What they really complain of is that we seek to take away their power."
> –President Franklin D. Roosevelt July 27, 1936

A rise of authoritarianism is strongly related to a rise in economic inequality. The wealth gap between America's richest and poorest families has more than doubled from 1989 to 2016.[23] We have become a country defined by those who "have" and those who "have not." The facts are staggering: housing is unaffordable for workers in seventy percent of the country.[24] The average family is now far less able to afford homeownership than it was just a few years ago.[25] Black families are falling even further behind: the gap between black and white homeownership rates in the United States has increased to its highest level in 50 years.[26]Almost 30 million people lack health insurance.[27] One-quarter of Americans have no retirement savings.[28] And one widely cited report from the Federal Reserve found that forty percent of the country could not afford an emergency expense of $400.[29] COVID-19 has only made a difficult financial situation worse. Political power and economic power are inextricably tied. As one scholar noted, "Enough economic inequality can transform a democracy into a plutocracy, a society ruled by the rich."[30]

Our system of government was designed with the belief that representatives would act in the best interests of their constituents and would be held accountable to their constituents through fair, open elections. But with the current structure and design of our electoral institutions and processes, **there is little incentive for politicians to act in the best interest of their constituents**. Instead, as elections have become more expensive, politicians become more dependent on and beholden to other incentives, including financial interests.[31] And through gerrymandering and greater geographic divisions, more extreme interests and fear of primaries win out over compromise.[32] This has understandably bred a level of frustration and disillusionment for those without power, with only seventeen percent of Americans saying they can trust the government in Washington to "do what is right."[33]

II. Current Landscape

It would be premature to call depolarization a developed field of giving. Within the philanthropic world, much of the existing work supports dialogue and reconciliation across political lines and the strengthening of democratic institutions. The work happening on the 501(c)(4) front is more outcomes driven, with a focus on state-level institutional democratic reform campaigns and support for capacity and movement building to help local communities build representative, political power. Other pieces are led by more traditional philanthropic funders around democracy. This section examines the major players, their perspectives and solutions, and the most current interventions to depolarization.

Major Philanthropic Players and Perspectives

Many philanthropic organizations address polarization from the position of supporting intergroup dialogue and pluralism. These players and other historical leaders in the field include:

- **PACE (Philanthropy for Civic Engagement**) is an established funder collaborative that works to support relationship building within the civic engagement space. Its membership includes 57 funders. This collaborative invests in faith communities as sites for relationship building and unity between people from different racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds.[34]
- **Arnold Ventures and Democracy Fund** act as the leaders in this field on institutional electoral reform work.[35] [36]
- **Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, Maynard Institute, and Newmark Philanthropies** lead reforms to depolarize the field of media. [37] [38] [39] [40]
- **The Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative**, founded in 2014, was one of the first philanthropic initiatives to delve into addressing polarization in the United States.[41] Today, **Hewlett's U.S. Democracy Program** has succeeded the Madison Initiative and focuses on strengthening democratic norms, values, and institutions in a time of political polarization. [42]
- ***What's New:*** New areas being explored by current and new philanthropic funders include the idea of cultural and local level interventions to bridge divided groups.

Current Actions in the Area of Depolarization

This section categorizes the six main solutions and interventions to depolarization currently being undertaken by major philanthropic players in this field.

- **Strengthening Political Interpersonal Relationships:** This solution focuses on altering the way people communicate and debate with one another in order to encourage bipartisan cooperation

and shared understanding.[43] The work typically takes the form of small group trainings and intergroup dialogue sessions.

- **The Braver Angels Projec**t conducts this work by leading and teaching interpersonal dialogue with a diverse group of participants to transform political perceptions of one another.[44]
- **The Aspen Institute** conducts this work through a leadership pipeline with its **Rodel Public Leadership Fellowship.**[45] The program hand-selects political leaders from both parties to support high ethical standards and civil bipartisan dialogue. Notable alumni include Utah Governor Spencer Cox, Stacey Abrams, and former Congressman Jason Kander.
- **The Millennial Action Project (MAP)** connects young lawmakers across state and party lines to find solutions to democracy reform to make government more accountable, participatory, and representative for all.[46] MAP founded the Congressional Future Caucus – the only bipartisan caucus for young members of Congress.[47]

- **Deep Canvassing to Build Community Power:** This approach centers on building unified multiracial and multiethnic coalitions to support consistent, empathetic conversations with community members in the attempt to build long term capacity and community power.[48] This typically takes the form of door-to-door knocking and other forms of community mobilization.
  - **The State Infrastructure Fund**, an innovative donor collaborative based at **NEO Philanthropy** and led by the Carnegie Corporation, Democracy Fund, MacArthur Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Wallace Global Fund, and individual donors like MacKenzie Scott focuses its efforts on increasing civic participation and advancing voting rights among people of color and other historically underrepresented communities in Georgia.[49]
  - **Ford Foundation** has also led this work in Michigan through their support of **We the People Michigan** which focuses on building a multiracial and multiethnic coalition with a shared vision of economic opportunity across the state.[50]
  - **PACE** supports **Faith in Action Alabama** which utilizes a multi-faith, multi-racial community organizing approach to ensure Alabama's democracy represents its people.[51]

- **Electoral and Government Reforms:** Solutions in this area address voter disillusionment and access, longstanding structural inequities around electoral representation, and reforming political incentives for politicians to increase accountability to their constituents.[52] Efforts range from advocacy groups organizing for institutional democratic reforms and ballot initiatives to increasing access to voting and abolishing the electoral college. Many of the organizations

working in this space operate under 501 (c) (4) status, providing greater flexibility to impact change in the political sphere.

- **Voters Not Politicians** and **Unite America** work to pass statewide ballot initiatives to encourage greater cooperation, more adequate political representation and increase voter participation. [53] [54]
- **No Labels** is a Political Action Committee (PAC) that works to combat partisan dysfunction in politics and build a bi-partisan governing coalition.[55]
- **FairVote Minnesota** is working to implement Ranked Choice Voting in Minnesota.[56]
- **FutureNow Fund** is a PAC and an advocacy group founded to help progressive candidates win elections and enact policy in state legislatures.[57] [58]
- **National Popular Vote Inc.** is a 501 (c) (4) organization launched to support the adoption and amplification of the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, which would bind states to commit in casting their electoral votes for the national popular vote winner.[59]

- **Improving Relations/Transparency between Government and Residents:** Government incompetence has been a central component of the rise in polarization.[60] In addition to civic education in which citizens are *taught* how decisions are made, another solution to improve trust in government institutions is *showing* citizens how and when those decisions are made.
  - **CivicLex** in Lexington, KY democratizes access to city governments by providing opportunities for community members to interact with their local government and supply input on the city budget.[61]
  - **Our Common Purpose**, a report by the **Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship,** advocates for government institutions to adopt technologies and formats, like participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, and other tactics that encourage widespread participation.[62]

- **Civic Education:** Funding for civic education in America significantly lags in comparison to STEM education.[63] Unlike science or math education, there is not a nation-wide standard or curriculum for civic education – its implementation requires the will and support of school districts and their teachers. While creative thinking on this topic exists, there is not enough attention into the "how" of building a more engaged, democratic electorate.
  - **The Massachusetts Civic Learning Coalition** successfully lobbied for an Act to Promote and Enhance Civic Engagement Money which passed into law in 2018 and helps fund civics in public schools.[64] In order to make this replicable, **CIRCLE** has conducted an analysis of what has and has not worked in MA's civic education programming.[65] [66]

- **iCivics,** which was founded by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, provides free educational online games and lesson plans to promote civics education and encourage students to become active citizens.[67]

- **Media Reforms:** To rebuild trust in the news and bring communities together, some groups are investing and building new modes of local journalism and media with built in trust indicators.
  - **Outlier Media** provides direct service journalism to people in Detroit through texting, transforming journalism into an essential service.[68]
  - **Broke in Philly,** a collaborative of 19 local news organizations, focuses its reporting on economic justice and solutions journalism.[69]

III. Interventions Framework

Research has shown that there is no singular cause of polarization: the roots of the issue are multiple, deeply interconnected and include inequality, demographic and racial changes, economic dislocations, and technological and media changes.[70] **Because there is not one singular cause to polarization, there is no singular solution to remedy the issue. Instead, it requires an approach that is multi-dimensional, layered, and intersecting.**

Our read of the current topic area shows that while important work is happening on the ground to address polarization in the domains of media and politics, these approaches are rarely connected and tend to operate in silos. Additionally, we found that while the economy is an area where manifestations of polarization are deeply apparent, organizations working to address polarization tend not to focus on economic inequalities as an area for intervention.

While we found some smaller emerging philanthropic collaborations, they tend to address polarization from limited vantage points and support approaches based on funder hypotheses rather than leaning into testing, measuring, and scaling what works. **Ultimately, our hypothesis is that what is missing from this field is a comprehensive and intersecting strategy, an approach that targets polarization from an economic, political, and media/communications standpoint.** This approach should prioritize supporting evidence building: specifically, supporting trials, testing, and measuring effectiveness to create a clearinghouse of research on how to depolarize.

Perspective: Addressing the Negative Polarization of this Country is Akin to Addressing a Pandemic

The deepening negative polarization in the US has much in common with a pandemic. Like a pandemic, polarization affects every layer of society: the economy, politics, government, and our news media. It also exacerbates existing inequalities, exposes deep societal tensions, gaps in our infrastructure, and impedes our ability to build consensus.

Like a pandemic, polarization requires long-term and short-term responses on the local and national levels, as well as structural policy and programmatic changes. Thus, to better understand how to tackle the issue of depolarization, we utilized the analogy of a pandemic to help frame and approach this issue.

- **Stop the spread:** Halt the continued infections by investing and partnering with organizations working to test, trace, and provide adequate protection for front line workers. Through the lens of polarization, this would mean supporting work to track and trace white supremacist activity, extremism, and urgently addressing the radicalization happening on the ground.

- **Tailor approach to fit the needs of a community:** The needs of a community depend on its geography, its culture, its access to resources, and a variety of other competing factors. Interventions to a pandemic outbreak in a rural area will look different than an intervention in a dense, urban area.

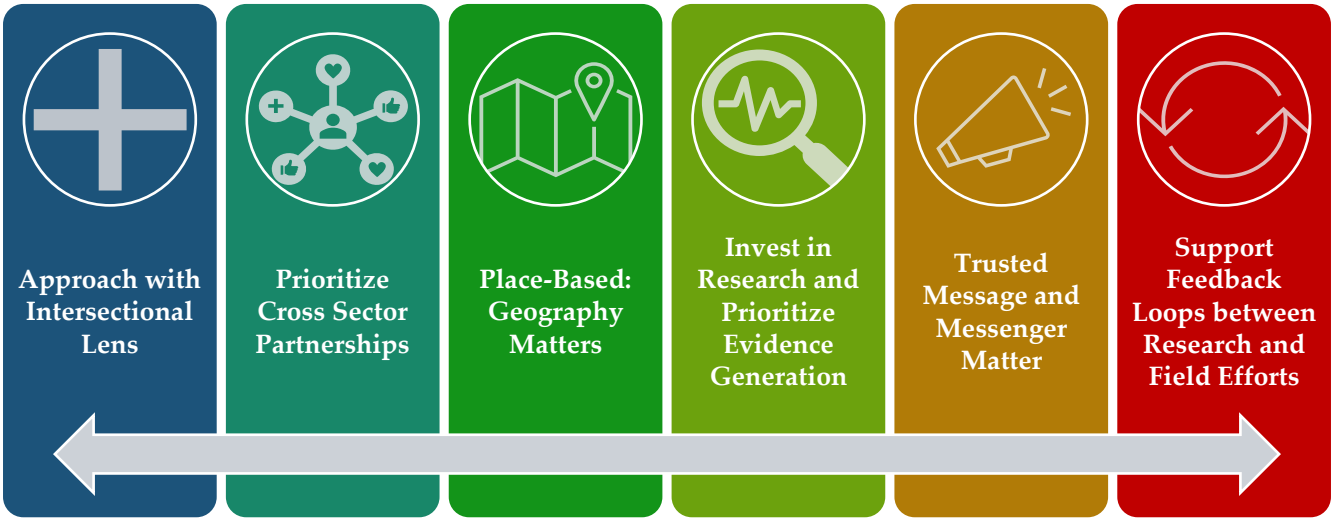
- **Intervene across multiple layers of an infected society:** The pandemic doesn't just affect our public health infrastructure, it affects our economy, education, and trust in our democratic institutions. A proper intervention requires a multi-layer approach to tackle the intersecting implications of the virus: we must address economic insecurity while providing key information around mask wearing and vaccination, support broken public health infrastructure, and source and deploy vaccines. Polarization manifests in similar ways and requires national, structural solutions, as well as local and state-based solutions.

- **The message and the messenger matter:** Trusted messengers and validators are essential in dispelling myths around vaccination or misinformation around mask wearing. Effectiveness of an intervention depends on who and what that message is and whether or not it reflects the lived reality and experience of the targeted community.

- **We need to run trials and tests to identify and scale solutions:** The process of rolling out a vaccine required significant tests and trials before it was replicated and deployed on a massive scale. There is no singular solution to polarization and thus, to identify and scale an approach, it will require running trials and tests and building a comprehensive clearing house of data and research.

IV. Intervention Design Principles

This section outlines six potential design principles to be considered when crafting, or supporting, any and all interventions to polarization. The suggested design and implementation considerations are drawn from our research, expert interviews, and an analysis of current and past depolarization efforts.



1. **Approach with an Intersectional Lens:** Because polarization stems from intersecting issues, interventions should tackle polarization from multiple, intersecting vantage points. Since manifestations and effects of polarization are felt most by historically disenfranchised and underinvested communities, interventions should apply an intersectional lens of race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status to not recreate systems of inequality.

2. **Prioritize Cross-Sector Partnerships**: Polarization is felt most acutely within the fields of politics, the economy, and media. Thus, a holistic intervention should incorporate perspectives from each of these domains. Cross-sector partnerships and coalitions will prevent information from being siloed across fields and can support aligned and innovative out-of-the-box solutions to polarization.

3. **Make it Place-Based:** Since "all politics are local," interventions should take into account the needs and realities of polarization in different communities as different communities with distinct cultures, geographies, daily realities, languages, and interactions with the government, deserve different approaches. This means that interventions in major US cities such as New York City will be different than interventions in places such as Cincinnati or the Bay Area.

4. **Invest in Research and Prioritize Evidence Generation and Field Building:** There is a lack of evidence-building regarding which interventions are most effective to depolarize our society and why. Interventions should incorporate an evidence-based component to build out an intersectional field of learnings and partners committed to addressing the long-term nature of this problem.

5. **Message and Messenger Matter:** The way information is framed and who is providing that information has a major influence in depolarizing a deeply divided electorate. Interventions should prioritize message testing, moral reframing, and incorporate deeply trusted community figures and validators.[71] [72]

6. **Support Feedback Loops between Research and Field Efforts:** In order to build and strengthen the field of polarization, interventions should be designed to include a strong feedback loop between researchers, evidence gatherers and those working with impacted communities on the ground. These interactions will help create a comprehensive series of learnings and will help identify and scale interventions to polarization.

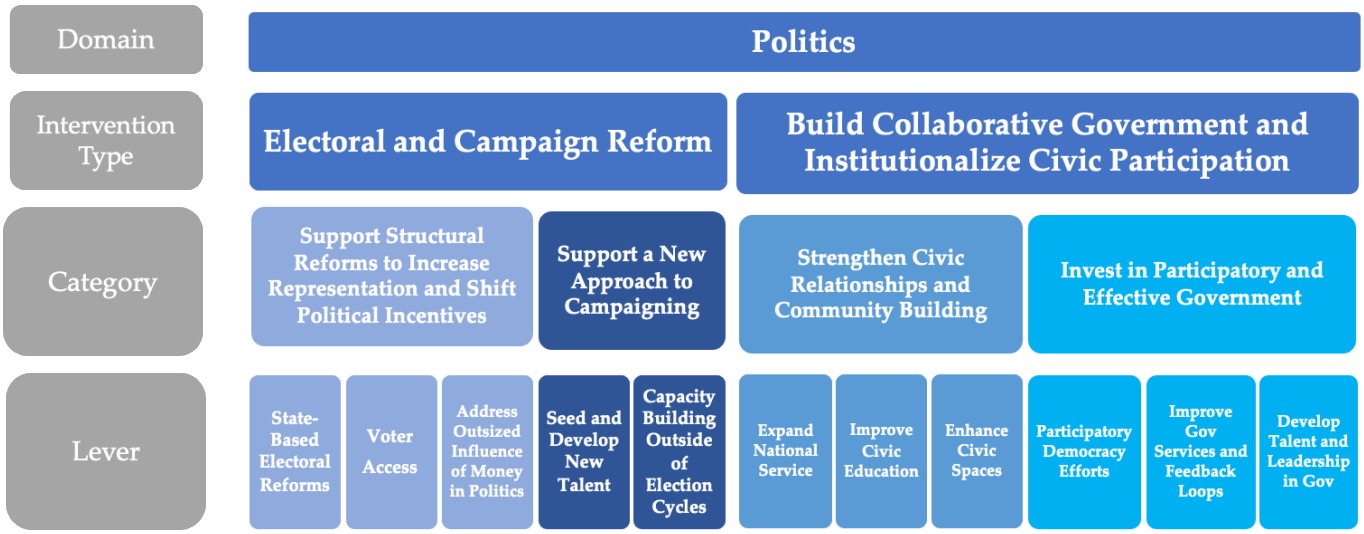
V. Menu of Interventions

This section outlines a series of interventions to polarization focusing on the three major domains where polarization manifests most profoundly: **Politics**, **Media and Information**, and the **Economy**. Within each domain, we've identified intervention types and several different "levers" that can be pulled to help address polarization. Within each lever, we've provided relevant corresponding activities with examples to show illustrative approaches to giving or highlight impactful, existing models.

Intervention Domain: Politics

There is a critical need to address structural reforms around elections, representation, and incentives for politicians and to enact the government reform needed to rebuild trust in our institutions and increase participation.

This section outlines two intervention types within the political domain: **Electoral and Campaign Reform** and **Build Collaborative Government and Institutionalize Civic Participation.** Within each intervention type, we present levers that can be pulled to depolarize and corresponding example activities and illustrative examples.



Intervention Type: Electoral and Campaign Reform

Intervention Category: Support Structural Reforms to Increase Representation and Shift Political Incentives	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**

Support Electoral Reforms at the State Level	• **Support organizations and campaigns working to pass Ranked Choice Voting on state and local levels.**
	  ○ *Example:* Incubate and scale state-level legislative reform campaigns to enact Ranked Choice Voting in partnership with organizations like Unite America, FairVote, and RepresentUs.[73] [74]
	• **Advocate for primary reform to change incentives and push candidates to appeal to a broader base of voters.**
	  ○ *Example:* Partner with organizations like New America, the Independent Voter Project, and Open Primaries to scale state and local campaigns to reform the primary system. [75] [76]
	  ○ *Example:* Support messaging campaigns that increase awareness and knowledge around the impact of electoral reforms on representation and polarization.

Invest in Voter Access	• **Work to make voting easy and accessible for all.**
	  ○ *Example:* Support organizations such as Fair Fight Action, New Georgia Project, and Black Voters Matter to scale their models in communities struggling with voter suppression on an institutional and grassroots level. [77] [78] [79]
	• **Support safe and healthy elections by investing in election administration.**
	  ○ *Example:* Ahead of the 2020 elections, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative donated more than $400m to the Center for Tech and Civil Life and other nonpartisan funds to support local election administration efforts.[80]

Address Outsized Influence of Money in Politics	• **Push for expansions to the public-finance system that matches small donations with public money.** ○ *Example:* Partner with organizations, like The Brennan Center, working to counter special interest spending with proposals for small donor public financing.[81] ○ *Example:* Support muti-stakeholder coalitions, that include corporate partners, like *NY LEAD (New York Leadership for Accountable Government*), to advocate for campaign finance reform.[82] • **Encourage efforts to address Citizens United.** ○ *Example:* Support groups such as Common Cause who run campaigns and coalitions to reform Citizens United.[83] • **Strengthen regulations around disclosure requirements.** ○ *Example:* Support legislation and advocacy efforts for the Honest Ads Act and the DISCLOSE Act, which would require greater transparency for online ads.[84] • **Increase public awareness of how money and corporate interests exist in today's politics.** ○ *Example:* Resource projects like The Center for Economic and Policy Research's Revolving Door Project, which publicly scrutinizes executive branch appointees to ensure that they serve the public interest, rather than entrench corporate power or personal advancement.[85]

Intervention Category: Support a New Approach to Campaigning	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**
Seed and Develop New Talent	• **Identify and develop political talent.** ○ *Example:* Invest in mission-driven organizations such as Run For Something, New Politics, or VoteRunLead that work to recruit and develop new, diverse, and talented candidates to run for local office.[86] [87] [88] • **Support development of a pipeline of next generation political operatives with an emphasis on digital and tech skills.** ○ *Example:* Partner with organizations such as Wellstone to expand their leadership training programs to train and incorporate a larger cohort of regionally, economically, and racially diverse talent to learn how to run, lead, and win political and advocacy campaigns.[89] • **Develop matching fund programs for candidates.** ○ *Example:* Scale models such as the Connecticut Citizens' Election Program (CEP) or the New York City Matching Fund Programs to support candidates with limited capitol to run for office.[90] [91]
Invest in Capacity Building Outside of Election Cycles	• **Invest in long-term deep canvassing or "persuasion" efforts around advocacy issues.** ○ *Example:* Identify and invest in existing infrastructure, similar to People's Action in Georgia or WethePeople MI**,** that builds multi-racial, multi-ethnic coalitions to engage in long-term persuasion and organizing efforts with the goal of building political power.[92]

	○ *Example:* Empower and incubate organizations working to amplify and scale a digital and field climate change persuasion strategy, an issue shown to be an area with broad, potential bipartisan support.[93] • **Focus on the development and deployment of campaign tools.** ○ *Example:* Support mission-oriented tech vendors, investors, and startups such as Higher Ground Labs or Tech for Campaigns to support innovation, training, and access to new tools to support the growth of the local political ecosystem.[94] [95]

Intervention Type: Build Collaborative Government and Institutionalize Civic Participation

Intervention Category: Strengthen Civic Relationships and Community Building	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**
Expand National Service	• **Support development of a National Public Service Corps to mobilize around pressing issues such as a public health crisis or national disaster by scaling and investing in existing infrastructure like AmeriCorps.** ○ *Example:* Support fully implementing the bipartisan Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act and growing national service opportunities to 250,000 positions a year.[96]
Improve and Invest in Civic Education	• **Support alternative forms of civic education and storytelling, including initiatives such as the NYT's "1619" which reckons with an under examined history.**[97] ○ *Example:* Organizations such as Our Nation's Story Initiative and Narrative 4 work with communities throughout the country in direct, open-ended, and inclusive conversations about the complex and always evolving American story. [98] [99] • **Fund government's capacity to partner with organizations to improve delivery of civics education in schools.** ○ *Example:* Equip and enable school districts and teachers to implement and deliver innovative civics education that is interactive, participatory, and service-based.
Enhance Communal Civic Spaces	• **Support efforts to develop spaces, such as libraries or community-based organizations, to improve and foster healthy civic associations.** ○ *Example:* Leverage scalable models such as Civic Commons, an organization that manages shared public spaces as a portfolio of assets through a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure fund.[100]

Intervention Category: Invest in Participatory and Effective Government	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**

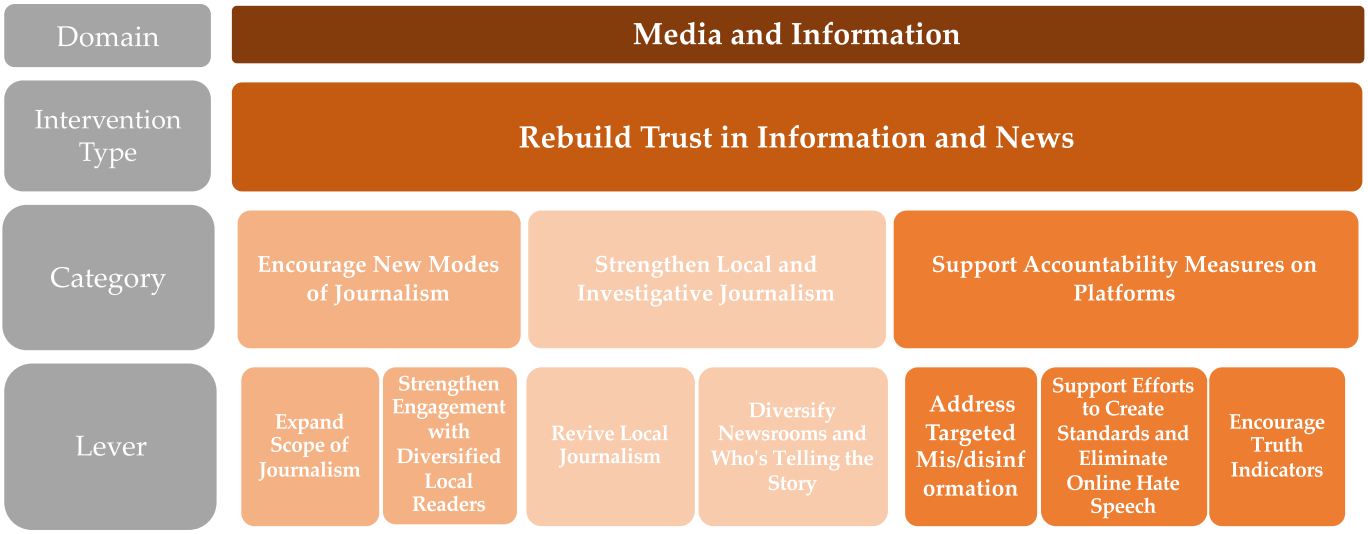
Support Participatory Democracy Efforts	• **Encourage new modes of participation and collaboration between government and citizens.**
	  ○ *Example:* Embrace and spur innovation to build new forms of digital participation by leveraging existing tech infrastructure.[101]
	  ○ *International Example:* In 2016, the Danish parliament passed a law that created an online citizens' initiative system (*borgerforslag*) whereby eligible voters can propose bills. Proposals which gain the support of 50,000 voters within 180 days are referred to Parliament for debate. [102]
	• **Support transparency and collaborative decision-making for citizens around budgets and funding.**
	  ○ *Example:* Grow and partner with organizations and models like the Participatory Budget Project (PBP) to scale their approach in cities and areas with high indicators of polarization. PBP has empowered more than 400k people to directly decide how to spend $300m in public funds in 29 cities. [103]

Improve Government Services and Feedback Loops	• **Assist government in adopting and deploying better technology and enhancing its customer service.**
	  ○ *Example:* Modernize government services by building public-private coalitions across organizations such as Civilla, Google, Code for America, Partnership for Public Service, and the Federal Government.[104] [105]
	• **Support regular feedback loops between government and its constituents.**
	  ○ *Example:* The Office of Community Wealth Building (OCWB) in Richmond, VA provides opportunities for community members living under the poverty line to participate in Richmond's city government by convening weekly focus group for community members. This feedback is then interwoven throughout the governing process.[106]

Support Talent Development and Leadership in Government	• **Develop pipeline for talent to work in public service.** ○ *Example:* Work in partnership with institutions of higher education and organizations such as Partnership for Public Service to scale and streamline fellowship and scholarship programs across the Federal Government to support and develop a new generation of sustainable talent for Federal agencies. [107] • **Address critical skill gaps in government by investing in the technical skills of current employees to enable agencies to meet workforce needs amid significant competition from private-sector employers.**

Intervention Domain: Media and Information

This section outlines interventions within the domain of media and information. Our central intervention type is **Rebuilding Trust in Information and News** by supporting new modes of journalism and accountability measures for news and information platforms.



Intervention Type: Rebuild Trust in Information and News

Intervention Category: Encourage New Modes of Journalism	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**

Expand Scope of Journalism	• **Support newsrooms that move their coverage towards more engagement with readers and viewers – answering questions, suggesting solutions and serving as a community convener.**
	  ○ *Example:* 89.3 KPCC, a Bay Area radio station, answered 6200 questions about the COVID-19 vaccine and has a team dedicated to answering any questions residents have about Southern California.[108]
	• **Leverage efforts to connect journalism with policy outcomes.**
	  ○ *Example:* MLK50 exposed the aggressive and illegal debt collection practices of Methodist Le Bonheur, Memphis' largest nonprofit hospital system. This investigation resulted in substantial change for those affected: the erasure of debts owed by the more than 6,500 patients and raising of the hospital's minimum wage to $15 an hour.[109]
	• **Encourage issue-based or community-focused journalism.**
	  ○ *Example:* The 19th reports on gender, politics, and policy and the Marshall Project which exposes failures and examines solutions for the criminal justice system. [110] [111]

Strengthen Engagement with Diversified Local Readers	• **Use journalism as a means to bring together diverse communities.** ○ *Example:* Support "dialogue journalism" models such as Spaceship Media, which strive to build journalism-supported conversations between regular people on issues of deep community importance.[112]

Intervention Category: Strengthen Local and Investigative Journalism	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**
Revive Local Journalism	• **Explore and support nonprofit or mixed revenue journalism.** ○ *Examples:* The Vermont Digger, Philadelphia Inquirer, and Texas Tribune are sustainable and successful mixed revenue models.[113] [114] [115] • **Support public-private journalism models with public-benefit corporations.** ○ *Example:* The State of New Jersey invested 5 million dollars to set up a nonprofit statewide consortium to fund local journalism.[116]
Diversify Newsrooms and Who's Telling the Story	• **Provide those who the story is about the opportunity to tell the story from their perspective and to receive proper compensation.** ○ *Example:* Community Change's Communications Fellows Program provides communications training and other support to enable individuals directly impacted by poverty to share their experiences with the public via mainstream media outlets.[117] • **Invest in programs that promote leveling the playing field for new local journalists.** ○ *Example***:** Report for America is a national service program that places journalists into local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues and communities.[118] • **Provide diverse staffing capacity and leadership.** ○ *Example:* American Press Institute sponsors the American Society of News Editors Emerging Leaders Institute**,** which trains minority journalists to become leaders in their organizations and in the industry. They also sponsor the Journalism and Women Symposium, which supports the professional empowerment and personal growth of women in journalism.[119] [120] [121]

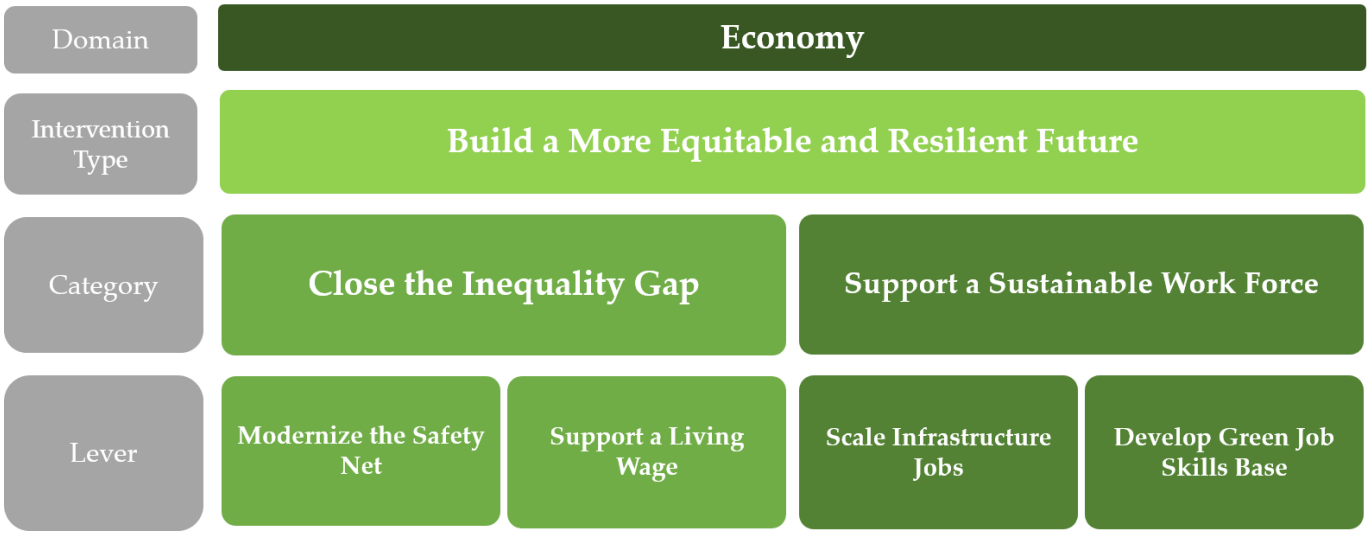
Intervention Category: Support Accountability Measures for Platforms	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**
Address Targeted Mis/disinformation	• **Promote transparency around algorithms and online ad targeting.** ○ *Example*: Commission an outside group to create and promote algorithms for users to select and choose filters to optimize trustworthiness or locality rather than engagement. ○ *Example:* Support work on algorithmic curation and recommendation engines by organizations like Center for Humane Tech.[122] • **Invest in field building around platforms, propaganda, and mis/disinformation.**

	○ *Example:* Fund general research about the role of social media, platforms, misinformation, and invest in a large clearinghouse of information around how to depolarize the internet.
Support Efforts to Create Standards Around Online Hate Speech	• **Create broader and strong incentives for content moderation or change liability regimes to incentivize more aggressive moderation.** ○ *Example:* Support campaigns like Stop Hate for Profit and coalitions like Change the Terms that push for standards around radicalization and online hate. [123] [124] ○ *Example:* Invest in resources and mechanisms for outside groups to help flag and take down violent or hateful content.
Encourage Truth Indicators	• **Encourage journalism, social media, and information platforms to adopt truth indicators and show their audience what their fact checking process is.** ○ *Example:* American Press Institute creates guides for other publishers to remain sustainable, including a program on fact checking and accountability journalism that promotes trust indicators for audiences.[125] • **Support bringing back the FCC's Fairness Doctrine (HR 4401) which from 1940-1987 required television and radio broadcasters to give airtime to opposing sides on issues of civic interest.[126]**

Intervention Domain: Economy

A thriving, equitable economy sustains a healthy democracy. Widening economic inequality has led to a vanishing middle class and that combined with economic anxiety about future globalization are key conditions for polarization. Efforts that focus on rebuilding a social safety net, expanding the middle class, and providing real opportunities for workers feeling "left behind" now and in the future all have the ability to make a real impact on polarizing attitudes in the country.

Work in the economic domain is vast, largely unexplored through the lens of depolarization, and requires continued, deeper efforts to identify solutions, models, and potential partners across philanthropy, community organizations, government, and the private sector. It would also require a broader approach than interventions outlined in the previous two domains, mainly because building a more equitable and sustainable economy will significantly depend on the leadership and direction of government and the private sector. Regardless, in order for this work to be effective, scalable, and sustainable, the perspectives, support, and partnership of flexible philanthropy, and mission-driven businesses and investors can be valuable.



Intervention Type: Build a More Equitable and Resilient Future

Intervention Category: Close the Inequality Gap	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**

Modernize the Safety Net	• **Focus on state-based pilot programs and organizations to support modernizing the safety net to make it more efficient and accessible.**
	  ○ *Example*: Support innovative programs and apps, like Fresh-EBT that allows people to check their food stamp balance on their mobile phones.[127]
	  ○ *Example*: Partner with groups like Code for America on projects such as the Integrated Benefits Initiative which supports the redesign of safety net programs, like unemployment and healthcare, to become more accessible programs.[128]
	  ○ *Example:* Invest in and replicate pilots on two-way texting to increase effectiveness of safety net programs. Civilla worked with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to test how clients and caseworkers can incorporate texting as a way to discuss and troubleshoot issues around benefit delivery.[129]
	• **Build the evidence base around COVID-19 programs for potential ongoing application and benefit reform.**
	  ○ *Example*: Invest in research around how the expansions and flexibilities of safety net programs during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted low-income Americans, what policies should be permanent, and potential routes for implementation.
	  ○ *Example*: Build an evidence-base to support a post COVID-19 safety net strategy, including research that explores expanding the definition of disability as well as research around how the expansions and flexibilities of programs during COVID impacted low-income Americans to support and advocate for a permanent change in benefits.
	• **Coordinate efforts to expand regional safety nets through shared planning and learning.**
	  ○ *Example:* In Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation's regional program helped to create a new unified regional planning agency, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP).

	CMAP played a role in creating a regional 211 system, which provides callers with information about a variety of social services.[130]
	• **Leverage efforts to modernize education for the needs of today's students and families.**
	  o *Example*: Build on the work of the private-public partnership models in CA to support the real-time needs of effective, existing providers, such as Think Together, to implement Universal Pre-K by leveraging current partnerships and supporting research needs.[131]
	  o *Example:* Invest in anchor institutions in struggling school districts to support digital upgrades, literacy, and investments in accelerated tutoring programs to minimize the education gap caused by COVID-19.
	  o *Example*: Support campaigns to lessen or eliminate the cost of student debt.
	• **Support pilots to explore how baby bonds can begin to close the wealth gap for communities of color.[132]**
	• **Fill gaps in research and corresponding advocacy campaigns on necessary reforms.**
	  o *Example:* Gates Foundation identified a gap in critical knowledge and research around the pervasiveness of evictions and funded studies to examine eviction rates for communities across the country. This information has helped policy makers, tenant organizers, and others understand the epidemic of evictions in this country and support new policies and protections.[133]

Support a Living Wage	• **Bolster national and state-based campaigns to raise the minimum wage.**
	  o *Examples*: Partner with organizations like the National Employment Law Project who run a campaign to raise the national minimum wage[134] or pilot through ongoing state-based campaigns.
	• **Advocate for protections and reform strategies for gig workers and others affected by the digital economy.**
	  o *Example:* The Athena Coalition advocates for basic living standards for workers in various industries.[135]
	  o *Example:* Gig Workers Rising is a campaign supporting and educating app/platform workers who are organizing for better wages and working conditions.[136]
	• **Support organizations that protect especially marginalized and vulnerable workers.**
	  o *Example:* Alliance/Resilience Force runs Immigrants are Essential, a campaign centering the essential work immigrants do in the United States.[137]
	  o *Example:* The National Domestic Workers Alliance: Organizing Projects, focuses on expanding power for Black domestic and homecare workers.[138]
	• **Leverage the reach of campaigns supporting paid family and medical leave.**
	  o *Example:* Family Values @ Work helps state coalitions shape the debate around Earned Sick Days and Family and Medical Leave Insurance.[139]

Intervention Category: Support a Sustainable Workforce	
Levers	**Corresponding Activities**

Scale Infrastructure Jobs	• **Invest in affordable educational opportunities and pipeline development for infrastructure jobs.**
	  ○ *Example:* The Los Angeles Trade-Technical Community College runs the Institute for Advanced Transportation Technology Training to build pathways to long-term careers in the public transportation industry.[140]
	  ○ *Example:* Scale private/public partnerships like Transit's Technical Program which works with Twin Cities Rise! and Metro Transit to recruit, train, and employ low-income and underemployed people for positions with Metro Transit. The program also provides social services and a two-year technical degree from St. Paul College to participants.[141]
	• **Scale and invest in businesses working to bring accessible, high paying employment opportunities to underinvested areas.**
	  ○ *Example:* Partner with programs like the Aspen Institute's Rural Development Hubs, which supports opportunities for investors to support foundational investments in employment, business, and infrastructure in America's struggling, rural areas.[142]

Develop Green Job Skills Base	• **Support the development of a diverse talent pipeline to align with increased demand for green jobs.**
	  ○ *Example:* Lane Community College in Oregon has started an online energy degree program to support reskilling of workers to provide opportunities for those looking for new technical opportunities in the field of energy.[143]
	  ○ *Example:* The Power Up Solar and Jobs Program, administered by the Indiana State Conference of the NAACP and the Evansville Vicinity Branch, provides instruction and hands-on training in solar panel installation. It is targeted toward unemployed and underemployed workers, as well as formerly incarcerated individuals and young adults between the ages of 18 and 25.[144]
	  ○ *Example:* Partner with organizations like Philadelphia's PowerCorpsPHL to scale their workforce development model to offer pathways for new energy careers for students, young people, and those lacking employment.[145]
	• **Partner on green job creation.**
	  ○ *Example*: Partner with funders deeply invested in environmental jobs like The Solar Foundation, which has led successful job creation programs including the Solar Ready Vets Network and Puerto Rican Solar Business Accelerator.[146]

VI. Next Steps

Philanthropic efforts around "depolarization" are nascent, developing, and lack a strong research or evidence base. Nevertheless, there are organizations, researchers, practitioners and others working to address aspects of our polarized system – whether it's 501 (c) (4) groups addressing unequal political representation by focusing on state ballot reforms; media and research efforts that tackle polarized information bubbles and help build back the capacity of local newsrooms; or funds and entities improving economic outcomes for impacted individuals. A big issue is that these efforts are too often siloed and not aimed together towards a larger outcome.

Negative, affective polarization will not be solved by one funder, one PAC, or one policy reform: it will require the energy, expertise, momentum, and commitment of many. It will also require an aligned research and field strategy that builds new clearing houses of knowledge for organizers, organizations, and others in this field around needs and lessons for decreasing polarization.

The question remains: **how can we build a holistic approach to depolarization that supports iteration, testing and trials, creates a set of learnings based on proven outcomes, and scales what has proven to work?**

Approach Types

Below are four approaches suggested both by the research and by previous successful ventures seen from foundations, that could be used to continue exploration around funding on the topic. Each apporach could be useful to the larger goals of depolarization and they do not have to be mutually exclusive.

- **Intentional Gap Filling.** One approach would be to drive forward on intervention activities that are not being addressed as clearly by other funders. The economic interventions are the most obvious domain that was shown as a gap, in terms of funding with the intentional goal of depolarization, but other gaps could be explored.

- **Building the Evidence Base.** As has been discussed, there is a significant lack of research around the impact of these interventions or even a "playbook" or framework for interested parties to follow. A focus on building and evaluating the evidence and creating a guide for this nascent field using experts and partnership could be a useful enterprise.

- **Integrated Place-Based Piloting.** As opposed to filling one gap, another approach would be to focus more on a location or set of locations to pilot a cross-cutting set of interventions across the three domains identified. This wraparound pilot would want to rely heavily on the design principles outlined in Section III, and through ongoing research, could be used as a demonstration project for a wider array of funders and stakeholders. If this approach were of interest, next steps could include conducting additional searchlight research to select pilot location(s) and approaching local and targeted community leaders to identify anchor institutions, understand nuances around community needs, and create a place-based strategy.

- **Creating a Coordinating Mechanism.** A final possible approach could be to test interest in building a coordinating mechanism for major stakeholders who are truly ready to drive a depolarization agenda. This would allow for better coordination and shared learning and research. Such a coordinating body may be bigger than just philanthropy and stretch to practitioners, business leaders and those in the private sector who have shown leadership in trust building, especially over the last few years, and/or elected officials with a proven interest and track record on domain areas.

Potential Process Steps

If there is interest in continuing to explore depolarization efforts, below are some potential next steps for moving forward:

- **Narrow:** Identify areas of interest for further exploration and possibly initial seed funding. Areas of interest could be from the approaches outlined above or around specific domains or categories and levers across domains.
- **Reach Out**: Deeply engage with potential partners to understand issues and consider merits of specific strategies and partnership development.
- **Plan:** Analyze the effectiveness of interest areas, including around impact and alignment with philanthrophic giving approach and goals.
- **Develop:** Build, refine, strategy and create a plan of action to test and scale interventions, developing out needed impact research and a body of learning.

VII. Conclusion

America's democracy began as a bold experiment and we are not immune from existential threats. After the events of the last four years and last month, it is not hyperbolic to say that the future of this experiment depends on our action, innovation, and commitment.

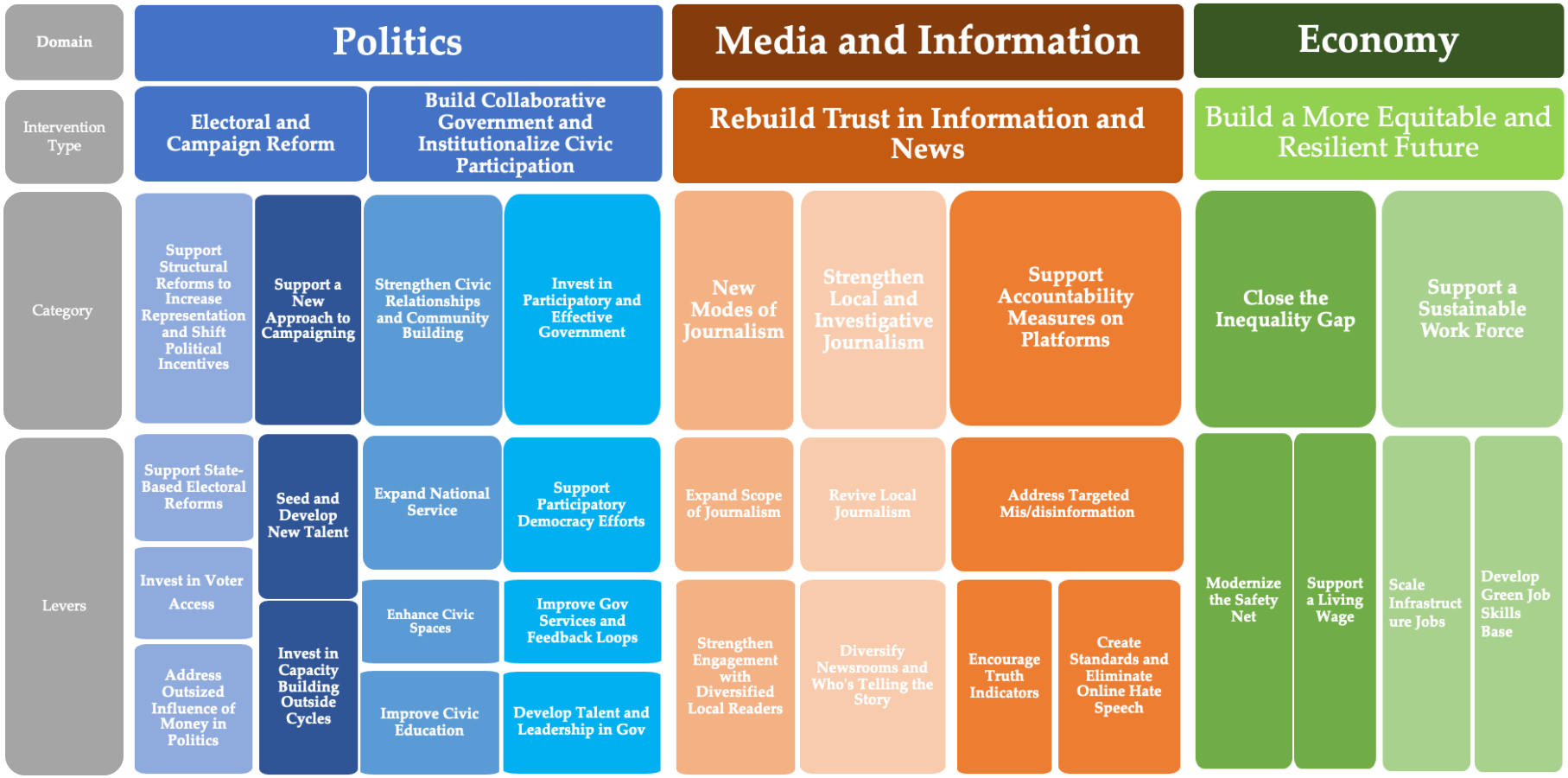
We cannot strive for total depolarization as it is an unachievable goal. Americans' differences – when given equal respect under the law – are what make our democracy unique. But depolarization interventions that level the playing field, providing Americans an honest opportunity to meet each other as equals in the domains of politics, the economy, and media/information, may have the ability to unify in ways we cannot yet understand. An inclusive approach would involve the perspectives and buy-in of local communities and leaders in specific areas to help bring the temperature down.

At this critical moment, flexible and innovative philanthropy is well-positioned to support aspects of depolarization work, identifying and leveraging partners working in other domains to support and inform a holistic, interconnected and research-focused approach. If this sparks interest, we would look forward to exploring this topic with you further.

Appendix A: Interviewee List

Interviewee Name	Organization/Position
Shiraz Ahmed	Editorial Operations Fellow, MLK50
Ashley Alvarado	Director of Community Engagement, Southern California Radio
Lee Drutman	Senior Fellow in the Political Reform Program at New America
Katherine Gehl	Author, The Politics Industry: How Political Innovation Can Break Partisan Gridlock and Save Our Democracy.
Seth London	CEO, Ground Control Partners
Ganesh Sitaraman	Director, Program in Law and Government at Vanderbilt Law School
Daniel Stid	Program Director of U.S. Democracy at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Robb Willer	Director of the Polarization and Social Change Lab at Stanford University

Appendix B: Graphic of Full Set of Interventions



Endnotes

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