2025 PIPELINE INSIGHTS

Civic Infrastructure in the Age of AI

Comprehensive dataset on early-stage civic, public-interest, and pro-democracy AI innovation

By

The New Media Ventures / New Rising Ventures

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artificial intelligence*[1] is reshaping civic life at a pace that few institutions are prepared to navigate. Yet even as AI's influence accelerates, the innovators building community-rooted, equity-driven tools remain cripplingly under-resourced.

In 2021, New Media Ventures released *The TikTok Gap,* warning that progressives were falling behind. That warning proved prescient as the right dominated on TikTok, contributing to their landslide 2024 election wins. Today, we face a parallel moment, but with far greater consequences. AI is becoming part of the digital foundation that underlies our information ecosystem and civic institutions.

This report draws on one of the most comprehensive early-stage datasets focused specifically on civic, public-interest, and pro-democracy AI: more than 200 nonprofit and for-profit organizations in our 2025 Responsible AI pipeline. The result is a pipeline full of credible solutions that's at risk of stalling without sustained capital.

Within our pipeline, we found extraordinary solutions being built disproportionately by people of color and women, who are developing AI tools that expand access to justice, improve how communities understand public issues, counter evolving forms of misinformation, support workers, and modernize outdated public data systems. These leaders are building the next generation of civic technology, often with minimal resources, in underfunded sectors, and without the initial investment required to scale.

Our analysis reveals a set of consistent findings across organizations that are challenging the status quo. First, leaders of color are significantly overrepresented among innovators creating civic and public-interest AI, yet operate with smaller budgets and face the steepest obstacles to growth. Second, women-led organizations overperform when adequately resourced, but face significant early-stage funding gaps, where traction is determined. Third, many teams are pushing the boundaries of applied AI despite lacking access to the compute, tooling, and engineering support typically available to venture-backed companies. And across both nonprofits and startups, responsible AI for civic use remains undervalued, even as risks to democracy and digital safety intensify.

Despite these constraints, the pipeline reveals real momentum. Innovators are developing AI-assisted civic education platforms, multilingual accessibility tools, narrative defense systems, participatory governance models, and technologies that blend machine intelligence with relational organizing. These solutions demonstrate how AI can function as a civic multiplier—expanding capacity of movements, improving public access, and supporting communities navigating increasingly complex digital environments.

This report outlines what we learned from this year's pipeline, the gaps that threaten progress, and the actionable opportunities for philanthropy and impact investors. It also highlights NMV/NRV's 2025 investments—Justicia Lab, Scrutinize, Retro Report, and Breakthru—which exemplify the type of Responsible AI innovation capable of reshaping civic life for the better.

AI's trajectory is still malleable. The question is whether we will resource the leaders building for the public interest or allow the future to be defined solely by those with the most capital. The next few years will determine which path we take.

FROM THE TIKTOK GAP TO THE RESPONSIBLE AI GAP: A NEW CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE MOMENT

In 2021, New Media Ventures published The TikTok Gap, highlighting the consequences of arriving too late to emerging digital spaces. That warning played out across the 2022 midterms and again in 2024, when shifts in platform dynamics, recommendation algorithms, and creator ecosystems reshaped political communication at speeds traditional civic institutions were not built to manage.

We now face a similar moment, but with far broader stakes and no organized, well-resourced movement to help shape it responsibly. AI is rapidly becoming part of the digital backbone through which people search for information, navigate public systems, communicate, and make decisions. As this technology embeds itself into everyday life, the values of its builders matter profoundly.

The core question is no longer whether AI will influence civic life, but who gets to shape that influence, and whose experiences and perspectives will be encoded into tools that increasingly mediate public understanding and access.

Yet while billions of dollars flow into AI, the innovators designing public-benefit applications—tools that improve access, expand civic agency, or make public systems more navigable—remain chronically underfunded. Many operate with scarce resources, limited technical support, and little access to early-stage capital despite building solutions with far-reaching social value.

Our 2025 Responsible AI pipeline provides a unique look into this emerging field. Across more than 200 submissions, we saw teams applying AI to address longstanding inequities, improve how communities engage with information, and design new models of democratic participation. These teams are building what may become the public digital layer of the next decade: technology that helps people understand their rights, engage with institutions, collaborate, learn, and take collective action.

This report shares what we learned: the strengths of this developing ecosystem, the structural barriers holding it back, and the opportunities to ensure that responsible, community-grounded AI takes root early before inequitable models become the norm.

This work builds on the contributions of field leaders shaping Responsible AI, including the Kapor Foundation, All Tech Is Human, Data & Society, ACLU, CDT, and others advancing equity, safety, and governance in AI. While these organizations shape policy, research, and governance frameworks, our contribution focuses on the innovation pipeline itself—who is building civic AI solutions, what barriers they face, and where deeper seed investment is needed.

> *If the "TikTok Gap" report warned us about arriving late, this Responsible AI report urges us to arrive early enough to shape the future.*

OUR GUIDING BELIEFS ABOUT AI

Our approach to Responsible AI is grounded in a set of core beliefs shaped by more than a decade of investing in civic technology, movement infrastructure, and community-rooted innovation. These beliefs guide how we evaluate emerging tools, interpret this pipeline, and determine where capital can have the greatest impact.

AI is not neutral. Every model reflects the values, assumptions, and biases of the people and institutions that create it. Without intentional design and accountability, AI systems will replicate existing inequities at greater scale and speed.

Who builds and owns AI matters. Representation in AI development is not symbolic. It determines whose needs are prioritized, whose harms are dismissed, and whose futures are imagined. Currently, power in AI is concentrated among a small number of companies with outsized influence over public life. For AI to serve the public good, the people most affected by its outcomes must have a meaningful role in shaping it.

AI is not liberation, but it can be a powerful tool when grounded in community leadership. Technology cannot solve structural inequity. But it can accelerate the movements that will.

AI is public-interest infrastructure. AI is becoming a civic utility. Increasingly, AI will determine how people access information, navigate public systems, learn, work, and participate in civic life. Decisions about this technology cannot be left only to market forces; they require democratic input, public accountability, and investment in models that serve the common good.

These beliefs shaped our 2025 Responsible AI funding cycle and informed our evaluation of submissions from both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. They are also the lens through which we interpret the findings in this report: the patterns we observed, the emerging trends, and the opportunities ahead for philanthropy and impact investors.

OUR FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSIBLE AI INVESTING

How we identify the early innovations capable of shaping a more equitable AI future.

To navigate a rapidly evolving landscape, we apply a framework that distinguishes AI tools that merely adopt new technology from those capable of driving meaningful civic and social impact.

The 2025 Responsible AI funding cycle—run through the New Rising Ventures Rising Fund and the New Media Ventures Innovation Fund—was guided by three strategic principles at every stage of sourcing and selection:

1. **Catalyzing inflection points:** Investing during transformative periods (like the rise of generative AI) when early action can shift long-term civic and social outcomes.
2. **Radical reconstruction:** Prioritizing leaders who build systems around equity, transparency, and community accountability from the start, rather than attempting to retrofit fairness onto fundamentally misaligned technologies.
3. **Amplifying ownership:** Supporting tools and governance models that shift power back to communities, workers, and the public.

We specifically sought startups and organizations:

- Strengthening trustworthy media ecosystems
- Reimagining civic engagement
- Expanding civic access and public-benefit technology

> *AI does not guarantee liberation, but in the hands of our communities, it can help build the conditions for it.*

OUR PIPELINE AT A GLANCE

Our 2025 pipeline reflects more than 200 nonprofits and startups working at the intersection of AI, civic life, and equity. This dataset showcases emerging builders, the problems they are tackling, and the systemic barriers they encounter long before commercial markets take notice.

In the next section, we turn to what this pipeline reveals about who is building Responsible AI, and what their experiences tell us about where the field must go next.

How Our Investment Approach Shaped This Pipeline

Our 2025 funding cycle explicitly sought organizations with early-stage Responsible AI solutions for which $50K investment would be catalytic. This naturally attracts leaders and founders who haven't yet accessed (or are unable to access) larger institutional funding. Consequently, our pipeline concentrates among organizations with smaller operational budgets and fundraising goals: nonprofits with annual budgets under $500K and for-profit companies seeking rounds under $2M.

All demographic and organizational data in this report (including budget sizes, fundraising outcomes, IP ownership, team structure, etc.) reflect self-reported information from intake forms submitted by applicants. We verified these details through due diligence conversations and documentation reviews for organizations that advanced to interviews and later phases of our investment process. This approach is standard for early-stage pipeline analysis and provides a robust view of trends across the sector.

Note on Report Development: This report was developed with editorial assistance from Claude (Anthropic). All data collection, analysis, insights, and recommendations are the work of the New Media Ventures and New Rising Ventures teams.

However, even accounting for this selection effect, the funding amounts these applicants sought are modest relative to the current AI market. While mainstream AI startups routinely raise millions in early rounds and billion-dollar financings dominate headlines, 75% of our for-profit submissions were seeking under $1M. Our investment criteria may explain who applied to our cycle, but they don't explain why founders seeking amounts that are tiny relative to the AI boom are still systematically unable to raise them.

This distinction matters, as our data reveals patterns among early-stage Responsible AI builders, which is precisely the stage where catalytic capital can have the greatest impact. The funding disparities we document by race, gender, and sector reflect real barriers these leaders face, not artifacts of our selection process.

WHO IS BUILDING RESPONSIBLE AI

Our 2025 Responsible AI funding cycle pipeline offers one of the clearest snapshots to date of who is building civic- and equity-driven AI in the United States. Across 209 submissions, we saw a field that included not only traditional tech founders but organizers, educators, journalists, designers, legal advocates, and civic technologists applying AI to solve public problems that are routinely overlooked.

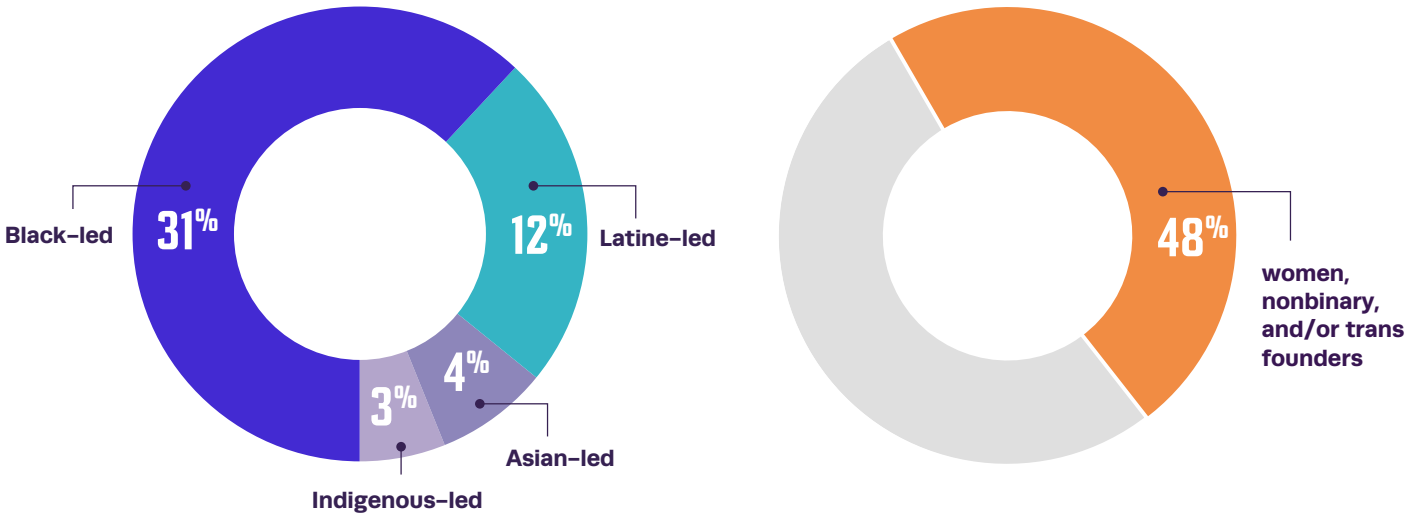
The data is unambiguous: *leaders of color and women are driving much of the innovation in our civic innovation pipeline, while receiving the least seed capital.*

WHO IS BUILDING: NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Nonprofits represented 65% of submissions. Leaders of color made up the majority of innovators in our Responsible AI pipeline, yet they are structurally underfunded.

Among the pipeline, nonprofits with underrepresented leaders are leading the sectors most essential to civic life, equity, and democracy.

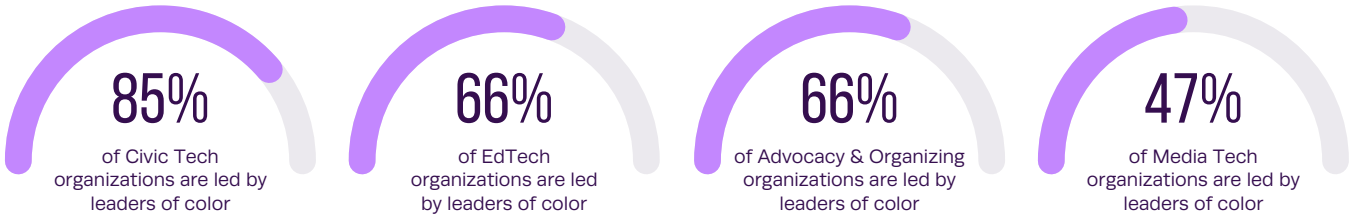
Nonprofit Leader Demographics



This representation far exceeds the mainstream tech and philanthropic sectors, reinforcing a pattern we consistently see: the people most harmed by inequitable technologies are the ones building the most thoughtful alternatives.

Leaders of Color Are Leading Across All Responsible AI Sectors

Among nonprofit organizations in our pipeline:

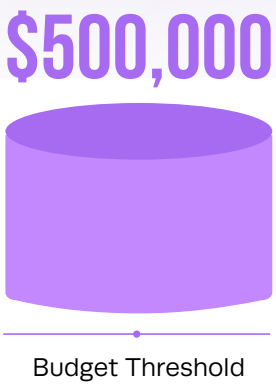


Upon review, these leaders are designing systems in sectors critical to public life with a deep commitment to accountability, transparency, and community voice. To us, this is a design signal. These leaders are shaping what Responsible AI looks like in practice.

These Same Leaders Are Dramatically Underfunded

Despite driving innovation:

- 55% nonprofits indicated that they operate on budgets under $500K
- 65% of those low-budget organizations are led by leaders of color
- In contrast, 56% of organizations with operational budgets above $500K were white-led



The funding gap appears starkly in fundraising outcomes:

- 42% of nonprofits had missed their fundraising goals at the time of submission
- 63% of those who fell short were led by leaders of color

The disparity is jarring: the nonprofit leaders taking the risk and building important AI interventions are the least funded.

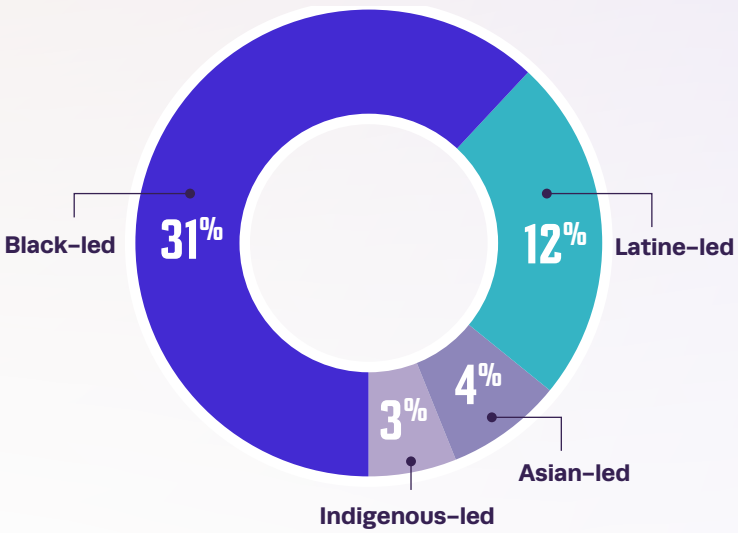
> *Those closest to the harm — and closest to the solution — are furthest from the capital.*

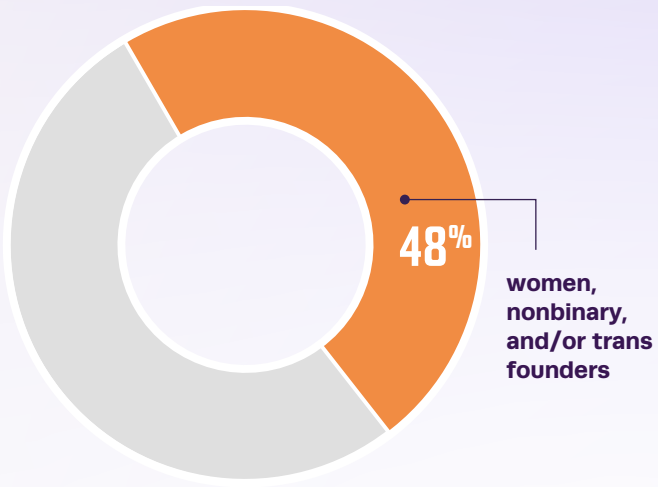
WHO IS BUILDING: FOR-PROFIT STARTUPS

For-profits represented 35% of submissions. For-profit founders of color are driving technical innovation while experiencing the steepest funding inequities.

In the for-profit segment of the pipeline, founders of color are not only innovating; many hold key technical roles, own IP, and are building some of the most sophisticated Responsible AI infrastructure tools.

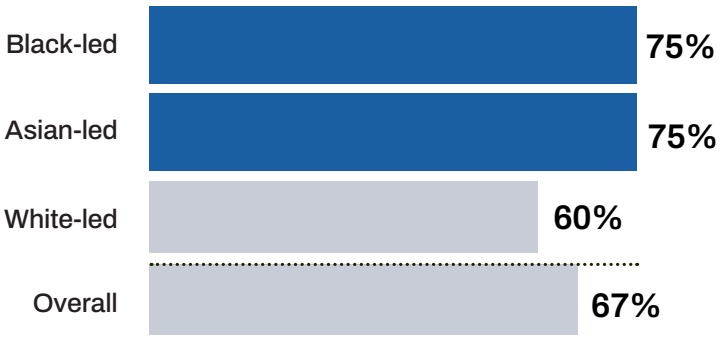
For-Profit Founder Demographics





Founders of Color Are Building High-IP, High-Technical-Demand Tools

IP Ownership:



The data directly challenge any assumption that funding disparities reflect technical capacity gaps. In fact, founders of color demonstrate equal or higher rates of IP ownership and technical leadership compared to White founders in our pipeline.

Technical Leadership:

These numbers clearly show that the funding gap is not a capability gap. Founders of color are building technically sophisticated solutions with defensible IP and the technical leadership to back it up, often at higher rates than their White counterparts. Yet as the data below shows, they face the steepest funding shortfalls.

Structural Underfunding Is More Severe Here Than Anywhere Else

Across all for-profit sectors (self-identified) in our Responsible AI pipeline, fundraising shortfalls were nearly universal:

Fundraising Shortfalls by Sector

Note: The funding data below reflects what applicants reported at the time of submission. Some organizations may have raised additional capital since then.

IP/CTO vs. FUNDING SUCCESS

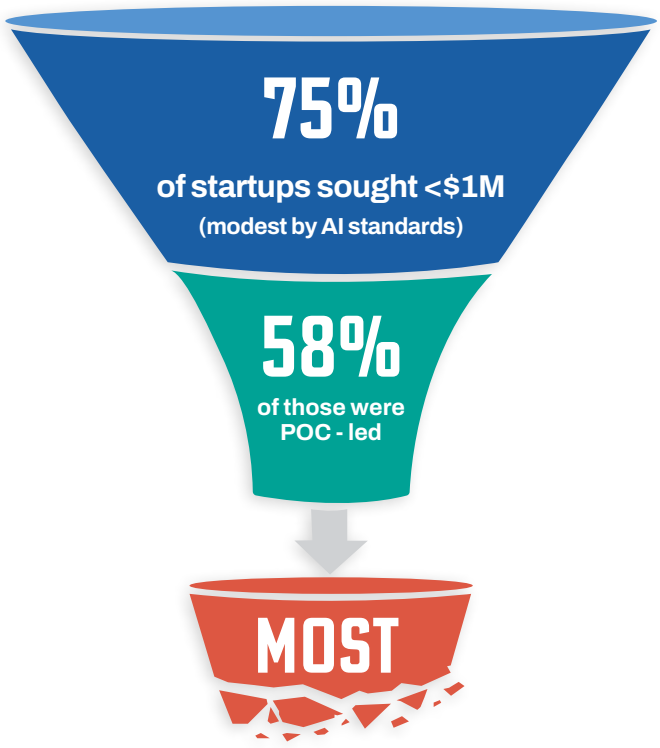
Technical capacity does not predict funding success

Founder Group	IP Ownership	CTO Presence	Fell Short Fundraising
Asian-led	75%	75%	100%
Black-led	75%	61%	86%
Latine-led	55%	82%	91%
White-led	60%	70%	70%

High capacity > should mean lower short falls but the pattern is REVERSED for founders of colors.

It's a tale as old as time. We know this is not a talent gap. It is a capital allocation gap, and once again, VC funding is systematically misaligned with public-benefit innovation– with founders of color bearing the brunt of that misalignment.

> *The deeper the social impact, the harder it is to raise venture capital, especially for founders of color.*



overlooked founder are concentrated in early stages, rarely reaching scale

Gender Dynamics in Responsible AI Funding

Women-led nonprofits excel at meeting fundraising targets, while women-led startups face severe funding shortfalls at validation stages

Gender inequity shows up across our dataset, though the patterns differ between nonprofit and for-profit organizations. In both sectors, women leaders represent significant portions of the pipeline and demonstrate strong capabilities but face distinct barriers that vary by organizational structure and funding stage.

Nonprofits: Underrepresentation at the Critical Mid-Stage

Women-led organizations show an unusual distribution across budget stages:

- 63% of nonprofits with budgets under $50K (extremely early stage) are women-led
- Only 9-12% in the $50K-$200K range (the critical "first institutional funding" stage) are women-led
- 62% of nonprofits with budgets over $1M (mature stage) are women-led

This $50K-$200K range is where most organizations transition from idea to prototype to proof of concept. The dramatic underrepresentation of women-led organizations at this stage, despite strong representation at both earlier and later stages, suggests potential barriers in accessing this critical tier of institutional funding. While we cannot determine from this data alone whether this reflects structural obstacles to accessing this tier, alternative fundraising pathways, or other factors, the pattern suggests women-led organizations face distinct challenges at this pivotal transition point.

Yet despite these barriers, women-led nonprofits demonstrate strong fundraising performance:

- 57% of nonprofits meeting their budget goals are women-led
- 67% of those exceeding their goals are women-led
- 56% of those nearly reaching goals are women-led

Despite representing 48% of nonprofit organizations in the pipeline, women-led nonprofits account for a disproportionate share of high performers—particularly the 67% exceeding their fundraising goals. This likely demonstrates strong execution and resource management when adequately capitalized.

FOR-PROFITS: Women Founders Show High Growth Potential When Capital Reaches Them

In the for-profit startup pipeline, funding shortfalls were nearly universal across gender, which is striking given that most founders sought amounts that would be considered modest in today's AI funding environment

Women founders represent significant shares across all fundraising tiers (36-47%), demonstrating their presence in building Responsible AI solutions. But funding outcomes reveal concerning patterns:

Women-led representation across funding rounds:

- 39% of founders raising Micro rounds (<$500K)
- 36% of founders raising Small rounds ($500K-$1M)
- 47% of founders raising Medium rounds ($1M-$2.5)
- Sample sizes too small for Large or Mega rounds

Funding outcomes at the time of submission

At the smallest funding levels (where our pipeline has the most significant sample):

- Micro rounds (<$500K): Universal scarcity—all women-led companies (100%) fell significantly short of their goals (raising <35% of their target). By comparison, 87% of male-led companies also fell short, though one nearly reached its goal.
- Small rounds ($500K-$1M): Similar struggle across gender—63% of women-led and 77% of male-led companies were falling significantly short. Women-led companies showed comparable performance: 13% had met goals, 13% had nearly reached them (vs. 8% and 8% for men).

In what AI markets would still consider seed-stage:

- Medium rounds ($1M-$2.5M): A gender gap emerged—0% of women-led companies had met their targets at the time of submission, while 25% of male-led companies had successfully met their minimum targets and another 13% had raised about half.

This pattern in the "Medium rounds" deserves attention but careful interpretation. The sample size is small (15 companies total, 7 women-led), and Medium rounds sit at the edge of what our investment approach typically attracts. However, the pattern is suggestive and aligns with well-documented VC patterns, where women founders face steeper obstacles as raise sizes increase, and with our nonprofit data, which shows women-led organizations are underrepresented in the $50K-$200K early-stage range despite strong fundraising performance overall. Together, these suggest women founders in Responsible AI may face systematic barriers at critical transition points—when nonprofits seek first institutional funding, and when startups seek validation-stage capital.

COMPOUNDING STAGE DISPARITIES

Structural funding inequities compound over time.

Capital scarcity is universal across our pipeline—Responsible AI leaders struggle to raise early-stage support regardless of sector or structure. But philanthropy and VC fail these founders for different reasons: philanthropy often underestimates technical work, while VC undervalues public-benefit models and civic impact.

These structural funding inequities compound over time. Because leaders of color are least funded:

- They are disproportionately concentrated at Concept and Prototype stages.
- They receive less multi-year support.
- They lack the capital to build defensible traction early.
- Later-stage ventures skew overwhelmingly white-led.

We believe this dynamic is a damning reflection of philanthropic risk aversion, VC bias toward profit maximization, the high cost of compute, and the lack of early-stage catalytic support. If we do not intervene early, these early-stage inequities will become permanent structural barriers as AI becomes a defining infrastructure of civic life.

These funding constraints, affecting leaders of color and women founders most acutely, shape the very architecture of Responsible AI itself. The technical choices leaders make reveal how resource scarcity intersects with deeply held values around transparency, accountability, and community power.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF INNOVATION

How access, power, and community values are shaping Responsible Civic AI

The previous section outlined who is building Responsible AI, and this section will reveal how they are building and what their technical choices tell us about access, power, and the values shaping this emerging field.

While nonprofits were the only segment of our pipeline required to specify the types of AI models they use, the patterns in their responses illuminate broader dynamics facing Responsible AI leaders across both the nonprofit and for-profit landscapes. These insights, combined with qualitative data from for-profit applicants, paint a consistent picture of how resource constraints and community-rooted values shape the technical infrastructure of Responsible AI.

The 2025 nonprofit responses surfaced four dominant architectural approaches:

1. Open-source AI models
2. Cloud-based generative AI from major providers
3. Domain-specific or fine-tuned models
4. Research-stage, experimental, or hybrid systems

(Note: Model-type percentages reflect nonprofit responses; for-profit patterns are inferred from qualitative data on their architectures and constraints.)

At first glance, these might seem like simple engineering decisions. But across more than 200 applicants, a more profound truth emerges: *model choice is a technical decision and a reflection of access, constraints, and values. It reveals who can build, under what conditions and for what purpose.*

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS SHAPE WHAT TEAMS CAN BUILD

Compute scarcity, capital inequity, and Big Tech concentration define the boundaries of innovation.

Over the past two years, Big Tech companies have invested over $300 billion in AI compute and models, while AI startups have raised nearly $200 billion in venture capital (CNBC, Bloomberg). In Q3 2024 alone, just four VC deals—for xAI, Anthropic, Nscale, and Mistral—accounted for nearly half of the quarter's total deal value (PitchBook).

This concentration of data, compute, and distribution power places early-stage AI builders, especially community-rooted teams with limited capital, in a structurally constrained environment.

For nonprofit and for-profit AI innovators alike, this manifests in very real technical limitations:

- High compute costs make training or fine-tuning models prohibitively expensive.
- Cloud-based generative AI becomes the default option in the short term due to affordability, despite long-term vendor lock-in risks.
- Open-source AI becomes both a necessity and a strategy, reducing dependence on proprietary systems.
- Domain-specific modeling becomes a cost-effective workaround for achieving precision without retraining from scratch.

These constraints shape the infrastructure of a sector that lacks equitable access to foundational AI resources.

> *In an AI economy defined by billion-dollar compute clusters, Responsible AI civic leaders are architecting tomorrow's civic systems with a fraction of the resources available to Big Tech.*

VALUES SHAPE HOW COMMUNITY-ROOTED INNOVATORS BUILD

Transparency, accountability, sovereignty, and equity show up in the technical stack.

Despite these structural constraints—or perhaps because of them—many leaders in our pipeline make intentional model and infrastructure choices grounded in community accountability. These patterns emerge from a combination of necessity and conviction: constraints that force creative solutions, and values that guide which solutions to pursue.

Across our nonprofit dataset (and mirrored qualitatively in for-profits), we observed three consistent patterns:

1. **Open-source as a commitment to transparency and community sovereignty.** Nearly a quarter of nonprofits rely on open-source AI at the core of their work. People of color lead two-thirds of these organizations.

For these teams, open-source is a more affordable option, plus:

- Philosophical stance against black-box systems
- Strategy to increase community oversight
- Mechanism to ensure accessibility and replicability
- Rejection of extractive data ownership practices

In this way, open-source becomes a democratizing force in Responsible AI.

2. **Domain-specific models as cultural, contextual, and justice-centered design.** Many teams, especially those led by leaders of color, chose to build or fine-tune models on datasets that center marginalized communities and preserve cultural knowledge that mainstream AI routinely ignores or erases:

    - Multilingual datasets
    - Environmental justice and climate data
    - Community safety data
    - Legal or administrative records
    - Educational content tailored to marginalized learners

While domain-specific modeling is common in commercial AI (optimizing for ad targeting, fraud detection, recommendation engines), these innovators are applying the same technical approach to fundamentally different ends: cultural preservation, equity, and community empowerment.

This decision reflects a core principle of Responsible AI: AI must be culturally aware, context-specific, and accountable to the communities it claims to serve. Domain-specific modeling, in this context, becomes responsible civic design.

3. **Community governance and trust embedded in technical decisions.** Across our reviews and diligence, we found that teams built governance and trust directly into their system architecture, not as an afterthought:

    - Consent layers and permissions
    - Community review boards
    - Participatory annotation processes
    - Transparency dashboards
    - Data cooperatives
    - Auditability baked into workflows
    - Explainable AI interfaces that show decision pathways
    - Mechanisms for consent, auditability, and redress

In civic systems, trust is a core product feature. While Big Tech companies often add governance mechanisms after public backlash or regulatory pressure, these teams designed them into their systems from the start—a reflection of being directly accountable to the communities their tools serve, not primarily to investors or shareholders.

4. **Blended technology and relational infrastructure as a design choice.** Contrary to narratives that AI will replace human connection, many organizations described hybrid models that intentionally combine both. These systems leverage AI's efficiency without sacrificing relational trust, which remains the backbone of lasting social change.

Examples include:

- Community learning centers where AI tutors augment, not replace, human facilitators
- Civic leadership programs pairing automated guidance with in-person cohort models
- Organizing hubs that use AI for translation, data management, or content creation while keeping decision-making human-led

Our takeaway is that technology can accelerate organizing, but movements scale when relational trust is amplified, not replaced. Thus, the choice to blend rather than replace is both practical (AI alone can't build trust) and ideological (relationships are where power lives).

WHAT THESE PATTERNS TELL US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF RESPONSIBLE AI

Across nonprofit and for-profit builders, three lessons emerge:

1. **Responsible AI is being built despite the resource environment.** Founders of color are creating some of the most technically advanced, equity-centered AI tools while navigating significant financial and infrastructural limitations. Their innovations are acts of adaptation, resilience, and determination.

2. **The most values-driven AI work is emerging outside traditional AI power structures.** Rather than conventional tech hubs and venture-backed labs, Responsible AI is being built in schools, community centers, advocacy organizations, and public-interest institutions, places where accountability to communities is built into the organizational DNA.

3. **Model choice is a reflection of worldview — access + intention.** We believe two major forces shape how Responsible AI is built: *structural realities* (limited budgets, compute scarcity, cloud dependencies) and values (transparency, sovereignty, accountability, community power).

These forces are deeply entangled. For many founders, open-source is a stand against data extraction. One founder stated, "Open-source isn't just an affordable alternative, it's a stance against extractive business practices and a commitment to collective ownership, cultural competence, and data sovereignty." Similarly, domain-specific modeling can demonstrate a commitment to cultural relevance and community voice. The distinction between necessity and conviction may be impossible to untangle, and perhaps that's the point.

What emerges is a powerful pattern: *Teams that lack access to "elite" capital disproportionately build architectures that democratize power—whether by necessity, by intention, or by both.* Whether constraint drives values or values drive technical choices in the face of constraint, the result is the same: the technical foundation of Responsible AI is being built by those most accountable to communities, not to investors.

For example, NRV's 2024 Responsible AI portfolio company, Data Nutrition Project, has made data integrity its mission. This year, they are preparing to launch an AI-assisted label maker to assess and qualify the "nutrition" of specific data sets. The foundational technology they developed makes label creation faster and more efficient while preserving human judgment and accountability, using LLM-assisted workflows. This intentionally allows organizations to rapidly utilize their data nutrition labels without requiring deep data management expertise.

These choices represent the early blueprint for what a just AI future could look like.

> *Model choice is not about preference — it is about power, access, and the world the builder is trying to create.*

TRENDS & OPPORTUNITIES IN RESPONSIBLE AI INNOVATION

What 200+ organizations reveal about where the field is headed.

While the previous section explored how teams are building, this section will turn our focus to what they are building and the emerging patterns that illustrate the shape of Responsible AI today.

A note on methodology: The trends identified here are based on qualitative analysis of more than 200 submissions, supplemented by interviews and due diligence conversations. Where quantifiable, we provide specific data points; where patterns emerged from the thematic analysis of organizational descriptions, we note them explicitly.

Across the pipeline, the data reveals a consistent and encouraging truth: *The most boundary-pushing, equity-centered AI innovation is coming from those closest to the harms — and the possibilities — of this technology.*

Below, we highlight the five most significant trends.

Trend 1: Narrative Integrity & Anti-Manipulation Tools Are Evolving Rapidly

From post-crisis response to early-warning infrastructure; offensive narrative strategy remains an open frontier.

In our 2024 Responsible AI funding cycle, we saw significant focus on reactive AI solutions—tools designed to audit content after publication, fact-check after misinformation had spread, or detect bias in systems already deployed. This year, the focus has shifted toward early-warning infrastructure: systems that can identify and mitigate harmful narratives before they metastasize into widespread damage.

Based on self-written descriptions and product demos, innovations have moved far beyond fact-checking and moderation toward early-warning systems and real-time narrative intelligence. Teams are building:

- Multilingual misinformation tracking across social platforms
- Community-tuned chatbots that defuse polarizing conversations
- AI tools mapping harmful narratives in AAPI and Latino communities
- Digital safety platforms shielding women leaders and candidates from harassment
- AI systems identifying coordinated influence campaigns

Several teams reported strong interest from newsrooms, civic organizations, and advocacy groups eager to pilot these systems ahead of the 2026 election cycle—a signal that demand for narrative infrastructure is both urgent and growing.

What's notable is how many of these defensive tools are built by teams from the communities most targeted by disinformation. Rather than generic content moderation, we're seeing community-specific defense infrastructure designed by people who understand the unique threat patterns, cultural contexts, and power dynamics shaping attacks on their own communities. This is a fundamentally different approach to safety, one that centers lived experience and community accountability over platform policies.

It's also important to note that much of this work remains fundamentally defensive. These tools detect, deflect, and mitigate harm rather than proactively build narrative power or shape public discourse. While this represents critical progress—you cannot protect what you cannot see—it also highlights a gap in the field. We saw limited innovation in offensive narrative strategy: tools designed to help movements craft and amplify compelling counter-narratives at scale.

The throughline is unmistakable: Democratic engagement is impossible without digital safety. *But defensive infrastructure alone is not sufficient. As disinformation tactics grow more sophisticated and targeted, movements need both the capacity to defend against attacks and the infrastructure to tell their own stories powerfully.*

Opportunity: Build long-term infrastructure for narrative resilience ahead of the 2026 midterms and invest in the next generation of offensive narrative tools that help movements proactively shape discourse, not just react to manipulation. The field needs both shields and megaphones.

Trend 2: AI + Civic Engagement Are Blending in New Ways

AI is being used to demystify civic processes, gamify participation, and rebuild trust in institutions. Another prominent pattern that emerged is a fundamental shift from "AI for operations" toward AI for engagement and agency—tools designed not to streamline government workflows but to activate citizen voice and action.

Amongst our pipeline, teams are designing:

- Translation tools that localize and simplify policy language
- Personalized civic guides based on user preferences
- AI-powered civics education platforms
- Gamified civic engagement tools mobilizing young voters and LGBTQIA+ communities
- Participatory budgeting assistants that help residents evaluate options

This represents a marked departure from the civic tech tools of the past decade, which primarily focused on back-end government efficiency. These new applications center the citizen experience, making civic systems more legible and accessible, particularly for communities historically excluded from formal political processes.

AI as Infrastructure for Navigating Systems

While the tools mentioned earlier in this section focus on encouraging participation, another cluster in our pipeline takes a different approach: using AI to make existing civic and social systems actually navigable for people who have been systematically locked out. These applications function as what we call "service gateways"—the invisible intake layer that determines whether someone can access resources they're entitled to.

Examples include AI-powered emergency response systems designed for deaf communities, tools that route multilingual callers to appropriate city services, and systems that pre-fill complex government forms using conversational interfaces. One team is building AI that helps formerly incarcerated individuals navigate reentry services across housing, employment, and legal support. Another is creating interfaces that allow people with cognitive disabilities to interact with social services without requiring institutional expertise.

What unites these tools is their recognition that bureaucratic complexity itself functions as a form of exclusion. For many communities, civic participation requires clearing the practical barriers that make engagement impossible from the beginning. These teams are turning AI into an accessibility layer by making the front door to those services wide enough for everyone to walk through.

This is Responsible AI at its most tangible: *systems that help people understand, navigate, and shape processes that were never designed with them in mind. If civic participation has historically been limited by information barriers, language access, and complexity, these tools have the potential to radically reduce those barriers.*

Opportunity: Invest in organizations that turn AI into a force multiplier for civic engagement, especially those serving historically disenfranchised communities. Support solutions that increase civic literacy and agency at the scale this moment requires.

Trend 3: Economic Justice & Wealth-Building Are Becoming AI Frontiers

Embedding AI into job pipelines, worker organizing, and equitable access to opportunity; responding to the reality that economic security shapes democratic participation.

Economic justice tools represented significant innovation in our pipeline this year, especially among teams building for immigrant, multilingual, and low-wage worker communities. This trend takes on new urgency in the wake of the 2024 election, where exit polls and post-election analysis consistently showed that economic concerns—grocery prices, job security, housing costs—were primary drivers of voting behavior across demographics.

The message from voters was clear: economic insecurity shapes everything, including democratic engagement. Movements cannot build sustained civic power when people are struggling to meet basic needs. The leaders in our pipeline understand this intuitively. What's particularly striking is that economic-focused tools appeared prominently in our pipeline despite our explicit focus on media ecosystems, civic engagement, and civic life. They positioned their work squarely within these parameters, a signal that the next generation of democracy builders refuses to separate economic power from civic power.

Their innovations span the full spectrum of economic justice:

- AI-powered job-matching platforms that mitigate bias
- Workplace justice tools built by and for immigrant communities
- Wage-theft and labor rights assistants
- Resume translation and upskilling tools for multilingual workers

What distinguishes these applications from traditional workforce development tech is their explicit focus on power-building and justice, not just employability.

Several teams described their tools as organizing infrastructure designed to help workers understand their rights, document violations, and take collective action.

Building Alternative Economic Infrastructure

The most boundary-pushing economic justice innovations in our pipeline go further than helping people access existing financial systems, using AI to build alternative infrastructure entirely. These tools reject traditional economic gatekeepers and instead create community-controlled pathways to stability and wealth-building.

Teams are developing platforms that turn local merchants into virtual ATMs for unbanked communities, eliminating reliance on predatory check-cashing services. Others are building systems that help individuals and community groups buy out predatory debt at institutional rates, reclaiming power from collections agencies. Several are creating AI-powered mutual aid networks that match hyperlocal resources to needs in real time, making cooperative economics viable at neighborhood scale.

This represents a critical insight that progressive movements have sometimes struggled to operationalize: *you cannot separate economic justice from democratic participation.* When communities lack economic security and agency, civic engagement remains constrained by material barriers that even the best civic tech cannot overcome. These tools recognize that building worker power and economic mobility is democracy work.

Opportunity: Support teams designing AI that strengthens workers' rights, expands opportunity, and shifts economic power toward those who have historically lacked it. In a political environment where economic anxiety drives voter behavior, invest in tools that address material needs alongside democratic engagement—not as separate strategies, but as inseparable components of power-building.

Trend 4: Government Accountability & Continuous Democracy

AI is moving beyond the election cycle to year-round oversight

While civic engagement tools (Trend 2) focus on helping people participate in democratic processes, this trend represents something distinct: using AI to shift power from institutions back to citizens through transparency, accountability, and continuous oversight.

Zohran Mamdani's campaign shocked the political establishment with its approach: authentic, bold, and addressing voters' concerns with tangible policy platforms he pitched directly to them on social media. He embodied Sarah Longwell from the Bulwark's approach of "everything, everywhere, all at once" by taking his case to the people on social media. It was a necessary strategy, given his outsider status but also a function of what's possible within today's media landscape. The result? Over two million New Yorkers turned out, with massive spikes among voters under 30. (Gothamist, 2025) What Mamdani demonstrated at the campaign level, the tools in our pipeline are building as infrastructure: platforms that make government transparent, accessible, and accountable on an ongoing basis—not just during the election cycle.

Several submissions push beyond election-cycle engagement toward year-round democracy tools, including:

- Real-time legislative scorecards comparing votes to public sentiment
- Civic dashboards that provide community oversight
- Participatory policymaking interfaces
- AI tools that route community needs directly into government workflows
- Translation systems that make public processes accessible across languages

This represents a fundamental reimagining of the citizen-government relationship. They make government more legible, more transparent, and more responsive, while drastically lowering the cost of civic involvement for everyday residents.

What makes this trend particularly significant is its focus on the redistribution of power. Traditional civic tech often helps people navigate existing systems; these tools help them monitor, question, and reshape them. In an era of declining trust in institutions, this infrastructure could be essential to rebuilding democratic legitimacy.

Opportunity: Invest in continuous democracy infrastructure that enables year-round government oversight and accountability. Support tools that make power visible and actionable for communities, not just during election cycles but as an ongoing practice of democratic life.

Nascent but Critical: Sectors that need Catalytic Investment

While the trends above represent areas of active innovation, two sectors remain underdeveloped, yet their importance to equity and democracy cannot be overstated.

An important caveat: Our theory of change shapes our pipeline. We explicitly seek organizations building civic and social power through technology, and this year, with priorities around media ecosystems, civic engagement, and civic life. The limited representation of disability tech and climate AI may reflect not the size of these fields overall, but rather how few teams currently frame their work as civic infrastructure or power-building. This presents both a gap and an opportunity: to help more innovators in these spaces see themselves as democracy builders, and to fund the teams already making that connection.

Accessibility & Disability Tech: An Increasingly Urgent, Emerging Opportunity

Last year, in our 2024 Responsible AI funding cycle, disability tech was one of the clearest gaps in the Responsible AI ecosystem. This year, four dedicated disability-focused AI solutions appeared in our pipeline—an increase from near-zero, but still just 1.9% of all submissions.

Innovations included:

- Emergency response tools for the deaf community
- Hiring platforms that embed accessibility by design
- AI-powered communication supports for people with speech or motor disabilities

What unites these innovations is their intentionality in treating accessibility and the disabled community as a foundation of justice and democracy. Notably, these teams explicitly framed their work as inseparable from equitable access to institutions and resources.

This is still a nascent field. There may be many more teams building disability tech through a responsible AI lens, but few frame it as democracy work. The gap is vast, but these five submissions signal that shift is beginning.

Opportunity: Catalyze disability-led AI development across more verticals, especially civic participation, education, and public services. Early investment here could establish an entirely new sector.

Climate & Environmental Justice AI Is Emerging and Often Community-Led

In this funding cycle, 21 organizations (~10% of the pipeline) selected "Climate" or "Environment" as one of their priority focus areas. Notably, many of these innovations were led by communities disproportionately impacted by climate change, including Indigenous and Tribal-led teams.

Examples included:

- Community-owned sensor networks measuring local air quality
- Predictive models helping cities plan for extreme weather events
- Indigenous data sovereignty tools designed to protect cultural knowledge
- Platforms linking climate monitoring to civic action and policy advocacy

Teams are building climate AI that is place-based, justice-centered, and community-governed. Most interestingly, they're framing environmental data as a tool for accountability and action.

Climate tech itself is a massive field, but relatively few teams explicitly connect their work to democracy or as challenging power structures. However, given the accelerating urgency of climate impacts and the importance of frontline community leadership, it represents a significant opportunity for catalytic capital to shape a field before it becomes dominated by extractive or top-down approaches.

Opportunity: Strengthen climate + civic tech + democracy collaborations, ensuring climate data informs community power-building. Invest early in community-led models before large-scale climate AI becomes purely technocratic. Fund teams who see climate justice as inseparable from democratic participation while helping more climate innovators understand their work as democracy infrastructure

Conclusion: AI as a Potential Civic Multiplier

Across nonprofits and startups, one vision is unmistakable: AI has the potential to multiply civic power if adequately resourced. AI alone won't deliver liberation or democracy, but it can multiply the capacity of movements and strengthen democratic systems

As demonstrated in the trends, builders in our pipeline are designing AI to:

- Lower barriers to civic participation
- Accelerate storytelling and narrative defense
- Expand access to legal, educational, and governmental systems
- Strengthen trust and transparency
- Reduce administrative burdens that slow movements down
- Personalize engagement in ways institutions have never managed
- Transform episodic democracy into continuous democracy

These are not hypotheticals. These applications exist in prototype and pilot stages. But critically, these breakthroughs are happening despite underinvestment, not because of adequate support.

The question is no longer whether AI can strengthen civic systems because these innovators are already proving it can. The question is whether we will resource them to scale before this opportunity comes to an end.

The Missing "Middle Layer": Ecosystem Support to Multiply Impact

Early-stage innovation is vibrant, but there is little scaffolding to help teams scale, coordinate, and connect with one another.

This year, Fast Forward's 2025 AI for Humanity Report found that 48% of nonprofits building AI solutions cite costs as the biggest challenge. But the problem isn't just initial funding, it's the ongoing cost of building and maintaining AI systems in a sector structurally misaligned with those costs.

Organizations across our pipeline told us they cannot afford the compute they need, cannot test models at scale, and struggle with unpredictable cloud expenses that can spike without warning. Philanthropic funding cycles rarely cover infrastructure as a line item, forcing nonprofits to treat essential technical capacity as a "nice to have" rather than a mission-critical investment.

Organizations also told us they lack shared datasets to train models, safe compute environments for testing, standardized evaluation frameworks to measure impact, access to community labs where they can pilot with affected communities, and legal guidance on procurement, contracting, and policy compliance. These aren't failures of individual organizations, but instead gaps in ecosystem support that would benefit everyone.

What makes this gap distinctly urgent is its multiplier effect. When individual founders lack access to shared resources and collective knowledge, innovation becomes isolated and inefficient. Brilliant solutions stay small not because they don't work, but because there's no connective tissue to help them reach the communities that need them, no coordinated advocacy pushing for procurement and adoption, and no shared foundation that reduces the cost and complexity of building responsibly.

Compare this to how other technology sectors developed. The open-source software movement built GitHub, shared repositories, and collaborative development standards that allowed individual projects to build on each other's work. The cloud computing industry created shared infrastructure and APIs enabled startups to launch without building their own data centers. Even the early internet relied on shared protocols, community-maintained standards bodies, and collective infrastructure investments that no single organization could have built alone. The Responsible AI field is still missing most of that scaffolding.

FROM PIPELINE INSIGHTS TO 2025 BETS

The pipeline made two things clear: (1) civic and public-interest AI is advancing quickly, and (2) the teams most likely to build accountable, community-rooted solutions are operating with the least runway.

NMV/NRV's role in this ecosystem is early conviction capital: moving first, backing builders before markets reward them, and helping them reach the scale and durability this moment demands. The four investments below reflect that strategy. Each addresses critical needs surfaced in this report—expanding legal access, strengthening institutional accountability, building civic learning infrastructure, and creating new pathways for participation.

Our Featured 2025 Responsible AI Investments

Investing in the builders shaping a more equitable, participatory, and trustworthy digital future.

We selected four organizations that exemplify what Responsible AI can look like when it is community-rooted, accountable, and built for real-world civic conditions. Together, these investments align with the most urgent needs surfaced in our pipeline: legal access, institutional accountability, civic learning and narrative resilience, and creative pathways into participation for a new generation.

Justicia Labs

Reimagining legal access, worker protections, and immigrant justice through co-designed, community-led technology.

Justicia Lab is a nonprofit innovation lab that has spent nearly 15 years building digital tools that expand legal access and immigrant justice, and is now poised to accelerate that impact with AI. As Pro Bono Net's immigrant justice tech incubator, they partner with immigrants, worker advocates, and legal service organizations to co-design platforms that simplify complex legal processes while protecting dignity, privacy, and safety.

Their proven tools: Citizenshipworks, immi, ImmigrationLawHelp.org, and Reclamo, have already helped hundreds of thousands of immigrants understand their options, complete applications, find low-cost legal help, and pursue stolen wage claims across all 50 states. New funding will enable Justicia Lab to layer responsible, community-led AI into this existing infrastructure, scaling reach, personalization, and language access while keeping power in the hands of immigrants and their advocates.

Scrutinize

Transforming opaque court systems into transparent, accountable public institutions.

Courts hold extraordinary power, yet their decisions often remain inaccessible to the public. Scrutinize is changing that. Their AI-powered platform collects and analyzes thousands of judicial decisions, transforming sealed-away legal activity into clear, actionable insights for voters, journalists, advocates, and policymakers.

Scrutinize is redefining what public oversight can look like in the age of AI. By surfacing judicial patterns from sentencing disparities to voting rights decisions, they strengthen democratic trust and make accountability visible. Their work offers a blueprint for how AI can support continuous democracy: year-round transparency that supports action. At a time when public trust in institutions is eroding, Scrutinize is building infrastructure that restores it.

Retro Report

Revitalizing civic education and combating misinformation through trusted journalism and adaptive learning technology.

Retro Report is an award-winning nonprofit newsroom committed to combating misinformation and inspiring critical thinking. With more than 70 million views, a monthly reach of 1.2 million students, and partnerships with 40,000 educators, they have become a leading force in revitalizing civics education nationwide.

Now, in partnership with Gravity, they are building an AI-powered platform that personalizes civics learning for all students, including neurodiverse learners. Piloted in five schools, this tool integrates translation, adaptive prompts, and feedback analytics to increase engagement, classroom participation, and civic literacy at scale.

Retro Report shows how responsible use of AI can strengthen public understanding, critical thinking, and trust in information, all of which are essential to a healthy democracy.

Breakthru

Gamifying civic participation and helping young people build long-term, trust-based relationships with civic institutions.

Breakthru is a data-driven engagement platform using gamification, rewards, and storytelling to connect organizations with young people, especially Gen Z and LGBTQIA+ communities. In partnership with Outvote, Breakthru gamified civic outreach and mobilized thousands of volunteers nationwide, proving that digital engagement can be joyful, affirming, and transformative.

Their platform reimagines how civic institutions engage young people on their own terms. By making participation accessible and rewarding for a new generation, Breakthru supports a new model of civic infrastructure — one rooted in relevance, representation, and relational trust.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: THE 2026 MIDTERMS AND BEYOND

In 2024, we saw the preview. In 2026, we'll see the test.

The 2024 election cycle offered early evidence of how AI is reshaping civic information environments. The 2026 midterms will be the first national stress test of whether public-interest AI has reached sufficient scale to shape civic life meaningfully or whether the information environment will be defined almost entirely by systems built without public accountability.

In this way, 2026 represents a structural inflection point rather than a discrete electoral moment.

Over the next two years, AI will move from experimentation to normalization across civic life. Tools that once felt novel will become embedded in how people search for information, encounter political content, access public services, and engage with institutions. At the same time, capital, compute, distribution, and technical standards are concentrating rapidly among a handful of mega-funds and Big Tech companies, reducing the range of actors with the capacity to shape how AI mediates civic participation.

This consolidation is happening precisely as philanthropic support for continuous, early-stage innovation has severely contracted. The contrast is stark. In 2016 and 2017, in the wake of that election, funders moved with urgency to resource emerging solutions because they recognized that democracy required investing in untested ideas and unproven founders. That momentum accelerated briefly in 2020, following the national reckoning after George Floyd's murder, when capital began flowing—however imperfectly—toward founders of color and women-led organizations building for equity and justice. But in recent years, that pendulum has swung sharply in the opposite direction. Funding to leaders of color

and women has retracted significantly, returning to (or even falling below) pre-2020 levels. Even organizations like New Media Ventures, which funded 17 new groups in 2017 and deployed its largest round of capital in 2021, now face constraints that limit how many startup ideas they can resource.

At the exact moment when bold, catalytic investment matters most, funders are retreating from risk. While Big Tech concentrates power and capital at unprecedented scale, the philanthropic dollars that could resource community-accountable alternatives have largely disappeared. The sector needs significantly more funders moving early-stage capital, not fewer.

As this report has shown, many encouraging civic and pro-democracy AI tools already exist. Without sustained catalytic investment and ecosystem support, these tools are unlikely to move beyond pilot deployment, while less accountable systems become embedded as default infrastructure. Without ecosystem-level support, even strong individual innovations will remain fragmented, unable to counter systemic threats.

The significance of 2026 extends beyond the midterm elections. The systems that are adopted, trusted, and scaled by 2026 will form the backbone of the 2028 election environment. Narrative infrastructure, civic learning tools, accountability platforms, and participation systems will not be built from scratch in 2028; they will be inherited from what exists, what has traction, and what has survived the resource constraints of the next two years.

In that sense, 2026 determines the defaults. If public-interest AI remains underfunded, 2028 will be shaped by opaque systems optimized for engagement and profitability rather than integrity, with limited avenues for accountability or community control.

For funders, this creates a small but consequential opening. Investment decisions made now will influence whether AI-enabled civic systems reinforce existing inequities or contribute to more democratic processes over the long term. The stakes are therefore structural rather than cyclical.

2026 will be the test of scale. 2028 will reflect the consequences.

LOOKING AHEAD: A CALL TO ACTION FOR FUNDERS AND INVESTORS

What founders need to build Responsible AI at scale

The findings in this report point to a clear conclusion: the constraint on Responsible AI is not a lack of ideas, talent, or ambition. It's the timing of capital.

Across the pipeline, teams are building solutions to civic problems, such as narrative fragmentation, declining trust in government, barriers to democratic participation, and restricted access to public information. What consistently holds these founders and leaders back is the absence of early, flexible capital that allows promising ideas to move beyond pilots.

For philanthropy and impact investors, this moment requires a shift in approach. If we look at historic trends, most capital will enter the AI ecosystem after norms, architectures, and power dynamics are already set. In civic AI, that lag has massive consequences. Material design choices are being made now, before markets recognize civic value and before accountability is embedded by default.

The window to shape this infrastructure is closing. The actions funders take in the next 1-5 years will determine whether the systems governing civic life in 2028 result in profit extraction or public benefit, for engagement at any cost or democratic integrity.

What This Requires in Practice

Redefine what counts as democracy work. Responsible AI must be recognized as core democracy infrastructure, not a tech niche. Expand the frame to include civic AI, community AI, educational and trust-building applications, and anti-harm architecture as essential investments. Narrative integrity and digital safety must be treated as foundational democratic needs, not communications-adjacent functions. As Inside Philanthropy and Borealis Philanthropy noted, while disinformation and damaging narratives are being produced "at scale," many funders still treat narrative work as secondary rather than as essential civic infrastructure. This must change. Fund the builders who protect communities, safeguard public discourse, and increase civic trust. Support teams transforming government accessibility and accountability. This shift in framing unlocks more players, more capital, and more urgency.

Fund technical capacity as a strategic imperative. Move seed capital, unrestricted grants, and catalytic funding toward those already building the systems that protect democracy and strengthen civic life. And don't stop at program funding. Provide compute credits, dedicated AI engineers or fellows, long-term support for core operations, and stable multi-year funds for experimentation and iteration. Philanthropic funding cycles that exclude infrastructure costs force nonprofits to treat essential technical capacity as optional, creating a structural barrier. Democracy requires durable technical systems, so fund them accordingly.

Invest in ecosystem infrastructure, not just individual organizations. The connective tissue that allows early-stage tools to coordinate, learn, and scale is largely missing. Support Responsible AI learning communities and networks, regional or identity-specific AI collaboratives, shared data commons and open-source platforms, community-driven evaluation models and safety frameworks, and legal and policy support systems. Funding the connections between organizations is as important as funding the organizations themselves. This kind of investment scales impact across the entire sector and helps brilliant individual innovations become a collective movement.

Move with urgency and accept appropriate risk. The philanthropic retreat from funding to leaders of color and women comes precisely when bold investment matters most. Funders moved decisively in 2016 and 2017 because they understood the stakes. Those stakes are higher now, and the window is narrower. Responsible AI needs funders willing to back risky ideas, invest before traction is visible, and resource founders who are accountable to communities rather than shareholders. The field is already producing viable solutions; the question is whether capital will arrive in time and at sufficient scale.

The following year will set the standards for the 2028 election cycle and beyond. Funders, philanthropists, and impact investors have a choice: resource the builders creating community-rooted AI systems now, or allow the future to be defined entirely by those with the most capital and the least accountability.

CONCLUSION

Closing note on possibility, responsibility, and the road ahead.

This report began with a simple but urgent premise: we are early enough in the AI wave to shape its impact, and we are accountable enough to do so with intention.

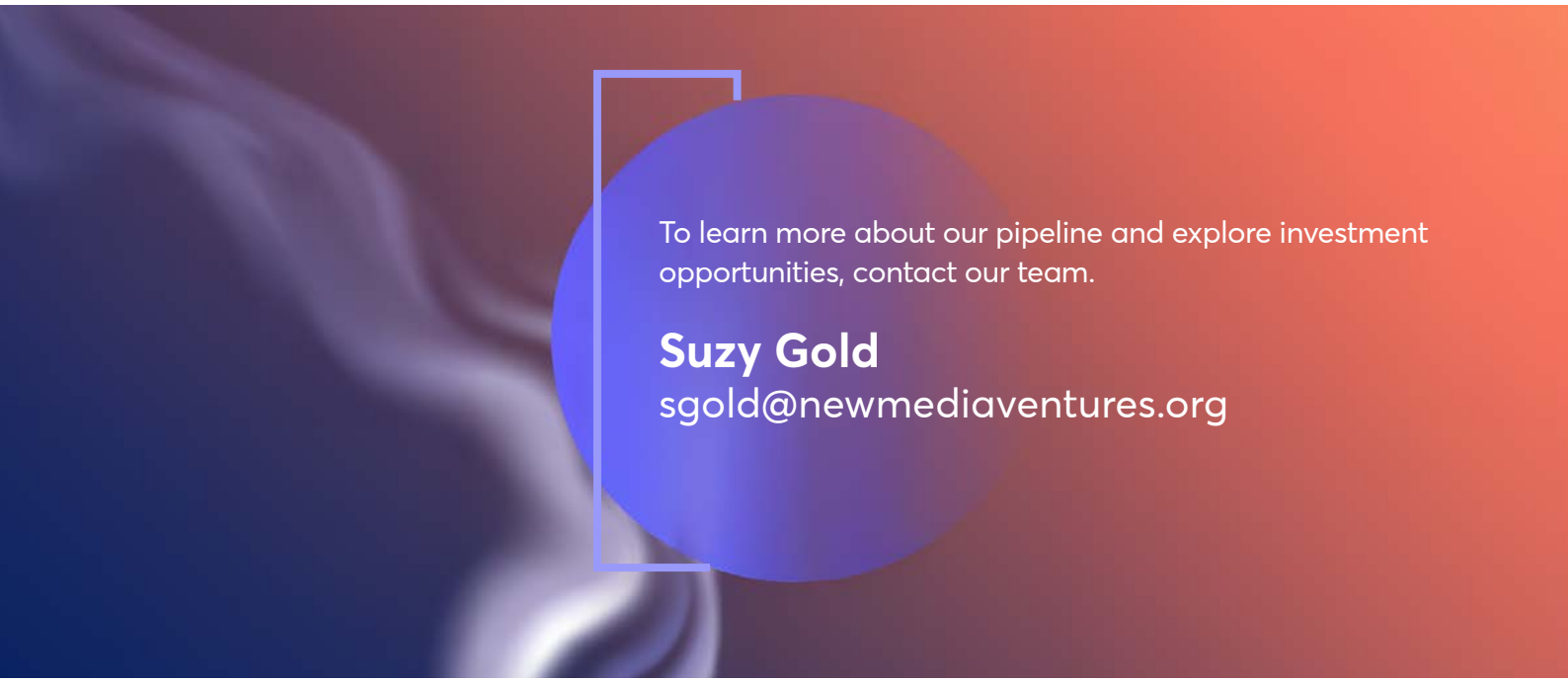
Across our 2025 innovation pipeline, we saw what Responsible AI can look like when leaders rooted in community, grounded in lived experience, and committed to equity and democracy build it. These founders are designing systems that expand access, strengthen accountability, and shift power toward those who have historically lacked it. They are proving that AI can function as civic infrastructure if – adequately backed.

We also saw how precarious this work remains. As Big Tech consolidates power and philanthropic capital retreats, the teams building the most pro-democracy systems are operating with the least support. The potential is undeniable. The barrier is funders' reluctance to move early, accept risk, and invest in founders accountable to communities rather than shareholders.

The future of AI is not predetermined. It will be shaped by what reaches scale, what becomes standard, and whose values are embedded early. These are decisions being made right now, in funding conversations happening this year and next.

The innovators highlighted in this report have already shown what's possible. Whether those possibilities become reality depends on whether this moment is met with the urgency, investment, and trust it requires.

There is still time to get this right but only if funders move now.



1 *For the purposes of this report, we use "Artificial Intelligence" and "AI" interchangeably to mean the technological and social landscape of AI. These are broad terms that encompass both the current, limited, technological innovations in Large Language Models, and also potential future innovations in agentic, autonomous AI. We acknowledge that "Artificial Intelligence" is often a misnomer for the technology being discussed, but it serves as a shorthand in this report for the technological movement overall.