

Democracy By the People with Erika Wood

Erika Wood is a senior program officer on the Civic Engagement and Government team at the Ford Foundation. Her grantmaking seeks to expand democratic involvement in the United States, promote greater voter participation in elections, and shape processes that reflect the public interest.

Start of transcript.

My name is Erika Wood. I'm a senior program officer at the Ford Foundation. I'm a middle aged white woman with a short brown bob wearing a black blouse and a black blazer.

The phrase “by the people” is a daring promise, but across our democracy in the U.S., it has been designed in ways that exclude too many people: women, poor people, people of color, indigenous people, incarcerated people. Even so, I remain inspired by American democracy. At the time of our founding, it was revolutionary to think about a government by the people. It remains aspirational. Audacious, an “unfinished experiment,” in the words of Walt Whitman.

But because our democracy is still shaped by just some people, it is vulnerable to division. It lacks the solid foundation that could be built with robust participation across all of our communities. The true power of our collective voice.

Imagine what would be possible if we redesigned the system to truly be by the people. Voter participation would be the default that you would have to opt out of rather than opt into. People could choose when, how, where to cast their ballots. No voter would have to stand in long lines or travel long distances. Incarcerated individuals could be encouraged to participate rather than excluded.

Our representatives could really be chosen by their voters, rather than legislators cherry picking their voters through gerrymandered districts. If our candidates for public office were insulated from corporate entities and big money, people could trust that they were really representing the public interest.

We are in a moment of enormous challenge, but also incredible opportunity. While some people may have the urge to tear things down, we could choose to build up our democracy, and redesign it, to truly be one that is of the people, by the people, for the people.

[The Ford Foundation logo is stacked in a bold black serif font, then transforms into a single letter “F” set inside a black circle.]

End of transcript.