Our democracy is a complex political system made of an intricate web of institutions, interest groups, individual leaders, and citizens – all connected in countless ways. Every attempt to influence and improve some aspect of this complex system produces a ripple of other reactions. While some of these reactions may be predictable, many are not. This reality makes it difficult to anticipate what will happen when we try to help U.S. democracy work better.

Systems thinking can offer insight into the dynamics of the various fields where the Democracy Fund is active. It is a methodology used to gain a deep understanding of a given field or topic within the whole. By supporting comprehensive analysis, systems thinking offers a way to better identify the root causes of problems we want to address, and to find intervention points that offer great opportunity to advance change. This approach has a long history in fields as varied as ecology, engineering, urban planning, family therapy, criminal justice, organizational development, and conflict analysis and resolution. Systems thinking employs a variety of tools and frameworks for analysis, most notably systems mapping. In 2015, we began mapping several of democracy’s component systems related to our programmatic priorities. Each map is developed in collaboration with stakeholders in the field being examined – and each welcomes continued input and improvement from an ever-wider circle of participants who bring new perspectives.

CONTEXT: OUR MISSION AND MEASURES

The Democracy Fund exists to help ensure that our political system is able to withstand new challenges and continually deliver on its promise to the American people. In short, we work on things that make democracy work better. Embracing systems thinking can assist us and our partners in this activity. Just as we know that democracy will face new challenges, we know that any systems map will change – becoming more accurate as new stakeholders add their perspectives, taking new form as evolution, or disruption shifts its factors and their relationships.

In the near-term, we will measure success based on modest changes in the areas where we focus, particularly those parts of a system where we believe we can move quickly. In the process, we will capture knowledge based on both intended and unintended outcomes. Over time, and with our partners, we expect to leverage short-term wins and lessons learned to create needed motion in other parts of the system. We hope these changes will cumulatively advance how our democracy serves the American people.
THE SYSTEMS APPROACH IN ACTION

To apply systems thinking in our work at the Democracy Fund, we will listen, examine, and learn and adapt.

Listen: With the stakeholders involved in creating a map, we seek to hear and capture the story of how a system works. Together, we can try to make sure the map is comprehensive and reflects the nuances and intricacies of the system it describes. As a result, we believe mapping is best done with a broad and inclusive set of players and perspectives.

Examine: We study a map’s factors, their relationships, and the dynamics in play. We can then pursue questions that will allow us to identify areas where there is the potential for high leverage in the system. We will also consider where the system might “push back” on efforts for change, and explore potential unintended consequences of our actions. This analysis will lead to a program plan that addresses our role at the Democracy Fund in tandem with others working to move the system.

Learn and adapt: In collaboration with our partners, we will implement strategies over several years and track progress against the map. We can identify indicators to measure impact, and build in regular points for rigorous reflection. We will compare our lived experience to the map and to our plan, aiming to quickly identify lessons learned and adapt our approach for greater results. As we learn more about a system and how change occurs, we will update its map to reflect new knowledge and emerging realities.

At the Democracy Fund, we believe there are three primary benefits from systems mapping:

Communicating and collaborating. First and foremost describing a system can generate shared language as well as rich content for stakeholders — creating new opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and ideas that can improve outcomes in a given field. This shared understanding can clarify the perspectives of others and reveal new possibilities for effective collaboration.

Making sense of complexity. We want to capture the elaborate set of relationships and dynamics that characterize a field. We recognize that changemaking is not a linear process, and we want to gain deeper understanding to make informed decisions about our investments and interventions.

Building a basis for action and adaptation. A map’s content informs how we strategize and implement approaches within the Democracy Fund and in conjunction with our partners. The map is a tool that helps us challenge and test our assumptions as well as track and learn from our actions. It serves as a living frame that we revise and build on as we gain insight over time.

“We are using systems mapping as a tool to help us make sense of the complex problems we are working on and to open ourselves up to new, creative solutions.”

JOE GOLDMAN
PRESIDENT, THE DEMOCRACY FUND