



# REALIZING DEMOCRACY

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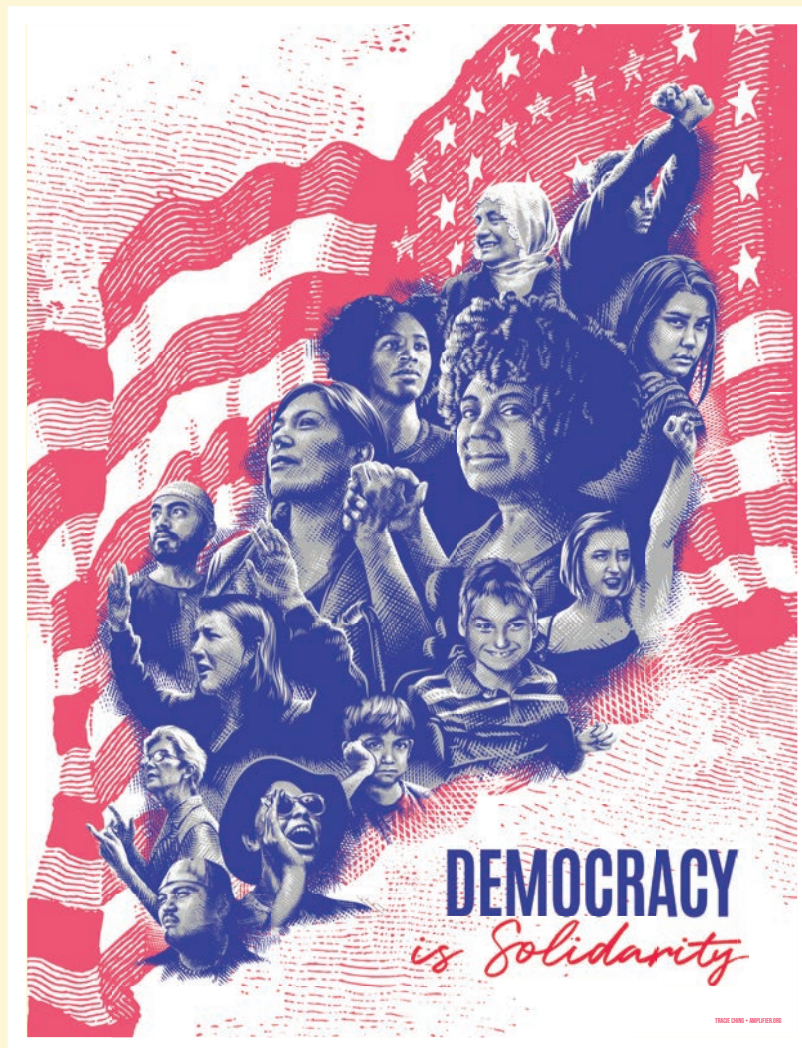
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The artwork for this series was commissioned by Amplifier, a design lab that builds art to amplify the voices of grassroots movements.

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This supplement to *SSIR* was funded by Ford Foundation as part of the Realizing Democracy project. The ideas reflect the views of the authors solely.

# Realizing Democracy

As long as it is more profitable to rig the rules than play by them, our better angels are unlikely to thrive.

BY K. SABEEL RAHMAN

**W**e are facing a moment of crisis and reinvention in American democracy. But the current crisis is not limited to disagreements about ethics, corruption, executive power, or the skewing of election results. The crisis of American democracy is a deeper, more chronic one arising from systemic racial and gender exclusion, entrenched economic inequality, and technological and ecological transformations that undermine dreams of collective action and inclusive shared self-governance. Democracy has always been an aspirational ideal—one that, in practice, American politics has consistently failed to realize.

In past times of crisis, American democracy has undergone radical and often constitutional transformation. The Civil War and the efforts to eradicate slavery led to Reconstruction and its transformational push for democracy, racial equity, and economic freedom. The inequities, insecurities, and new forms of corporate power arising from the Industrial Revolution provoked the rise of Progressive Era social movements and the institutional and constitutional reforms of the New Deal. The Civil Rights Movement sparked a “Second Reconstruction” of expanded rights and democratic institutions. Now, we are similarly in a unique moment of possibility, renewal, and reinvention.

The essays in this supplement to *Stanford Social Innovation Review* speak to an increasingly shared understanding among policymakers, civil society leaders, and scholars that democracy reform today must address these underlying systemic roots of exclusion and inequality. This means democracy-reform policies must be connected to parallel fights around rebuilding civil society, building an inclusive economy, and reinventing the practice of governance itself. We will explore why our democracy is in crisis today, what the emergent experiments are, how new approaches show promise in tackling the

roots of those problems, and how social change practitioners can advance a more transformative, radically inclusive vision of democracy that addresses structural problems and raises new possibilities.

## THE POLARIZATION OF POWER

The crisis of democracy is one of concentrated political and economic power where a small elite—from corporations to politically influential interest groups—have outsized influence on public policy and social and economic life. Reorienting democracy reform to address these power disparities represents a distinct and important shift for the social change ecosystem because it is a departure from more conventional accounts of why our democracy is failing.

There are two narratives that dominate conventional accounts of democratic failure: norms and polarization. The norms account emphasizes the importance of unwritten rules of political and civic conduct, particularly among political parties, candidates, and the presidency.

**By bringing together theoretical insights and on-the-ground case studies, this supplement offers a framework for realizing an inclusive multiracial democracy.**

When these norms—including the mutual toleration of dissent and respect for informal procedures of presidential consultation, disclosure, and decision making—are violated, the formal structures of institutions can quickly become shells, encasing a more authoritarian and explosive form of politics. In the polarization account, as the two parties become more ideologically and demographically polarized, the result is a decrease in compromise and increasing scorched earth, “hardball” politics that bring our political system to a halt.

Both narratives speak to a real set of concerns. But a narrow focus on norms or polarization suggests a narrow reform agenda in which the answer to the democratic crisis lies in cultivating greater civic virtue and cross-partisan collaboration, particularly among elected officials. However, these solutions do not address the deeper political and economic inequities that afflict democracy today; such deeper challenges cannot be solved by an appeal to virtue and good faith alone.

Furthermore, the focus on norms and polarization is misleading insofar as it implies a desire to return to the idyll of depolarized midcentury politics—a period that papered over other forms of undemocratic and inequalitarian problems. First, the period of bipartisan compromise from the 1950s to the 1970s was an artificial period of Democratic Party hegemony in the US Congress, leading to a Republican Party that was more oriented toward compromise than the contestation for power. Second, the period of depolarization was also one of implicit unity around deeply undemocratic presumptions, as both parties operated under the ambit of a New Deal order that had made its peace with the Jim Crow regime of racial inequity—and with the systematic exclusion of women and people of color from the 20th century social contract.

Indeed, the move to a more polarized party system has its origins in the realignment of parties around race and civil rights after 1964. These origins are not in a decay of civic virtue but in an increasingly sharp battle over those

most democratic of values: the defense of racial and economic inclusion. In the 1940s, movements for racial justice and worker rights gradually linked civil rights and economic liberalism in state-level political coalitions. By the 1960s, the exodus of Southern Democrats to the Republican Party in opposition to civil rights was well underway. These civil

rights opponents forged common cause with business interests that were keen to dismantle the New Deal regulatory state that undergirded midcentury economic inclusion.

Since then, as the country’s demographics have shifted, it has become increasingly profitable for large corporations, wealthy constituencies, and defenders of traditional racial and gender hierarchies to further rig the American democracy and economy to maintain their wealth and power. It is not a coincidence that conservative interest groups have deployed their control over state legislatures and the ideas infrastructure to advance policies like “right to work” and voter-suppression tactics, both of which share a common purpose of limiting the countervailing power of workers and communities of color. Indeed, as scholars have documented, the problem of polarization is asymmetric, as is the proliferation of hardball tactics to stretch constitutional rules of the game.

Put another way, the problems of polarization and norm-busting originate from the

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coalition of conservative interests that oppose economic inclusion and civil rights. At the same time, these interests were legitimized by a moral and political discourse that couched these policies in a language of traditional values and free-market conservatism. For many Americans, these moral values—of self-reliance, of neutrality, of traditional community norms—had real meaning and import, and helped provide wider support for these policies that had clear beneficiaries. But the engine of these political developments was rooted in these powerful, undemocratic interests.

This historical trajectory suggests that the aspirations for greater civility, collaboration, and democratic responsiveness actually require structural reforms that break this concentration of power and restore economic and political guardrails. What we need is a set of structural reforms that rebalance the terms of political contestation and economic participation.

#### REFORM FOR SHARED GOVERNANCE

There is a second challenge for democracy reform that stems not from the active hostility of opposing interest groups, but from the limitations of prevailing visions of social reform.

There has been no shortage of economic reforms aimed at expanding opportunity: investments in education, the promotion of credit and financial literacy, investments in job training programs, and more. But these interventions have been woefully inadequate, and economic inequality has been increasing for decades while social mobility has been declining. Similarly, “race-neutral” attempts to address racial discrimination do little to address the deep, cumulative inequities that shape everything from the physical structure of our cities to the gaps in worker protections. And “good government” reforms like greater transparency and expanded civic engagement have not been enough to rebalance inequities in political voice and power.

These conventional reform efforts fall short because they leave in place underlying structural inequities of power, ownership, and control. This is what is at stake in contemporary debates about “neoliberal” conceptions of markets and “color-blind” conceptions of racial inclusion. Without a different way of thinking about reform, it is difficult to actually dismantle these inequities.

A structural approach to democracy reform, by contrast, would focus on eliminating these systemic drivers of our democracy crisis and building the rules, associations, and institutions we need to ensure a more equitable balance of political power and a more inclusive economy

and society. This means targeting reforms to the underlying background rules of the game, rebalancing political and economic power, and dismantling systemic forms of racialized and gendered exclusion.

Consider, for example, the difference between trying to solve the problem of precarious and gig-ified work through job training programs versus changes to the rules of corporate governance, shareholder power, and the safety net, which would alter the very push for firms to cut labor costs in the first place. Or simply contrast increasing governmental transparency with institutionalized participation and representation for marginalized communities within zoning boards or federal agencies. Furthermore, this structural approach pushes us to think outside of the conventional silo of “democracy reform,” looking instead to the realities of how democracy reform and inclusive democracy requires also addressing

disparities of economic power, and disparities of power between communities seeking to organize and participate in civil society.

This focus on power and structural reform points to another critical shift in our social-change ecosystem as well, in the very ways in which we approach the organizing of civil society and governance itself. Too often grassroots communities are either ignored or engaged with as “end users” or “clients”—funded to execute specific initiatives and projects (such as voter registration or direct services), but not to build durable grassroots capacity and infrastructure that cuts across specific policy fights and issue campaigns.

Similarly, too often governing is understood as a technocratic, elite endeavor where experts identify solutions that are then implemented by policymakers—as opposed to a shared practice of *co-governing* where communities, policymakers, and experts work together to share political



ART BY ROMMY TORRICO

power. In short, the United States has a civic and political infrastructure that is not oriented towards the *building of the capacities for shared self-rule* among communities and among policymakers alike.

### THREE PATHS FORWARD

This supplement outlines three dimensions of understanding and approaching the work of democracy reform.

The first set of essays explores what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of civil society. Democracy requires a civil society infrastructure that can provide an effective counterweight to the great concentrations of wealth and power that continue to exert influence on our economic, social, cultural, and political lives. This also means that we need a civil society infrastructure that can both speak to and help bring together the different lived experiences of powerlessness and inequity into a shared conversation about community, moral values, and collective action that cuts across lines of race, gender, and class. We can create new forms of inclusive, multiracial, bottom-up civic power.

But achieving this kind of civic power requires an infrastructure that surpasses flash-in-the-pan moments of mobilization, protest, and voting, and instead channels participation through durable organizations that can deepen the efficacy and power of communities. We need advocacy strategies that can build durable grassroots power that outlasts any one election or campaign. This aspiration, in turn, raises important questions both for the practice of organizing and the civic engagement sphere—including how we resource and support grassroots groups.

Second, we examine what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of government. For example, the reliance of state legislators on external lobbyists for policy research has helped enable the outsize influence of business interests, while the limitations of our voting system and gerrymandered districts and the role of money politics reduce the accountability and responsiveness of elected officials to “we the people.”

At the same time, a reliance on technocratic top-down policymaking—even in the presence of “good governance” reforms that enhance transparency and governmental efficiency—can leave those communities most affected by public policy without real voice or accountability. In contrast, we explore how policymaking can deepen democracy and build power by, for example, expanding the scope for participatory and inclusive governance. These ideas point

to a democracy reform agenda that affects both constitutional structures and day-to-day bureaucracies of governance—and a shift in how policymakers themselves approach their work.

Third, we delve into what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of the economy. Historically, economic power has been understood as a threat to democracy. A democracy cannot survive when individual firms or actors have so much wealth and economic power that they can effectively control the fates of whole communities. Liberal democracy has always rested on the assumption that markets and governments work in mutually reinforcing ways. But just as economic freedom and political freedom go together, so too do economic oppression and political oppression go together. A democracy marked by deep inequities of wealth—operating simultaneously along class, race, and gender lines—is one in which political democracy is fundamentally limited and unstable, as economic exclusion and concentrated power easily spill over into political exclusion. As we imagine a deeply inclusive and power-balanced political democracy, we must also imagine a similarly radically transformed inclusive economy that balances power, opportunity, and wealth.

This means pushing beyond more conventional forms of economic reform to envision more structural ones. For example, we need to do more than just investing in financial literacy or job training as ways to better equip workers and consumers for surviving in today’s economy. We need to also look at how background rules of corporate governance, antitrust regulation, financial regulation, and the like have created an incentive structure that encourages extractive vulture capitalism that concentrates wealth rather than driving innovation and equity.

By bringing together theoretical insights and on-the-ground case studies, this supplement offers a conceptual framework for realizing an inclusive multiracial democracy. Following this path will require more innovation, creativity, and bold reform agendas, which in turn will generate further case studies and opportunities for learning. This expansive approach to realizing democracy is not a partisan affair. Indeed, the policies that have helped perpetuate inequality have often been advanced by Democrats and Republicans alike. And the kinds of structural reforms that these essays propose cut across familiar lines of party or constituency. We do not pretend to have a blueprint for realizing our democratic aspirations, but we hope that in setting a direction and a framework, we can point toward a path forward. ●

# Problems of Power

Fixing democracy demands the building and aligning of people’s motivation and authority to act.

BY HAHRIE HAN

**P**ower operates in every domain of human life: in families and communities; in social, civic, and economic organizations; and in political states and regimes. Reclaiming democracy means contending with power.

Yet reformers are often reluctant to confront problems of power. Revealing underlying power dynamics can be complex and uncomfortable. It is often tempting to try to solve problems by instead looking for policy fixes, new technologies, and informational solutions.

In fact, some problems can be solved through policy, technology, and information. For instance, when doctors wanted to reduce the rate of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) in the early 1990s, they launched a campaign to teach parents to put babies to sleep on their backs instead of on their stomachs. Once parents had the knowledge that babies who sleep on their backs are less likely to suffocate, they made the necessary change and the SIDS rates dramatically declined. When scientists used technology to create the polio vaccine, they were able to basically eradicate polio. In these examples, there is an alignment, broadly speaking, between the motivation to act and the authority to act. Because parents have both the motivation to protect their children and the authority to determine how they sleep, when they had the information they needed, they adjusted their behaviors.

Problems of power, however, are different because there is usually a misalignment between motivation and authority. Either those who have the motivation to make change lack the authority or capacity to act, or those who have the authority lack the motivation. Solving problems of power, then, requires bringing motivation and authority into alignment.

Recasting challenges of democracy as problems of power makes visible a distinct set of solutions. Considered in this frame, the embrace

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of antidemocratic authoritarian ideologies around the world is not just a rejection of particular candidates, parties, or policies. Instead, it is a reflection of the profound mismatch between the motivations or interests of the public and the actions of those with authority to act. If people are left feeling powerless, they might believe they have no choice but to blow up the system.

But giving up on democracy is not the only solution. Reformers can also seek to strengthen the capacity of people to exercise their voices in the democratic process—and instantiate the authority they have to hold economic and political leaders accountable within institutions. Realizing democracy must be about building the motivation, capacity, and authority that people of all kinds need to act as a source of countervailing power to institutions of the economy and the state. That is realizing the promise of democracy.

But this is only possible if reformers understand the link between the way people behave toward each other in their daily lives and how those daily experiences shapes people's willingness and ability to act within a democracy. Every day, at home, at work, in places of worship, and in community spaces, people have positive and negative experiences with power, the state, corporations, and the democratic process. From those experiences, people develop their own beliefs about how power should be developed and deployed, as well as how to construct their own definition of democracy. In the process, they develop the motivational, practical, and material capacities that inform their ability to act in public life.

However, reformers often seek structural change at the level of institutional or policy change without seeking to change the way people experience power in their everyday lives. As such, there is nowhere to build the capacity that people need to hold institutions and policies accountable. Research on the idea of "policy drift" shows that even when unique political coalitions are formed to pass policy, the policy often drifts from its original intent in implementation, shifting to reflect the underlying power dynamics in a policy domain or community. Reformers can pass campaign finance laws to get money out of politics and voter registration laws that make it easier to participate, but unless they also address underlying questions about the disproportionate influence of the wealthy and the lack of motivation and capacity among many to vote, the underlying problem remains unsolved.

Solving problems of power in today's democracy thus entails two crucial pieces. First, reformers must invest in the institutions of civil society,

the economy, and the state through which people develop the capacities of democratic life. People are not born with the capacity they need to engage in public life; it must be cultivated. People need places to go to learn the value of engaging with others, develop the skills they need to negotiate difference, and cultivate the emotional resilience necessary to take the interpersonal risks associated with collective action. In other words, people need places to learn how to exercise their own agency. People must also have the autonomy and material conditions necessary to exercise their right to choose to act. Many people experience democracy as nothing more than the opportunity to vote for uninspiring candidates, and they see the workplace as nothing more than a site of labor extraction. When these same people reach out to community organizations, often they are treated as nothing more than names on a list. Instead, the places where people work, interact, and socialize should be places where they can build the motivations and skills they need for public life. People must experience agency in their private lives before they can become a source of countervailing power in public life.

Second, reformers must strengthen organizations through which people can exercise their power to act as a countervailing force to corporations and the state. Civil society organizations are not just where people go to learn the skills and practices of democracy; they are also sites of transformation where people's actions turn into power and influence over sociopolitical outcomes. These organizations do not transform people's participation into power by acting merely as canvassing organizations or neutral repositories for people's actions. Instead, they have to strengthen and expand ties between people, build social bridges in places where they do not otherwise exist, generate people's willingness to commit to each other, and expand people's inclination to think differently about the things they might want or the futures they might imagine. Doing all of these things means that these organizations need the leadership, structure, and governance processes that are grounded in constituency to make them powerful.

The challenge of democracy in the 21st century comes from a society that has neglected the challenge of enabling people's power. Even in civil society, catchy slogans, nifty apps, and policy debates have replaced the hard work of building capacity for democratic life and strengthening organizations that translate that capacity into the ability to hold power accountable. The precarity of this historical moment, then, comes not only

from the enormity of the problems we face, but also from the mismatch between the scale of the challenge and the hope offered by the solutions on the table. TED Talks and social media alike promise solutions that fit in a 7-minute video or 280-character missive. Authoritarian campaigns promise presidential candidates and parties as saviors. But none of those will work. Instead, the most intractable social problems are problems that require power-oriented solutions. The question is whether we will do the hard work of investing in the institutions, processes, and practices of civil society, the economy, and governance to make it real. ●

## Reclaiming Civil Society

Organizers have a significant role in renewing democracy through the creation of an inclusive constituency.

BY MARSHALL GANZ & ART REYES III

**T**he promise of American democracy is at greater risk than at any time since the 1930s. Among the most important factors of America's democracy crisis is an acute erosion in the power of civil society to assert its influence on both government and private wealth.

Since the dawn of the republic, civil society has served as the principal source of the collective capacity to engage effectively in democratic politics. Creating this capacity required what Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, described as "knowledge of how to combine": leadership practices people learn to transform individual self-interests into common interests, build bonds of solidarity, and acquire skills of democratic self-governance, including deliberation, decision making, accountability, strategizing, and taking action.

Within the context of a democratic state, civil society is a vital source of autonomous power dependent neither on government nor on private wealth—but it is capable of influencing both. This requires turning individual resources into collective power, often through the mechanism

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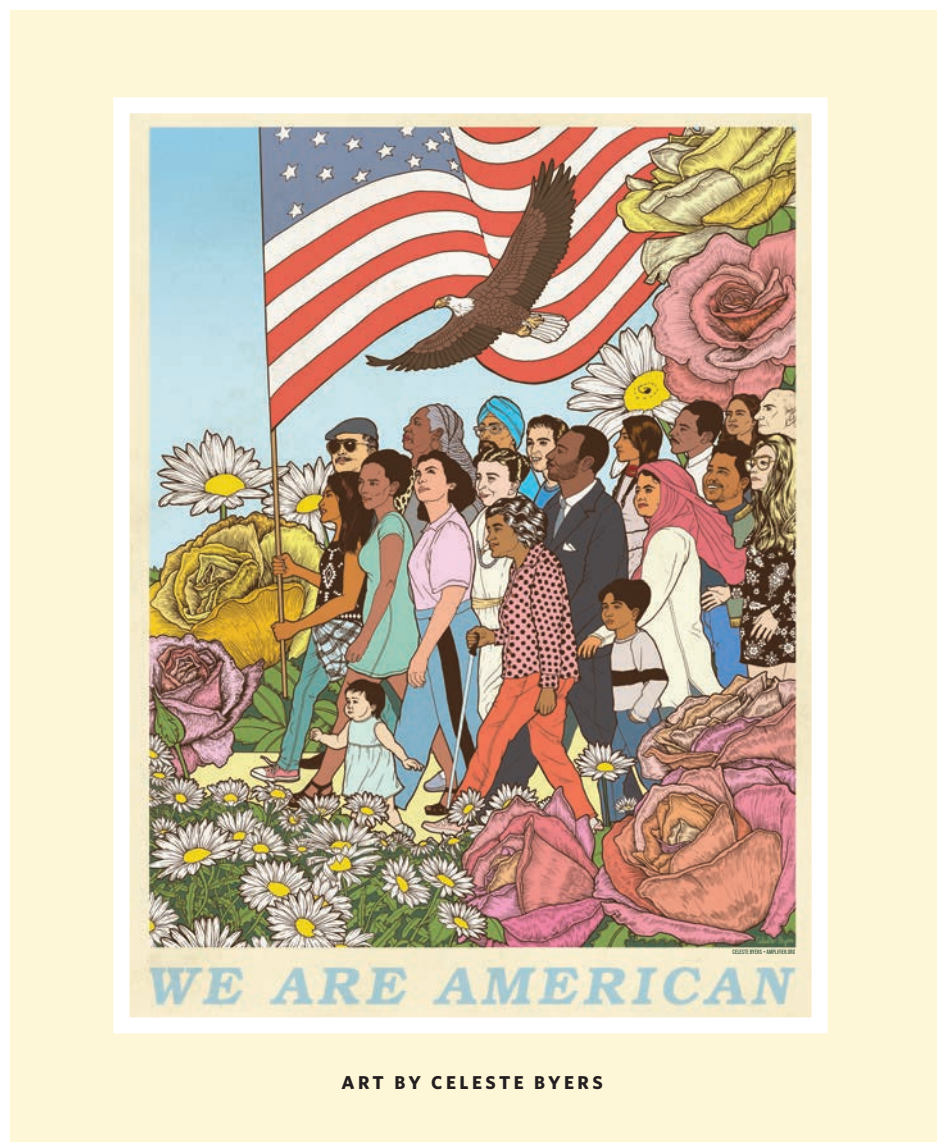
of government. Political scientist Sidney Verba once observed that liberal democracy is a gamble that equality of voice can balance inequality of resources. Inequality of power—especially political power—can cripple democratic practice even more than inequality of wealth. In the American context, racism has often been used by economic elites as a weapon of division to hold on to political power to realize economic gain. This also influenced the creation of antidemocratic electoral institutions—the electoral college, the US Senate, and noncompetitive “first by the post” legislative districts—that privilege rural over urban, acres of land over numbers of people, white people over everyone else, and the past over the future. This has increasingly yielded political representation that is sharply divergent from the trajectory of American demographic, geographic, and occupational growth and development.

Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson describes inequality of power as inequality of freedom, understood as agency: the emotional, cognitive, and material capacity to make the choices that shape our lives. Freedom depends upon how equally this agency is distributed in a community, organization, or nation. The promise of equal voice means little in the absence of a capacity to combine voices economically and politically to challenge the power of private wealth to capture government for its own ends.

Organizers develop leadership, build community with that leadership, and create power from the resources of that community. Organizing is not about providing services to grateful clients like a nonprofit or nongovernmental organization. Nor is it about marketing products to paying customers like a company. Organizers bring people together to form a constituency—a community that can stand together, learn together, decide together, act together, and win together. Given the rich diversity of 21st century America, it is both challenging and important to build a multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious, and gender equitable society. This kind of robust, pluralistic civil society requires effective organizing, which only thrives in a robust, pluralistic civil society.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER ASSAULT

The opportunity to participate in civic life—unions, churches, fraternal organizations, social movements, and other associations—equipped Americans of all walks of life with the power to govern themselves and to use that power to influence political and economic life. The atrophy of these civil goods and replacement with top-down models of service and advocacy—or market-like digital mobilization—has left Americans with a diminished capacity for



self-government, transforming them from active citizens into political customers or nonprofit clients. This has radically weakened civil society as a foundation for our democracy.

This is not to romanticize the past. For much of our history, civic associations were segregated by race, gender, status, and class. At times, these divisions were transcended, often to the benefit of their constituencies, such as in the early Populist movement, or at particular moments in the labor movement. Because this could threaten holders of private wealth, including banks, industrialists, and large landowners, they found ways to make strategic use of institutionalized and consequential division, especially based on race.

Since the 1970s, convergent developments on the left and the right have eroded our civic infrastructure to the point that it is hard to imagine we can regenerate American democracy without a parallel and radically inclusive civic regeneration.

The erosion of civic infrastructure unfolded in counterpoint with an evisceration of government itself. In spite of the challenges of globalization, financialization, and digitalization, efforts to manage them in the public interest were scuttled by political choices that enabled the privileged to grow more privileged. The Republican Party transformed itself by embracing a racist, misogynistic, xenophobic reaction to the civil rights movements combined with a strident neoliberal reaction to economic challenges of the 1970s. And this assault on democratic government, the tax revenue it needed to work, and the regulatory power to the government’s responsibilities to its citizens—including, but not limited to health, education, and criminal justice—have only further enriched the wealthy.

Progressives have struggled with how to respond effectively to this challenge, their efforts complicated by the capacious racial, gender,

class, and generational diversity inherent in their vision. Generational conflict over the Vietnam War also contributed to a breach with organized labor, an essential component of any broad-based democratic coalition. This made it harder to defend attacks on unions, and resulted in the erosion of worker protections and the upending of the economy. Conflicts over school integration accelerated the decline of white support for public schools and stimulated privatization. The election of Ronald Reagan, who launched his campaign from Philadelphia, Mississippi—where three civil rights workers were murdered in 1964—reasserted the link of racial animus with corporate interest, which laid the groundwork for racist policies like mass incarceration. The reluctant opening of narrow public and private power hierarchies to tokenized women and people of color masked the fact that the structural reforms were needed to lift everyone.

Civil society has thus been under assault from two different directions at once: closing the schools of democracy and the economic and political colonization of civil society itself.

Public life was once anchored in great free schools of democracy in which citizens could build collective civic capacity with each other. Unfortunately, these schools have been turned into a political marketplace. Customers shop their individual preferences and exit at will if dissatisfied. Since the 1970s, electoral professionals have created a new political industry using profitable new tools that transformed the electoral means of production from a civic process into a market process. They subdivide and redefine constituencies as individual types with whom mail—and later, digital—technology enabled direct, if very shallow, communication. Relational commitment has been replaced by momentary transactions. Instead of bringing people together, they drive them apart with polling, television, direct mail, computer targeting, and digital media. Finally, the 1976 Supreme Court ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo* that “money is speech” created an unregulated political marketplace in which an almost infinite demand for money is driven by professionals who make more money when they spend more. This \$12.6 billion election industry has turned politics into marketing, campaigns into advertising, candidates into brands, voters into data points, and debate into messaging.

Meanwhile, autonomous self-governing membership associations are being replaced by nonprofit firms that offer services to clients (or beneficiaries) but are in reality accountable only to the high-net-worth individuals and foundations who fund them and who are accountable

to no one. They are the “private few” whose exponential accumulation of wealth reduces the capacity of a “public many,” especially the most marginalized, to support their own organizations. This helps to explain why so many of the “pop-up” groups that emerged in reaction to US President Donald Trump’s election fell victim to what feminist sociologist Jo Freeman called the “tyranny of structurelessness.” Although they reclaimed some autonomy in the midterm elections, they continue to struggle with meeting, deliberating, decision making, and mutual accountability. With a few exceptions, they also continue to struggle with how to govern themselves to scale at regional, state, and national levels. They had not acquired what Tocqueville

## **Building multiracial, gender-inclusive power requires rooting organizing in a shared identity and linked fate built via deep listening both within and across communities.**

called “habits of the heart,” micro practices that can turn motivation into the macro power needed to create real change.

Organizing in the 21st century requires dealing with both challenges. Most organizing depends more on funders than on constituencies. Funders who want to make good on their investments measure impact as a return on investment. In electoral terms, dollars per vote. In advocacy terms, dollars per call, per visit, or per signature. Elite funders attempt to purchase short-term policy or electoral outcomes while at the same time undermining the capacity of ordinary people to organize, mobilize, and deploy their own power to make democracy work.

### **REGENERATING CIVIL SOCIETY**

Despite the significant erosion of civil society, the current moment offers opportunities for robust revival. The motivation has been stimulated by almost daily violations of moral, economic, and political justice, most evident in the mobilizations by women, young people, and people of color. The challenge is one of turning motivation into the power we need to build a new democracy that is inclusive, equitable, and accountable.

Community organizers who have accepted the challenge of regenerating Tocqueville’s schools of democracy struggle to make democracy work. For it is skilled organizing that can turn

community into constituency by relationship-building, developing public narrative, creative strategizing, wise structuring, and effective action. In fact, the seeds needed to regenerate a robust and inclusive civil society can be found in the work of disciplined, creative, and committed organizers across America.

For example, We the People-Michigan (WTPMI) is building a multiracial, gender-inclusive, and working-class infrastructure. Organizers bring together white, indigenous, black, and brown communities with a common purpose. They facilitate community organizing workshops across the state to recruit and develop leadership. Grassroots leaders in turn learned to conduct campaigns tailored to their own communities.

In one case, WTPMI worked with an undocumented immigrant-led organization, Movimiento Cosecha Kalamazoo, to launch a campaign that stopped the county sheriff from detaining individuals by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) beyond their release date. They also won local legislation that requires the city and county of

Kalamazoo to sever financial ties with ICE. They developed the shared leadership who organize their communities to create the power they needed to hold their local officials accountable.

We the People-Keweenaw, which represents the rural Keweenaw Peninsula in the northernmost part of Michigan, trained a cohort of 30 local leaders and launched an independent voter organizing project. They ultimately elected a progressive woman as a county commissioner in a conservative rural county. These campaigns were driven by volunteer leadership who created the intentional space to build relationships. They told stories not only to communicate, but to articulate core values and deepen trust. They built a clear organizational structure with roles and responsibilities, and they strategized to develop leadership even as they mobilized effective action.

Building multiracial, gender-inclusive power requires rooting organizing in a deep sense of shared identity and linked fate. This can be built via deep listening both within and across the communities themselves—not by messaging experts and pollsters. In 2018, WTPMI partnered with organizations across the state, like Detroit Action, 482Forward, and Jobs with Justice, and together they organized six months of listening sessions in black and brown neighborhoods, in rural white communities, among undocumented people, with formerly incarcerated people, and



with working-class white and black people living on opposite sides of one of the starkest racial-divide lines in the country: Detroit metro's Eight Mile Road. People worked together to lead their own fights based on a shared analysis and a sense of linked fate.

### REGENERATING WE THE PEOPLE

Campaigns like these can be building blocks of national strategy. But swing states like Michigan often find themselves targeted by national funders seeking short-term mobilization in pursuit of issue or electoral outcomes. Strategy and tactics are not locally generated but are decided upon by funders, pollsters, and consultants. Under these conditions, organizers and community leaders can find themselves playing the role of brokers or vendors who mediate between capital and community. This dynamic plays out each election cycle, and it undermines the agency and power of the very communities it purports to support.

Committed organizers and communities often find themselves in similar quandaries. Real change only happens when they can anchor their financial, temporal, and human resources within their constituencies, growing organizational sinews that are firm and flexible enough to link local, state, and national strategy, and organizations powerful enough to reassert their agency.

Powerful social movements have depended on their constituencies more than on funders. Public sector support can be a real option as it was with the "community action projects" of the Great Society era or the Action program led by organizers Sam Brown and John Lewis in the Carter administration. The Reagan administration, however, ended these programs under the rubric of "defunding the left." In response, many community organizations turned to full-time canvassing to fill the gap. But this turned out to be another form of mobilizing—not organizing—that turned young people who wanted to learn organizing into a renewable resource. Churches and unions have been key sources of support. They generate resources by creating moral value within their constituencies, not by producing profit in the marketplace. The reality is that solving the democracy problem requires the restoration of significant autonomy to an organized civil society.

Finding our way forward must begin with organizing. We can bring together experienced organizers who are committed to empowering their constituencies at a whole new level. But we will never find our way to regenerating our democracy if we don't begin now. ●

# People Power

Powerful organization, rather than efficient mobilization, is the way to re-center people in our political life.

BY DORAN SCHRANTZ, MICHELLE OYAKAWA & LIZ MCKENNA

**T**he continued decline of Americans' active participation in many aspects of public life is perceived to be common knowledge. Voting rates are one measure of citizen engagement, but there are many others, including campaign donations, volunteer hours, protest participation, online activism, and the density of community groups in a given location. Curiously, many of these numbers

**The assumption that scale is synonymous with impact should be interrogated—these mobilizations produce scale absent of impact, participation without commitment.**

have gone up even as the overall health of our democracy—the policies and institutions at work for the people—has decayed.

In this context, many organizations have designed solutions grounded in a belief in the power of mass mobilization in which they equate an increase in civic activity with a stronger democracy. This logic, however, wrongly assumes "scale" and "depth" to be mutually exclusive. "Scale" means the quantitative breadth covered by an activity—numbers of conversations with likely voters, numbers of names on a list, or numbers of "likes" or "engagements" on social media. The assumption is that the greater the scale, the higher the probability of impact—here, the higher probability of electoral victories or policies passed—in the political or policy arena.

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Furthermore, to achieve scaled programs that can produce these prized numbers, paid civic engagement programs are incentivized to prioritize efficiency in order to maximize the number of transactions over depth of relationships—either with an individual or with a community.

The underlying assumption that scale is synonymous with impact should be interrogated—these mobilization outfits produce scale absent of impact, participation without commitment, and breadth without the depth needed to sustain it. Given these challenges and the reality of a political system unresponsive to the demands of the larger public, programs of action should combine scale with impact.

### FAITH DELEGATE STORY

In 2018, the community-based organizing organization Faith in Minnesota (FiMN) eschewed the standard, scaled political programs and instead devised a two-year campaign and strategy around the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) state endorsing convention for governor.

FiMN first elected and then organized a bloc of 207 delegates and alternates, comprising 11 percent of the total number of delegates and the largest bloc at the convention. These "faith delegates" came into the party process more committed to one another, their organization, and to their shared agenda than to any particular candidate or to the

party. The delegates remained uncommitted until they voted as a bloc and agreed to only support the candidate that the collective had agreed to together.

FiMN wanted more than politicians' attention. The organization's strategy had four intentions: to define the public agenda for the 2018 governor's race; to ensure that the campaign narrative of the DFL candidate for governor directly addressed Islamophobia, racism, and white nationalism; to prepare the ground for an election that would build a mandate for a "bold governing agenda"; and to ensure that the constituency of FiMN would be in a co-governing relationship with the new governor's administration. With more than 200 organized delegates with voting power at the convention, FiMN had enough disciplined people power to determine the outcome of the endorsing convention—and, more broadly, to shape the agenda and narrative of the candidates for governor in 2018.

In the past, many large organizations, such as labor unions and interest groups, similarly

sought to affect the outcome of the DFL state endorsing convention. Yet when it came time to endorse, they had always failed to hold their bloc together. Several candidate's campaigns and their allies attempted to "split the bloc" of FiMN by appealing to individual delegates, whose personal preferences for each of the three major candidates did indeed vary. Although historical precedent suggested there was no way the bloc would hold, the FiMN delegation was successful.

How did FiMN arrive at this moment of collective discipline? They first invited 500 members of its base to be core organizers of the path to the state convention. Those volunteers were invited to organize others to attend precinct caucuses, to build their own individual "campaign" to become a state delegate, and to remain uncommitted to any campaign or candidate until it was clear how FiMN would act as a collective. These volunteer leaders organized close to 2,000 people to attend house meetings six months in advance of the state convention. Then, FiMN's 500 volunteer organizers trained and transported 3,500 people to attend precinct caucuses, equipped 1,500 FiMN supporters to attend Senate District conventions, and ultimately made it possible for FiMN to secure 11 percent of the total DFL endorsing convention.

The secret of the success of this program was the investment in the 500 volunteer organizers. Most of these grassroots volunteers had never been to precinct caucuses and certainly had never attended a party endorsing convention. These 500 leaders are connected to community-based, member institutions of FiMN such as childcare centers, barbershops, congregations, and mosques. Of the total delegation to the state convention, close to half were people of color, a third were from rural and small towns, a quarter were Muslim, more than two-thirds had never before participated in a party process, and many had never even voted in an election. In other words, communities of people who are constantly politically redlined out of the democratic process were part of the most influential

voting bloc at the Minnesota DFL (Democratic) nominating convention.

### TAKEAWAYS FOR COLLECTIVE POWER

While FiMN was leading this strategy, a team of researchers prospectively tracked the campaign to document, analyze, and learn from how the organization built and wielded people power.

## Leadership advocating for racial and economic justice in rural and small-town regions makes the difference in whether or not a policy even gets a hearing at the state capitol.

Three takeaways crystalized from the interviews, participant and direct observation, and 10 years of leadership and membership data accumulated by FiMN.

**Sustained "super" leadership** | Prior to the campaign, FiMN's 500 faith delegates had participated in a median of five activities. Many of the delegates were thus a part of FiMN's

preexisting base of highly engaged volunteer leaders, while others were brought in through the campaign. Since 2010, the base has grown to now include more than 13,000 Minnesotans.

FiMN spends most of the organization's time and energy on leadership development, rather than on episodic mobilizations built around urgent calls (or clicks) to action. What

this means in practice is that a significant amount of organizational resources are invested in developing "super leaders" (reflected in the steadily growing high-engagement line in Figure 1). They are the reason FiMN—a relatively small community organization with a team of 12 paid organizers—was able to reach tens of thousands of

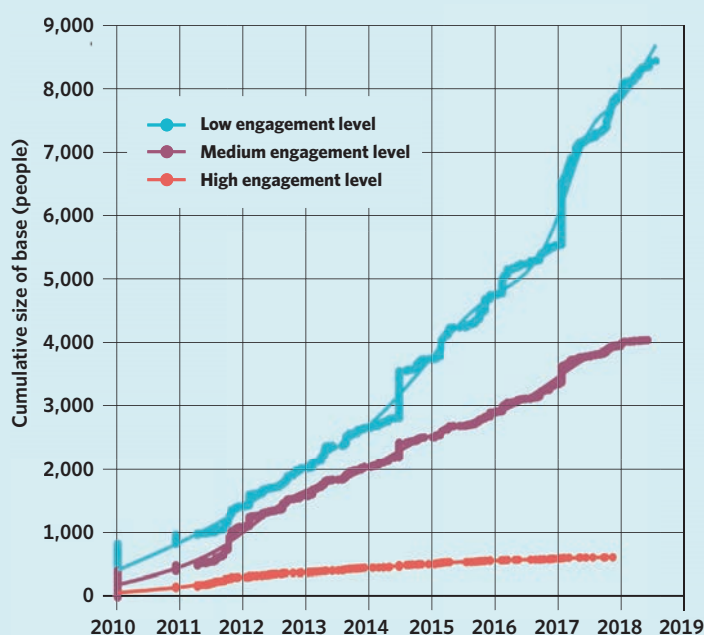
caucus-goers and voters in 2018. Although smaller in number than FiMN's lower-engagement membership, which tend to show the steepest increase in participation around election cycles, the super leaders are the core of the organization.

**Wielding people power: a combination of organizing and mobilizing** | The researchers

found that it was not only the number of events that FiMN members participated in that was associated with the organization's leadership capacities and political power, but also the quality and sequence of their participation. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, which conceives of most civic-engagement work as voter-facing mobilization work, the findings show that the majority of FiMN's faith delegates become committed—to each other and to the collective—in the organizational context of meetings, trainings, and strategy sessions. At these trainings and meetings, leaders of different races, religions, and social classes related to one another, practiced democratic and public skills, discovered their own capacity to lead, and learned how to engage other people in shared strategic action. FiMN was able to draw on the civic and relational capital it had built over the years to deploy when it counted.

## The Power of Super Leaders

The chart below depicts Faith in Minnesota's base growth over time. Since 2010, FiMN's steady growth (scale) has been attributed to an investment in super leaders (depth).



**A multiracial, multiregional, and multifaith base** | The mass mobilization approach would prescribe a strategy whereby FiMN built its programs around “high-propensity voters”—a euphemism often used to refer to middle-class white voters living in places like Minnesota’s Twin Cities. After conducting a power analysis, however, FiMN chose to instead build a state-wide base of leadership that was multiracial, multiregional, multifaith, with multiple centers of power that could be networked into shared strategy and called to take collective action, as happened during the 2018 election.

It took five years to build multiple centers of leadership within key regional centers. FiMN now has a presence in small towns, mosques, barbershops, and congregations across the state. The organization now has chapters and teams of leadership growing in the small towns and regional centers that represent a critical constituency for governing power in Minnesota. Leadership advocating for racial and economic justice in rural and small-town regions makes the difference in whether or not a policy even gets a hearing at the state capitol. FiMN’s faith delegate campaign sheds light on how civic organizations can build power by investing in a well-trained base of people who are committed to one another.

But questions remain: What, for example, are the tradeoffs of funneling large amounts of money to civic organizations during election years, while starving them of the funds required to do sustained, relational, multiyear organizing on off-years? And what are the organizational conditions—the structures, routines, decision making, and data practices—that enable members to both have a voice in overall strategy and still act as a disciplined collective? How do we distribute not just capacity but strategic capacity?

Although it is more challenging to document or “measure” depth than scale, FiMN’s faith delegate campaign transformed the level of influence of the organization in the public arena. This new power is shared by the whole base and has caused both an expansion in the capacity to influence policy and systems, but also an expansion in membership and engagement. Those who are volunteer leaders in FiMN have a visceral experience of politics working for them—not just working for a candidate or a particular issue or a cause. This creates a virtuous cycle where more people become involved because those who have had a direct experience of public power invite others to join in the journey. ●

# Revitalizing People-Based Government

Revived civic infrastructure at the state level is necessary to realize the promise of democracy.

**BY ALEXANDER HERTEL-FERNANDEZ & REP. CARLOS GUILLERMO SMITH**

**C**loser in proximity to citizens than the federal government, states are thought to embody the virtues of decentralization and self-government. Americans, so the argument goes, are better positioned to check the activities of their local and state politicians than those elected to the more distant US Congress. Therefore, state and local policy should be more responsive to public preferences than federal policy. Beyond political representation, having 50 state governors and legislatures competing for public support ought to spur more innovation and experimentation; they should be what Louis Brandeis has memorably dubbed America’s “laboratories of democracy.” But do these rosy assessments of the states hold up under closer scrutiny?

## STILL DEMOCRACY’S LABORATORIES?

Recent political events suggest that American federalism is playing exactly the democracy-bolstering role envisioned by the Constitution’s framers. States, for instance, are checking the power of the federal government, challenging the Trump administration on its decisions related to immigration restrictions and implementation of the decennial census. States are also innovating in areas where the federal government has failed to act: on the minimum wage, climate change, and protections for the LGBTQ community.

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But at the same time many states are curbing their democratic processes, like taking steps to restrict political participation—either by making it harder for individuals to vote or weakening grassroots associations that organize citizens. Furthermore, in a growing number of states the geographic distribution of voters, combined with partisan redistricting, means that even large majorities of the popular vote do not necessarily translate into legislative majorities, entrenching minority legislative control. And even when large majorities of voters bypass legislatures to approve ballot measures—like expanded health insurance for poor adults, campaign finance reforms, and broadened voting rights—some state governments have rolled back such measures or even ignored them altogether.

For example, after Floridians voted overwhelmingly to re-enfranchise over a million former felons, the Republican-controlled legislature voted to create punitive barriers to ex-felon voting. In recognizing the success of progressive strategies to bypass the conservative legislature and make appeals directly to voters, conservatives in control of the Florida state legislature subsequently approved a bill with onerous new requirements for future ballot initiatives.

Another antidemocratic strategy involves state preemption. Once a tool used to curb conflicts between local government and states by bringing local governments in line with state policy, it is now aggressively used by conservatives to strip local authority from city governments and force an antiregulatory, corporate agenda that disproportionately harms marginalized communities. Examples in Florida from the 2019 legislative session include enactment of legislation that preempts local laws concerning sanctuary cities, wireless internet siting, and inclusionary housing. And an even more egregious use of punitive preemption is an older Florida law that puts local officials at risk of removal from office or fines of up to \$5,000 for adopting local laws to prevent gun violence.

In light of these abuses of state legislative power, it should come as no surprise that recent research documents only a weak electoral connection between state legislators and their voters: state legislators who cast roll call votes out of step with their constituents are unlikely to be punished in subsequent elections. In fact, this kind of legislative accountability is lower in the states than in Congress.

Three interrelated features of the states currently undermine their potential as sites for robust democracy. Some are longstanding characteristics of the states, while others are more



recent developments. Together, they form a toxic brew that is increasingly exploited by concentrated economic interests—wealthy individuals and private-sector businesses—in the pursuit of policies opposed by majorities of Americans that ultimately exacerbate political and economic inequalities. These features include:

■ **Low visibility of state politics.** In the *Federalist Papers*, Constitutional framers Alexander Hamilton and James Madison assumed that state governments would loom larger in the minds of Americans than would the more distant federal government. In practice, the reverse has been true: Americans know much more about the federal government than their own states. According to statistics from the American National Election Study and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, about 4 of 10 Americans say that they cannot name the political party that controls their state senate or house—twice as many as for the party in control of the US Senate or House. Without this basic civic knowledge, it seems unlikely that citizens can adequately hold their state politicians accountable. While scholars have bemoaned the lack of media coverage of state politics compared to national politics for decades, the problem has worsened in recent decades with the demise of state-house reporting. The Pew Research Center, for instance, found that the number of full-time reporters covering state capitols fell by 35 percent from 2003 to 2014.

■ **Nationalization of state politics.** At the core of the “laboratories of democracy” vision of the states is that governors and legislatures will compete with one another to develop new and effective policies that appeal to their constituents. This assumes, however, that voters will recognize and reward innovative policies. But voters often struggle to even recognize the party in control of government, let alone have knowledge about their legislative records. There is also strong evidence that state politics has nationalized in ways that undermine state government accountability as voters increasingly cast ballots for state races that reflect their national political views, rather than state issues. Nationalization thus dampens electoral accountability for state politicians. It also means that policy innovation and emulation is likely to happen only among states on the same side of the partisan divide—Democrats copy only from fellow Democrats; Republicans from fellow Republicans.

■ **Understaffed and under-resourced legislatures.** For state governments to adequately respond to the needs of their constituents and generate new policy, elected officials must have baseline legislative resources. Yet in many states, legislating remains a part-time job with minimal staff help. In more than a dozen states, for instance, legislative salaries average less than \$20,000. Low salaries necessitate legislators hold another job to make ends meet; the consequence is that elected officials often report only spending about half their time legislating. Faced with these constraints, many state legislators rely heavily on outside interest groups for bill ideas, research, and political advice. Unfortunately, these groups are often a front for wealthy or corporate interests. The ironic consequence is that part-time, sparsely staffed citizen legislatures wind up relying most heavily on disconnected, outside groups for legislation.

In states where these three factors are combined, legislative agendas tend to be most closely aligned with the goals of the wealthy few and out of touch with the interests of the general public.

#### STATE CAPTURE

Together, these three features have been increasingly exploited by well-resourced political actors representing narrow interests: wealthy donors, private-sector businesses, and conservative advocacy groups seeking to shift state policy and politics. As recently documented in (article coauthor) Alex Hertel-Fernandez’s *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation*, organizations like Americans for Prosperity (AFP; a grassroots federated advocacy group at the heart of the Koch brothers’ political network), State Policy Network (SPN; a coalition of state-level conservative think tanks), and American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC; provides model legislation and support to conservative state legislators) have since the 1970s successfully constructed an infrastructure capable of electing friendly lawmakers, flipping legislative chambers, and promoting a coordinated legislative agenda across the states.

These groups succeed by providing state legislators with the exact resources—including model bills, research support, political strategy, and mobilizing power—that legislators often lack. Regardless of partisanship and ideology, legislators in states with fewer staff, shorter sessions,

and lower salaries are more likely to copy and paste bill ideas from corporate-backed conservative networks. The right-leaning networks have also taken advantage of the nationalization of state politics by promoting a common legislative agenda in states under full conservative control. And these networks have taken advantage of the weak electoral accountability faced by state legislators to promote policies that are otherwise quite unpopular with voters.

Despite opposition by most Americans, these right-wing networks have rolled back environmental standards and efforts to address climate change, restricted access to the ballot box, cut labor standards and union rights, slashed tax revenue and public spending, curbed reproductive rights, and stymied efforts to regulate access to firearms. The net effect of these policies has been to exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities, with especially pernicious consequences for already-disadvantaged segments of the population, especially people of color.

Beyond their direct social and economic consequences, many of these conservative networks’ policies are intended not only to materially benefit particular economic constituencies—wealthy individuals and large businesses—but more generally to tilt the political playing field to disempower ordinary citizens from expressing their political preferences. Conservative networks do not shy away from thinking about policy as a means of power-building.

#### RECLAIMING STATE DEMOCRACY

There are three takeaways from federalism’s failings for the creation of a people-centered government:

■ **Build civil society organizations.** A strategy for reclaiming state government for the people will require investments in organizations that connect citizens with their elected officials to provide ordinary Americans with the information and resources they need to hold politicians accountable in all states. Reversing these trends will likely involve creative and diverse solutions in each state. One example is Capitol News, a project in Illinois that helps local outlets cover state legislative debates and which focuses especially closely on “news deserts.” Capitol News does this by creating content that other local editors and publishers can use in online and offline publications.

■ **Focus civil society organizations on the right institutions and levers of government.** To say that civic organizations are

important is not to imply that we simply need more organizations. Instead, advocates for people-focused democracy need to ensure that they can count on organizations that complement one another at the right scales and levels of government. Conservative activists recognize the power, for instance, of having networks that can mobilize legislators (like ALEC) or engage citizens (like AFP) across the typical issue silos in the conservative movement to help coordinate longer-term governing agendas. These right-wing organizations also identified and targeted key leverage points in political institutions, like mobilizing citizens to contact state officials or providing model bill ideas to understaffed legislators.

It would also be a mistake for progressives to simply blindly copy the organizations that have worked on the right. Instead, they would be wise to think about figuring out the needs of interested legislators and their constituents. That is what the State Innovation Exchange (SiX) is doing for state legislators across the country. SiX is a progressive resource center that supports legislators with policy research and a cross-state network, spreads awareness of state policies and legislators, and connects elected officials directly with their constituents.

- **Use policy to build, retain, and support grassroots political power.** Reviving grassroots democracy in the states will require approaching policymaking not just to solve economic and social problems, but also to build political power. As conservative activists discovered, policy can be a tool for cementing alliances between otherwise diverse interests, building grassroots constituencies, bolstering organizations that can help politicians win elected office, and undermining opponents by cutting off resources or making it harder for them to participate in politics. Advocates of people-centered democracy would be wise to think in similar terms about opportunities to use policy to boost the resources that ordinary citizens have to participate in politics, to reduce the political clout of concentrated wealth, and to construct durable coalitions of allies.

Some of these power-building proposals are relatively straightforward, like broadening access to the ballot box or making it easier for workers to organize on the job in labor organizations,

including unions. But political officials should also think about whether they can create stronger incentives for political participation throughout the policymaking process—like giving community groups resources to organize members and to create inclusive internal processes around decision making. Similarly, a power-building lens would prioritize efforts to divide opponents—for instance, peeling off supportive businesses—early on in the policymaking process.

As political observer Grant McConnell noted decades ago, the “advantages of disorganized politics” in the states—above all, weak mediating organizations like parties and civic associations—“accrue quite impartially to whatever groups, interests, or individuals are [already] powerful in any way.” To break this cycle and restore political power to ordinary citizens over entrenched minorities is a tall order—but necessary if American federalism is to live up to its democratic ideals. ●

## Representing the People

Community organizations nationwide are helping to reimagine the role of law enforcement by pushing prosecutors to embrace a new criminal justice reform agenda and collaborating with attorneys general to protect working people.

BY ARISHA HATCH  
& TERRI GERSTEIN

**T**he past several years has brought a re-examination of the role of law enforcement in confronting some of the key challenges facing our democracy. This new vision of the prosecutor’s role includes dismantling elements of the criminal justice system that perpetuate racial and economic inequities, affirmatively wielding power in response to community concerns, and addressing economic exploitation, power disparities, and abuses of authority.

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### CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

There are close to 2,400 elected prosecutors in the United States. These prosecutors are mostly white, mostly male, and approximately 85 percent of them run for their positions completely unopposed. Along with their staff, they make daily discretionary decisions large and small that impact the lives of predominantly black, brown, and working-class communities. “Tough on crime” rhetoric and policies—perpetuated by Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs, the 1994 Crime Bill, law enforcement television shows like *COPS* and *Law & Order*, and the nightly local news—became the metric for law enforcement at the expense of safe, healthy, thriving, and empowered communities. Police unions were the critical endorsements that district attorney (DA) candidates needed to vie for, and, once elected, the groups deemed most worthy of consideration. And although in court filings, prosecutors’ offices technically represented “The People,” many interests of working-class communities became the least of their concerns.

In 2015, Color Of Change, the nation’s largest online racial justice organization, gathered about 10 community organizations from across the country to reimagine the role of prosecutors. Many community-level organizations had been working in silos for decades to push back against a growing incarceration economy and cultural attitudes that had destroyed their communities. At that event, the organizations crafted six demands of prosecutors: to be transparent; to hold police accountable for overreaches and unnecessary violence; to treat kids like kids; to exercise their discretion and decline to prosecute petty and poverty-related offenses (like marijuana possession); to avoid the use of bail as leverage to incarcerate poor people before trial; and to avoid partisan prosecutions connected to immigration, the death penalty, and abortion.

At the national level, the power of the elected DA was finally emerging as a viable intervention in the effort to reform discriminatory policing and mass incarceration—a tangible victory for activists in the Black Lives Matter movement. Many organizations had independently reached the same conclusion: at minimum, more DA races—often a launching point for higher political office and yet ignored by both major political parties—should be contested.

The work is already underway. In early 2017, a former prosecutor and public defender, Whitney Tymas, created Justice & Public Safety PAC, a network of state political action committees that recruits, vets, and conducts

research and polling on candidates and even supports them with television ads. Later that year, Miriam Krinsky's organization Fair and Just Prosecution began to provide a support network and training for progressive elected prosecutors navigating the reinvention of their offices. In 2018, Color Of Change began compiling a first-of-its-kind database of elected prosecutors, including centralized contact information and a means to track prosecutors' commitment to the six demands. Color Of Change PAC began reaching out to black voters nationwide with contested prosecutor races on the ballot, knocking on doors, sending text messages, and hosting community town halls to alert people that they had a choice in their upcoming election. In late 2018, grassroots organizer Becky Bond and racial justice activist Shaun King launched Real Justice PAC to support progressive prosecutor candidates in their campaign efforts.

These efforts have shown results. Progressive prosecutors have been elected in 13 cities across America. Even Bob McCulloch, the 26-year incumbent prosecutor in St. Louis county, Missouri, who refused to indict the officer who killed Mike Brown, has been replaced. Local and national community organizations joined together to host local prosecutor debates and to launch "First 100 Days" campaigns connected to the six demands, resulting in key policy and practice changes. For example, in Cook County, Illinois, progressive prosecutor Kim Foxx has reduced incarceration rates by 20 percent; violent crime also has decreased locally. She has also become a model for prosecutor transparency after an unprecedented data release summarizing case-level data dating back to roughly 2010. After Larry Krasner took office in Philadelphia in 2018, he ordered prosecutors in his office to stop charging people for possession of marijuana and related drug paraphernalia. He also sued 10 big pharmaceutical companies for their role in the opioid crisis. More than 40 prosecutors have signed a letter pledging not to support a wave of new state antichoice laws.

But progress hasn't come without setbacks and backlash. In 2017, more than 300 grassroots activists took to Florida's state capitol to protect newly elected state attorney Aramis Ayala, who then-governor Charlie Crist threatened to remove from office after media reports of her opposition to the death penalty. (She later announced that she wouldn't run for reelection in 2020.) In August, FOX News host Tucker Carlson, aided by US Attorney William McSwain, dedicated a segment to attacking

Krasner. The same month at a fraternal order of police national conference, US Attorney General William Barr, coauthor of a 1992 Department of Justice report called "The Case for More Incarceration," criticized "the emergence ... of district attorneys that style themselves as 'social justice' reformers."

Nonetheless, community groups and national political organizations continue to reimagine the prosecutor's office as one responsive to the people. In the four years since hosting its first meeting on the subject, Color Of Change's annual convenings have quadrupled in size and now serve as a congregating space for community groups seeking local reform. Prosecutors are now a focal point for community organizations in close to 20 states and growing.

### REIMAGINING LAW ENFORCEMENT

Along with criminal justice reform, a progressive law enforcement office would use its powers to fight abuses in which the powerful prey on people from working-class or marginalized communities. This would include taking on abusive landlords, predatory lenders, corrupt elected officials, hate crime perpetrators, and corporate and government leaders whose decisions have devastating consequences for ordinary people, such as poisoned water. And it would involve doing so in collaboration with affected communities and grassroots organizations.

The growing momentum among state and local law enforcement to enforce workers' rights provides a concrete example of what progressive law enforcement might look like. This work of state attorneys general (AGs) and local prosecutors (DAs) emerges in a context of political and economic developments over the last several decades that have left workers in a terribly precarious situation. These trends include low union density, subcontracting and other "fissuring" of the workplace, forced arbitration, technological changes, employer concentration and resulting monopsony, and most recently, the Trump administration's antiworker agenda and immigration enforcement policies. They have resulted in high rates of violations of workplace laws among many employers, and degradation of working conditions. Historically, AGs and DAs have left such matters to federal and state labor departments and the private bar, but in the past several years, a growing number have begun to include protection of workers as a part of their office's mission.

State attorneys general have been at the forefront of this trend. Five years ago, only three AG offices had dedicated workers' rights units

(California, Massachusetts, and New York); now, six others have joined them (the District of Columbia, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania).

These new units were created because AGs made the decision to prioritize worker issues, and units have been developed with community input. The inception of the workers' rights unit in the Washington, DC, AG's office provides an example of the synergistic interplay between community and government in giving rise to these developments. Worker organizations, including unions and DC Jobs With Justice, pressed for a 2016 law granting the AG's office jurisdiction to handle wage cases; the following year, DC Attorney General Karl Racine created a workers' rights unit in the office.


The creation of a dedicated unit ensures that an office will be involved in workers' rights in a continuous, proactive, strategic, and in-depth manner—not as a one-time event. It embeds workers' rights lawyering within the agency; specialized attorneys develop ongoing relationships with advocacy groups, unions, and worker centers. Establishment of a dedicated unit institutionalizes the work, increasing the likelihood that it will continue beyond a particular administration.

AG offices with dedicated workers' rights units have brought cases to combat wage theft, payroll fraud, unfair noncompete agreements, and wrongful treatment of workers as independent contractors instead of employees (misclassification). These cases have involved small employers in the underground economy and national corporations such as Domino's Pizza, WeWork, Jimmy John's, and the national electrical contractor Power Design, among others. Some AGs also have played a leading role in the legislative process. In 2019, Minnesota AG Keith Ellison was instrumental in achieving stronger antiwage theft laws, and New York AG Letitia James proposed legislation to strengthen antiretaliation protections for immigrant workers.

The focus on workers' rights in key offices has helped create opportunities for a greater number of state AGs to take on labor issues through participation in multistate efforts, such as opposing proposed federal antiworker regulations, filing a lawsuit against the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and investigating no-poach agreements used by fast food franchisors.

Workers' rights enforcement requires extensive collaboration and partnership with civil society—worker centers, unions, advocacy



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relationships between government and community organizations can also be institutionalized. Two programs within the Massachusetts AG's Office offer possible answers. The Fair Labor Division has regularly scheduled meetings with a labor advisory council (comprised of labor leaders) and also with the Fair Wage Campaign (comprised of immigrant worker centers and legal services offices). A different program in the office awards grants to local consumer advocacy groups for outreach and education to consumers; a similar program could be created for worker advocacy groups.

In addition to AGs, a number of DAs are taking on employer committed crimes against workers, bringing prosecutions for crimes including wage theft (under, for example, larceny, theft of services, or explicit wage theft statutes), payroll fraud, human trafficking, workplace sexual assault, and predictable and preventable workplace fatalities. The Center for Progressive Reform has created a first-of-its-kind "Crimes Against Workers" database that lists many state criminal prosecutions of employers.

This work requires law enforcement officials to think differently. Treating wage theft as "theft" requires understanding economic inequities and the imbalance of power between workers and employers. Some DAs are stepping into the breach that leaves so many workers vulnerable to exploitation, using their authority to be responsive to a new set of problems stemming from power imbalances. They are using their power to redress harms caused to people who have less power in society. In so doing, prosecutors can inherently shift the balance, demonstrating to employers and workers alike that people who speak up can bring about change, that there are limits to employers' power, and that bosses cannot act with total impunity.

As with AG offices, DA involvement in these cases requires collaboration and relationships with community and worker organizations. It also requires new methods of learning about cases and trends. While a typical criminal prosecution might originate with the police, employer crime cases often come through referrals from community-based and worker organizations.

In this work, and in other cases confronting corporate abuse, DAs and AGs are taking a broader view of what it means to represent "the people." More than simply standing up in court, it means deep engagement and partnership with a wide range of organizations in civil society, and in fact, with the people themselves. ●

groups—because these groups are based in communities, know conditions on the ground, and have the trust of workers who may be unlikely to reach out to the government. The AG offices that have taken on this work have developed relationships with community and worker organizations within their jurisdiction. These collaborations allow groups to have ongoing conversations with and access to the AG offices, including referring cases, raising issues of concern, and helping offices develop cases by, for example, identifying potential targets and bringing witnesses to an office. In addition, many AG offices have chosen attorneys with past experience as workers' rights lawyers or in advocacy organizations. These lawyers bring their perspective, relationships, and experience with them.

This collaboration is not without guardrails. AG offices conduct their enforcement work independently, and must be unbiased in

their investigations. Being unbiased, however, is distinct from being neutral. As California Labor Secretary Julie Su wrote, "We are not neutral about what fundamental protections must exist in the workplace. We are on the side of the law." But there are important limits to community input. For example, AG offices independently make the decisions about what cases to bring, what evidence is needed, how to build a case, whether to handle a case civilly or criminally, and what parties to sue or charge. These limitations are appropriate; the AG brings cases on behalf of the people. Nonetheless, AG offices take worker organizations seriously as partners; constituencies do not drive the agenda, but they have meaningful impact and a real voice.

As workers' rights enforcement becomes institutionalized within some AG offices, one next-level question is whether the collaborative

# Democratize the Economy

Democratizing economic power can break the cycle of self-reinforcing inequality and remake American democracy.

BY FELICIA WONG, K. SABEEL RAHMAN & DORIAN WARREN

**T**he US democracy crisis is not only a matter of voting; it is also a deeply economic crisis. The sharp and growing imbalance between the wealthy and the rest of Americans dramatically alters how public policy itself is formulated—and what those policies ultimately look like. American politicians and policymakers are consistently more responsive to the preferences of the wealthy, which drives public policies that further concentrate wealth and power for the most resourced constituencies and corporations. The result is a vicious cycle where economic inequality breeds political inequality, which in turn exacerbates economic inequality. That cycle can only be broken if we understand how these inequalities work and feed each other.

## DEEP ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

We are mired in a rampant and historic crisis of economic inequality, as more and more wealth is concentrated at the top. We can measure this in a number of different ways. Take wages: since the 1980s, American productivity (measured as how much workers produce per hour) has increased, but wages have been stagnant. Or economic security: even though we have seen headline indicators of aggregate economic strength, for many Americans, economic conditions remain precarious and far from secure (which is defined as having an income that is enough to meet basic expenses, including modest asset accumulation). Or consider business concentration: corporations have become larger,

more powerful, and more profitable within their market sectors, which has led to higher prices, fewer new and innovative businesses, lower wages, and less worker autonomy.

These various measures of economic inequality suggest that the fundamental problem is not the lack of worker skills, which would imply that more and better education is the central answer. Nor is the problem simply a matter of annual income, though income inequality is a serious issue. No, the core economic problem is one of power, with wealth and influence concentrated at the top of American society and business.

This is the economic crux of our democracy crisis: Very few people and firms have outsized political influence. This leads to inequality-increasing policies that favor the wealthy. In other words, democracy in the United States closely approaches what political scientist Jeffrey A. Winters calls “civil oligarchy”—rule by the wealthy few wherein the role of the state is to enforce property claims on behalf of the ruling class, and where the greatest threat to that class is taxation or some other form of income redistribution. And, of course, American civil oligarchy is heavily skewed by patterns of durable racial and gender inequalities.

Realizing a truly inclusive democracy requires tackling this parallel problem of economic power. Economic policy has to be understood as involving more than the conventional list of kitchen table issues like wages, benefits, household debt, and safety net policies (Social Security, Medicare, unemployment). Economic policy also goes beyond technical, macroeconomic concerns of GDP growth and stability (meaning lack of financial crises). While these issues are important, they must be understood as part of a larger conversation about the governance of our economy. What matters is not just the quantity and distribution of resources and opportunities; it also matters a great deal who has the power to shape our economic life and how they exercise that power.

## THREE CHALLENGES

We call for democratizing economic power. This means policymakers today must tackle three key challenges. First, the extreme concentration of economic control in the hands of a small number of corporate and financial firms must be dismantled and rebalanced. Second, the countervailing power of both government and civil society, particularly workers, must be expanded to ensure that economic decisions reflect the full range of interests and constituencies. Third, communities—especially those most

affected—must have more direct influence in the business of economic decision making, whether it is within the firm, on the local zoning board, or in the administration of national policymaking at the federal level. The principles of belonging and inclusion must be at the forefront of this effort, especially in a multiracial America.

Our hypothesis is that rebalancing power in this way will drive more growth and lessen the cumulative economic inequalities (of income, wealth, security, and access) of the last 40 years. Policymakers must do so in ways that actually make the US economy more democratic, which means creating more inclusive decision making at various levels of policy.

## THE NEOLIBERAL STRANGLEHOLD

For much of the late 20th century, economic policymaking and public political discourse operated from the presumption that markets would bring more growth, better distribution, and less systematic racial and gender exclusion. It's the result of explicit narrative strategies to make these ideas seem like common sense, and it started as an intellectual idea, developed mostly by Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and others who formed the backbone of the Mont Pelerin Society and, ultimately, the Chicago School of Economics.

But as neoliberalism evolved, it became more than just a preference for market systems to solve both economic and social problems. It also involved a deep distrust of, and deliberate resistance to, the public in two ways. First was opposition to the government providing public goods. Neoliberals, at minimum, portrayed government as prone to capture, inefficiency, and failure. Maximally, neoliberals equated “the state” with Soviet-style communist central planning. All of this led to the “smaller government, less regulation, lower taxes” mantra that became central to American politics by the 1980s, even as conservatives embarked on a project not to liberate markets, but to use the state to encase them.

The second opposition to the idea of the public involved an attempt to resist the popular exercise of voice and decision making exemplified in the civil rights and women's rights movements of the 1960s and '70s. Economic experts, businessmen, and politicians especially objected to the state when its power was used to expand civil rights regimes. As historian N.B.D. Connolly reminds us, neoliberalism of the '70s and '80s was “a story about backlash and the panic-selling of state functions—literal ‘white flight’ from liberalism.”

Neoliberalism, then, may have started primarily as economics, but it became politics: the use

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of power to make sure that some had access and others didn't. By the 1980s, American democracy was structured around a political alliance of free-market thinkers, big-business interests hostile to the New Deal settlement, social conservatives, antifeminists, and anticivil rights groups. Not everyone with these views signed on to everything that their political bedfellows believed, but this configuration of interests proved to be a powerful foundation for the conservative dominance of politics and public policy for the last half century.

The neoliberal ideological undercurrent has helped drive, legitimize, and validate a policy agenda that has not delivered the equitable growth it once promised. Instead, it has further concentrated economic wealth and power and further weakened democratic reforms. "Right to work" laws in the states have proliferated, as have a slew of judicial opinions that have severely undermined the ability of workers to organize. The antigovernment and antitax revolution of the Reagan era led to a persisting proliferation of "balanced budget" requirements at the state and local levels, and sporadic spasms of concern about the federal deficit. The result was less economic security and less voice for working people, and proposals to cut public provision of health care or other income supports were validated by the argument that people need to "stand on their own two feet." But such fiscal prudence is curiously absent in the face of conservative dismantling of the government's tax base.

We also see these presumptions in shaping liberal policy vision. Consider how even with unified control of the federal government, the Obama administration stopped short of the kind of economic stimulus that was needed to arrest the slide into the Great Recession of 2008. Or the predilection of many liberal reformers to prefer incremental improvements in the safety net through hidden transfers like tax credits rather than through more politically sustainable and inequality-reducing commitments to public provision and public options.

The result of these conservative policy ideas—and these self-limited liberal reforms—has been to facilitate the economic inequality and control that now shapes the vast majority of Americans' lives.

## DE-RIGGING THE ECONOMY

By contrast, building a more inclusive economy and democracy requires policies that address three critical front lines:

- **Create a new policy agenda to shift economic power.** This new agenda must

dismantle the concentration of corporate power and its control over the economy itself. We should look at new antitrust efforts, from stronger enforcement to new standards of effective competition (taking into account harms to workers, suppliers, and market competition generally, rather than focusing on price alone).

- **Build up the countervailing power of government and civil society.** The decline of labor unions is a key reason why wages have stayed stagnant and the electoral returns have shifted in favor of conservatives. Furthermore, the dismantling of government regulatory regimes has further concentrated wealth and power in the corporate sector. The gutting of federal budgets and tax receipts has similarly fueled the hollowing out of the modern safety net. An inclusive economy requires robust government and robust worker organizing to push for and defend these policies in the political arena.
- **Craft institutional designs that democratize economic governance more broadly.** These must lie outside the episodic moments of elections and focus on the day-to-day of economic policymaking. To better distribute wealth and opportunity requires the workers and communities most affected to have a voice in the governance of these economic institutions. New forms of worker voice and more democratic forms of governing corporations, shifting firms from acting like quasi-authoritarian "private governments" to workplaces that treat stakeholders equitably, can help ensure an equitable flow of value.

The crises of democracy and inequality are deeply interrelated. Concentration of political power helps ensure that public policies continue to serve the interests of the wealthy and well-resourced. Meanwhile, concentration of economic power helps megacorporations and wealthy interests dominate, while also ensuring a concentration of political influence that blunts policies that could undermine this vicious cycle. Realizing democracy requires democratizing economic power across the areas of corporate power, public power, and inclusive economic governance.

But while the crisis of economic and political inequality is severe, we are also in a moment of remarkable innovation and mobilization in public policy and civil society. These developments, if pursued to reality, can help break the vicious cycle of self-reinforcing inequality and replace it with a more virtuous cycle of self-reinforcing democracy. ●

# Workplace Power

Linking worker movements to social ones can free democracy from corporate clutches.

BY ANDREA DEHLENDORF  
& MICHELLE MILLER

**H**ealthy, inclusive democracies and economies need working people to thrive. In the United States, 80 percent of working people currently live paycheck to paycheck. Full-time jobs with benefits are increasingly a relic of the past. Private equity firms currently own businesses employing close to six million people, and the largest US employers, like Walmart and Amazon, amass private power that rivals that of the state and destabilizes democracy. Corporate and financial sector giants use profits generated in part by those who work to enrich already-wealthy executives and shareholders instead of investing back to people who work. To rebalance our democracy and economy, a real system of economic checks and balances must exist to ensure that working people have power in their workplaces.

In response to catastrophic levels of inequality, economic instability, and imbalance of power, working people are taking direct, collective action. They are challenging their employers to raise pay, increase stability, and address structural racial and gender inequality in the workplace. These decentralized movements increasingly espouse critiques of concentrated power and use workplace organizing to contest it. They link immediate kitchen table economic issues to how corporate and financial sectors are governed and operate, extending to their broader social, economic, and environmental impacts. These emerging movements are winning concrete gains by challenging the corporate and financial sectors' power that is causing inequality.

These campaigns are led from the bottom up with support from emergent labor and community groups building new organization models as well as traditional unions. They are aided by social and digital media platforms that have cre-

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ated a context where millions of working people can share their experiences, build a shared consciousness of their experiences at work, and create distributed online and on-the-ground actions. Some of these movements are organic; others receive focused organizational support from groups like United for Respect (UFR) and Coworker, Jobs with Justice, Bargaining for the Common Good, and traditional unions.

Using social networks and internal communications networks within corporations themselves, people are claiming virtual space to link dynamically with on-the-ground power building and collective action directly aimed at corporate decision makers. Organizing outside of the traditional union infrastructure has opened up new approaches for institutionalizing the power of working people. As these efforts begin to take shape, there has also been the strengthening of organizational infrastructure to support organizing led by working people. Broad public support for people taking workplace action is growing.

At Coworker and UFR, we have experienced an unprecedented increase in requests for support and training on how to campaign, talk to coworkers, and understand workplace rights and labor laws.

#### IMPACT IN A NEW MOMENT

Coworker is a digital-first organization that supports worker-led organizing using a campaign platform, social technology tools, and media strategy in combination with direct leadership support. We support organizing where there's otherwise no infrastructure or entry point to the labor movement. We have nurtured the growth of digital collectives of people working at places like Starbucks, Uber, REI, and Publix, assisting people working in the mostly low-wage service sector.

Over the last couple of years, we have heard from tech workers across the industry who are concerned about the human rights impacts of the technology they are building. They are concerned about the potential for tech to enable surveillance, harassment, and detainment of marginalized populations. At Google, employees have organized around a host of issues, including diversity and equity policies, opposing the use of artificial intelligence for drone surveillance, and equal treatment of contract workers. This employee-led organizing has demonstrated possibility to people working across the tech sector, setting off a wave of organizing in other companies and significantly altering the way stories about them are reported. The tech press has become more critical, more probing of the power of

these companies. In companies like Google, which exercise social, political, and economic power that rivals that of the state, employees are one of the few checks on the continued expansion of that power. This work is part of a wave of pro-democracy organizing that demands shared governance over institutions with outsized power and influence.

UFR is a national organization that merges online and on-the-ground organizing strategies to reach, connect, and activate the 16 million people who work in the retail sector. Retail clerks, stockers, and others are facing some of the most devastating economic pain and instability in the United States as the industry consolidates, Walmart and Amazon grow and destabilize and dehumanize the workplace, and smaller retailers are driven out of business as a consequence of extractive investment and competition with a monopoly. UFR has a

base of hundreds of thousands and a reach of millions of people working in low-wage jobs.

UFR's Toys "R" Us campaign demonstrates how we execute fast, deep engagement in the service sector workforce and politicize issues of jobs and the economy among women and working-class voters. Last year, 33,000 people were forced out of their jobs after private equity firms bankrupted the company. In a few short months, UFR leaders and organizers reached more than 10,000 Toys "R" Us workers online, conducted over 2,000 one-on-one organizing conversations, carried out 400 actions, and developed 150 leaders. Toys "R" Us workers actively engaged nationwide, from taking direct action in their stores to giving public testimony at pension fund meetings, in the fight to win severance pay from the private equity owners. Their activism led to a historic settlement with the private equity firms for a \$20 million hardship fund.



ART BY NEVER MADE

In the aftermath, UFR leaders worked closely with Senator Elizabeth Warren and other key elected leaders and partners, including Americans for Financial Reform, to introduce the Stop Wall Street Looting Act of 2019 to create guardrails for the industry. With the trail of private equity-driven retail bankruptcies that followed Toys “R” Us, from Shopko to Gymboree to Sears, it was clear that there needed to be federal regulation that curbed the industry’s worst practices and investment strategies. The Stop Wall Street Looting Act has provisions to mitigate these dangerous investment strategies and ensure that portfolio companies, consumers, workers, and investors are protected. This historic bill levels the playing field for those who have felt abused by private equity, whether it is retail workers facing job loss, public pension funds struggling to get greater fee disclosures, or those challenging private equity’s profiteering from immigrant detention facilities. The voice of working people who had been directly impacted has been critically important to the development of regulation that we hope will grow and evolve a more equitable business model that does not profit at the expense of people or the planet.

#### A BRAVE NEW WORLD

What ties all this and similar campaigns together is people using their collective voice to impact working conditions and corporate decision making on issues of existential importance, rewriting the rules so that they work for all of us. Teachers went on strike for increased pay, reduced class sizes, and expanded student programs. Tech programmers at Amazon used their voice as shareholders to push on sustainability practices. Wayfair tech workers demonstrated to protest their employer’s role in supplying furniture to immigrant detention centers. Nurses have long campaigned for quality patient care for those they serve and universal health care. Bank tellers and loan officers called for changes to compensation so that pay is not tied to extractive sales quotas, as well as a role in regulation. From teachers to bank tellers to programmers, working people are wielding their voices and power to challenge core decisions on how government and corporations—which could not function without their labor—are run.

These new movements will strengthen existing organizations and inspire new ones. They also create a moment for introspection and reflection to move forward: How can labor and movement organizations respond to this spike in interest and willingness? Can we translate that popularity into lasting power? How can working people rewrite

the rules of how we build and hold power where we work, win economic stability, and fundamentally transform the ways we govern corporations? How do we embrace the tremendous reach and energy of social media and digital tools and build infrastructure that institutionalizes them into lasting bases of power?

We can win only by unifying campaigns for power and democracy in the workplace to social movements. To create multiracial, participatory, and equitable institutions owned by working people, we need to question the fundamental principles and design of our current democratic and economic systems. ●

## Reversing Income Inequality

The Los Angeles teachers’ strike is a master class in using unions to build bases and secure progressive wins.

BY JANE MCALEVEY

**W**hen Margaret Thatcher famously said, “And, you know, there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families,” she wasn’t making an observation. She was declaring a strategy to unmake a once-powerful working class. For several decades, at least since Thatcher and Ronald Reagan delivered severe blows to unions in their respective countries, it has been open season on workers. Academics and policymakers argue about how to preserve or restore a decent quality of life for workers—all for naught.

These endless debates about how to reverse income inequality and restore and strengthen democracy are a constant distraction from a more urgent need: workers who can organize together to form fighting organizations capable of effective mass collective action. Two of the most democratizing movements in US history—the union movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s—

both relied heavily on confronting a seemingly unshakable power structure with direct-action organizing. Both movements understood that challenging power required power-building strategies. The only strategic advantage that the non-elite have over billionaires and the political elite is population size. To win elections or policy or political support, those large numbers must create sustainable, demonstrable supermajorities capable of persuading corporations and the political elite to come to the negotiating table.

The best evidence that unions continue to be not only relevant but urgent is the explosion of labor strikes over the past 18 months. These include the multicity, multistate strike by low-wage immigrant workers against Marriott, the largest hotel corporation in the world; the uprising by 31,000 Stop & Shop workers in New England; and the enormous strikes in the education sector, like the one in Los Angeles. The victories have been uneven, but each strike either has stopped egregious corporate behavior or has led to progressive breakthroughs not seen in decades.

When it comes to the Los Angeles teachers’ strike, the policy wins are more enforceable than legislation because workers have secured the right to redress if employers try to evade implementation. More important, the teachers, students, and parents together built organizations capable of implementing their achievements. According to Alex Caputo-Pearl, an award-winning high school teacher of 22 years and president of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), “We knew they’d never agree to our demands, including Green Spaces, creating an Immigrants Defense Fund [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement had been increasingly targeting schools], a big expansion of school nurses and guidance counselors, or our top demand to reduce the number of kids per class, unless and until we were out on strike with parents standing united behind the demands.”

Caputo-Pearl knew this because the students, the parents, and their teachers were pitted against a recently appointed school board superintendent who was a hedge fund billionaire with zero experience in the education field. Less than 60 days after his appointment in May 2018, Austin Beutner published a report titled “Hard Choices,” which declared that teachers were overpaid and overcompensated, and called for a 47 percent reduction in their benefits, which he declared to be “too generous.” This is in Los Angeles, where full-time workers live in their cars and buy gym memberships to shower. With per pupil spending in California ranked 47th in the nation, Beutner declared that teachers—who

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buy pencils, paper, and tampons for their students—were overpaid, setting the stage for what became the first strike in 30 years. The school board management had been steadily converting public schools in Los Angeles into private corporate charter schools, the largest and most steady expansion in the nation. Beutner's report was a declaration of his intent to defeat the teachers' union in a head-on confrontation. After all, teachers' unions were flat on their backs, right?

For the six months following the release of his report, under his direction the school board repeatedly attempted to get legal injunctions and used lawsuits and other tactical gimmicks to try to weaken and demoralize the teachers. What blocked him was a four-year effort of the best teachers who rebuilt their once-do-nothing union into a powerhouse organizing machine.

Each policy achievement was won contractually through the collective bargaining process. In

Los Angeles, many of the demands presented by the teachers' union were proposals that parent groups and the broader community had been trying to win for years, without success. Examples include forcing annual reductions in class size by capping student-teacher ratios; securing more wraparound services for low-income youth and youth of color by hiring more school nurses, librarians, and counselors; and making vast improvements in wages and health-care benefits for the mostly women of color workforce. The policy wins have also included specific measures that challenge direct and indirect racism, including banning so-called random searches, almost all of which target youth of color and ultimately direct them to the prison, not college, pipeline.

Ending random searches was a central issue in the negotiations. The teachers won an experimental ban on these racist practices in 30 schools, and the victory emboldened

the racial justice community and raised its expectations for a total ban across all 900 Los Angeles schools. To secure the district-wide policy, the teachers led a movement that translated their all-out worker strike into an all-out picket-lines-to-the-polls election for a vacancy on the school board—a campaign that had to begin on the heels of the strike. Despite exhaustion, by May, they had elected a progressive school board candidate, setting the stage for the June 2019 banning of searches that research shows were anything but random.

Another example of a remarkable achievement from the 100 percent out strike was the win for Green Spaces. Hedgefund bankers representing the corporate wing of the Democratic Party dug in their heels against the 34,00 teachers demanding improvements to the physical, emotional, and mental health of more than half a million students of color. Despite their resistance, the new contract calls for the school board to immediately form a Green Space Task Force that includes representatives from the LA Unified School District (LAUSD), UTLA (the union), and the City of Los Angeles. LAUSD will work with UTLA, the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, and appropriate nonprofit partners to create—to the maximum extent possible—adequate green space for student physical activity.

According to the task force plan, green space will be constructed in order of priority: schools without any existing green space and not located near parks; followed by schools without any existing green space; and, finally, schools with small amounts of green space and communities with limited to no access to parks and recreation.

That was big, but the Green Spaces provision also calls for removing the metal bungalows used as classrooms on K-12 campuses across the district. The structures, which resemble shipping containers, are a manifestation of the disinvestment in America's public schools and the disinvestment in the American public. At one point, the city considered buying some used bungalows from the school district to use as shelters for the rapidly expanding homeless population, but it ultimately decided against the idea because the containers were in such poor condition. Yet they were deemed good enough for low-income kids to spend most waking hours in, allegedly learning the skills that would prepare them for life. The idea of equality of opportunity would be a joke if not for teachers fighting through their union, with their heart and feet, to make it so.

Los Angeles's progressive educators led a master class in how to rebuild strong, socially



ART BY NICOLAS LAMPERT



relevant unions, and how to expand their base by building solidarity with students, parents, and the broader community. It happened fast, and the results are a model for exactly what needs to happen nationwide. These victories required power, not merely “a voice.”

Good strikes force the very consensus building that America needs, and the sooner we reprioritize unions, the sooner we can reclaim democracy. ●

## Other People's Money

Better education about the role of effective governance ensures that markets and institutions serve society.

BY ANAT R. ADMATI

**T**he debates about our economic system are sometimes framed as a stark choice between market-based capitalism and government-controlled socialism. But the actual choices are much more complicated. Corporations, which control much of our economic activity today, owe their existence to governments. Although they do not vote in elections, the economic and political power of corporations and their impact on democracy are immense. The challenge arises from the tension between functioning democracy on one hand and narrowly defined business practices on the other hand. For the market economy to serve society in a democracy, more citizens must become educated about the forces that shape the system, including corporations and governments, and the key role of effective governance in determining the outcomes.

In his famous 1970 essay “The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase its Profits,” Milton Friedman championed “free-market capitalism” where managers should “make as much money as possible while conforming to the rules of society.” He presumed

that businesses operate in an environment of “open and free competition without deception and fraud,” but he failed to discuss whether or under what conditions this assumption is true. In fact, markets are unlikely to become competitive and devoid of deception and fraud on their own, and capitalism cannot deliver on its promise without effective governments.

Friedman warned against “the iron fist of government bureaucrats” that the concerns of chief executives about corporate social responsibility would bring back. But a key role of government is to enable markets and to protect stakeholders when market forces fail to do so properly. The civil servants (“bureaucrats”) who Friedman mentioned derisively are essential for enforcing contracts, ensuring competition, administering justice, protecting rights, and dealing with fraud and deception when conventions, accepted business practices, or cultural norms fail to hold actors accountable to socially acceptable behavior. Governments also maintain infrastructure and provide important services, including public safety, benefits that many ignore or take for granted. If governments fail to design and enforce appropriate laws for individuals, businesses and markets, then it no longer follows that managers who solely focus on making as much money as possible are fulfilling their social responsibility.

The critical issues lie not in the size of government, but rather in the quality, integrity, and effectiveness of the individuals and institutions that act on its behalf. To fully realize the benefits of democracy, political systems and government institutions must embody the collective choices of all citizens, and the rules of the game must be designed and enforced to serve the social good.

These days, well-functioning democracies are few and far between. Democracy itself appears to be in retreat around the world, and trust in private and government institutions, particularly in the United States, is low. In a 2018 poll conducted by Harvard University's Institute of Politics, nearly two-thirds of Americans ages 18–29 expressed fear for the future of democracy in America, and in a 2018 Gallup Poll, only 25 percent of Americans expressed “a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in big business. Public trust in the US government seems to be at a near historical low. Unfocused anger with “the system” can be misdirected by demagogues and lead us away from the right solutions. To

tackle effectively the lack of trust and the distortions in our prevailing economic system and in our democracy, we must first diagnose their underlying causes.

The problems plaguing democracy and capitalism are largely rooted in the complex interactions between corporations, governments, and individuals. These interactions are fraught with conflicts of interest, wide gaps in information and expertise, and the potential for abuse of power. Effective governance is key. How do we ensure transparency to hold the powerful accountable in the private and public sectors? How do we prevent conflicted experts and narrow interests from having excessive impact, particularly on issues that appear complex and confusing to nonexperts and the public? Ultimately, how can we trust those with power in corporations and in government institutions who have important impact over our lives to avoid abusing their power and causing harm?

Corporations and governments have numerous points of contact. Some interactions are primarily transactional: when corporations sell goods and services to government bodies, including essential services such as prisons, security forces, transportation, weapons, health care and medicines, for example. Some corporations act as private watchdogs, providing credit ratings and financial audits to private and

### Particularly insidious challenges to democracy arise when corporations become involved in the writing of the rules that apply to everyone, including themselves.

government entities. Financial institutions are involved in funding governments as investors and intermediaries. Consultants offer advice to governments as well as to corporations. Media corporations inform the public about government bodies as well as on private sector corporations. In all these engagements, conflicts of interests and information gaps create numerous opportunities for abuse of entrusted power. Corruption can occur even if nobody breaks laws.

Particularly insidious challenges to democracy arise when corporations become involved in the writing of the rules that apply to everyone, including themselves, or interfere with

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enforcement. The problem is not new, but it has been exacerbated with increases in corporate lobbying activity. Over their history, US corporations have used the legal system to gain many legal rights and fight against government rules. Some of the legal rights of corporations are important to their ability to benefit society; others, however, such as political speech and religious rights, aren't directly linked to any social benefits. Yet, the 2010 decision by the US Supreme Court in the case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* allows corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on campaign contributions and political activity.

When corporate engagement with governments serves narrow interests and money is critical for campaigns and influence, the system causes "corruptive dependencies," exacerbates inequality, and leads to the perception that our "captured economy" is rigged and unjust. Corporations can also pit governments in different jurisdictions against each other, leading governments to offer them privileges that may not benefit the public, or to weaken useful rules so as to help some corporations succeed even at the cost of harming citizens. Examples of corporations undermining democracy through policy engagement are rampant in the financial sector and in the pharmaceutical, coal, and gun industries.

I first encountered these issues when looking at the banking sector after the financial crisis of 2007-2009, which led me to realize that many of the assumptions about markets and corporations that are routinely made in research and teaching about financial markets and corporations are false. The crisis was not, as some conveniently imply, akin to an unpreventable natural disaster; rather, it was the result of failed corporate governance and poorly designed and ineffective rules that tolerated waste, fraud, and an enormous buildup of unnecessary risk. The rules effectively rewarded recklessness and exacerbated the fragility of the system.

In *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, Adam Tooze describes how developments before 2007 and since, including the extraordinary actions by governments and central banks and the narratives and public anger surrounding the events, exposed the enormous harm that free-market capitalism and government failures can cause. The crisis transformed our economic, political and geopolitical landscape in ways that continue to have substantial impact on us today.

Over the last decade, I have engaged with trying to improve the rules for the financial

system, and I witnessed with dismay and concern how distorted incentives, averted eyes, and insufficient accountability have led markets and governments to fail society. The reformed rules after the financial crisis do not reflect the full lessons of the crisis and maintain a largely unchanged system that is inefficient, reckless, and opaque. Some rules are too costly and counterproductive, while others are unnecessarily complex, yet weak and inadequate, benefiting few and harming and endangering the rest unnecessarily.

In "It Takes a Village to Maintain a Dangerous Financial System," I discuss the actions and motivations of the numerous enablers in the private sector, government, and even academia that are collectively responsible for this situation. These enablers remain unaccountable because the issues appear complex and confus-

## **It is important to place governments in a better position to design and enforce proper rules ... and citizens in a better position to hold all those in power accountable.**

ing to the public. Flawed claims contribute to the confusion, muddle the debate, and continue to impact policy and cause harm. Creating a better financial system requires that citizens become savvier as consumers of the system and better informed about its flaws and what can be done to correct them. Teaching at universities can help, but much more is needed to challenge the entrenched system.

Similar problems arise in many policy areas in which experts might be conflicted and where the harm, or specific flaws in corporate governance and policy, are difficult for nonexperts to detect or know how to correct. Examples include financial disclosures, technology, and the environment. The recent scandal involving Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration shows that even in aviation safety, distorted incentives in the private and public sectors can cause preventable harm. Other recent examples where corporations or government bodies caused or tolerated harm that their employees and leaders could have prevented but failed to do so are Purdue Pharma, Equifax, Theranos, Facebook, and Wells Fargo. Even when investigations reveal some of the culprits of harm, the typical outcome of excessive endangerment

and misconduct by corporation is a fine paid by shareholders and minimal if any consequences for leaders, raising questions about the justice system in a corporate context.

So far, those in the business community and business schools concerned with the loss of trust in capitalism or with problems such as climate change and inequality have focused on private-sector solutions involving philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and impact investment. Perhaps in response to backlash against their focus on "shareholder value," 181 chief executives in the United States recently vowed, without being specific about how their practices might change, to consider all stakeholders.

Voluntary actions by the private sector can be useful, but they cannot solve society's big problems or replace governments altogether. Worse, the focus on private-sector solutions

perpetuates the flaw in Friedman's analysis by ignoring the critical role that governments must play and distracting us away from ensuring that governments act properly in our collective interests. By assuming that governments are unable or unwilling to solve social problems, those who focus on private-sector solutions fail to ask why governments

might be dysfunctional or to reflect on or take responsibility for their own role in causing harm or weakening governments.

Indeed, those who practice free-market capitalism today and count on governments to protect their property rights and safety may cause harm and undermine governments and democracy in their pursuit of profit. For example, to achieve success, managers may seek outsize subsidies and tax breaks and lobby to weaken beneficial safety standards or environmental regulations. They may also find it useful to confuse policymakers and the public so as to maintain market power or get away with reckless practices. Even if these actions do not violate the letter of existing laws, they may contradict the spirit of the laws and hinder their enforcement. And self-regulation is unlikely to suffice when stock-based compensation and pressure from aggressive investors create strong incentives to respond to the standard success metrics.

We can do more to tackle the governance problems at the nexus of corporations and democracy and improve the system. To root out subtle and often invisible forms of corruption and to ensure that markets, corporations, and

governments serve society, it is important to place governments in a better position to design and enforce proper rules, including for markets and corporations, and citizens in a better position to hold all those in power accountable.

To be effective, government bodies need appropriate resources, unconflicted expertise, and capable civil servants who are not prone to being corrupted. Well-designed rules can correct distortions, protect the public, and help markets work better, but poorly designed rules can exacerbate distortions. The details may be complex, but at least some citizens should be able to evaluate the rules and they should help citizens to hold those who write and enforce the rules properly accountable. Academic institutions and independent media can play important roles by providing unconflicted expertise as well as exposing governance and policy failures. And it is imperative that more people see through flawed and misleading claims that can scare or confuse politicians and voters to benefit narrow interests. Such strategies must not win.

Education is key to achieving these goals. Business schools, in particular, should work to eliminate some of the information asymmetries that lead to flawed rules, deception schemes, and lack of accountability. More generally, higher education programs should practice and promote civic-minded leadership and emphasize the importance of good governance mechanisms. As I have proposed in a recent piece at *Harvard Business Review*, doing so involves nuanced discussions of policy challenges related to business and society, collaborations to break disciplinary silos, and broader engagement across identity groups to elevate the level of public discourse beyond ideology and anger. A better informed and engaged citizenry can push, among other things, for badly needed reforms to campaign finance laws, improved transparency for corporations, and policies to improve governance and accountability in all institutions.

We face significant challenge in ensuring that our institutions are trustworthy. But we must first look beyond simplistic and misleading narratives about our choices. We do not have to choose between capitalism and socialism or between markets and big government. Rather, we must work to create a system in which corporations can thrive without distorting the economy and democracy, and in which governments write and enforce proper rules for all. Better education on the issues would be a good start. It is up to all of us. ●

# Against Nostalgia

Three takeaways to establish the structural and institutional guardrails necessary to achieving the democracy we need and deserve.

BY LISA GARCÍA BEDOLLA

**T**he articles in this supplement outline the changes that need to happen within civil society, government, and the economy in order for our society to realize its full democratic promise, arguably, for the first time.

The articles' authors propose and explain the key principles needed in order to establish those guardrails. The goal is to provide a holistic diagnosis of the problem—one that does not romanticize history but instead learns critical lessons from it. The stories from the field are meant to exemplify the courageous transformation that is already happening across the country.

**Building People Power** | The stories from Faith in Minnesota and the Los Angeles teachers strike make it clear that transformative changes are possible when organizations foster a sense of belonging and power within their communities. That sense grows out of relationships, the core of which are the authentic conversations that organizers have with their community members. For these transformations to be real, the knowledge community members bring must be valued rather than relying on the opinions of highly paid political consultants who are parachuted in for a campaign but have no connection to the community, no understanding of its context, and no sense of its history. Real changes must be grounded in all three, with relationship-building at the core. Realizing democracy requires bridge crossing within and across communities in order to ensure that the people can serve as a countervailing force that holds state and economic actors accountable.

**Reversing Institutional Capture** | A government cannot be seen as democratic if it is not accountable to its people. America's founders believed that state and local government were less dangerous than the federal government because they were closer to, and therefore more accountable to, the people. Hertel-Fernandez and Smith's

analysis suggests the Founders may have been wrong, showing how state governments have, for a variety of reasons, been captured by "the political interests of the well-organized, wealthy few at the expense of the broader public." Yet Hatch and Gerstein make clear that state and local government can also be seen as potential sites of democratic opportunity, as is evident in their success electing progressive prosecutors and working with attorneys general in localities across the country.

Their story shows what happens when attorneys general and district attorneys take a "broader view of what it means to represent 'The People.'" Their success suggests that when it comes to governmental transformation the collective imagination needs to be bigger. Changing the institutions themselves in fundamental ways in addition to changing the people within those institutions can turn incremental policy tweaks into transformative policy change.

**Building a Democratic Economy** | Democracy must value people over profits. Basic assumptions about markets, their value, and their efficiencies, need to shift. One of the most important changes that needs to happen is the acceptance of government as a countervailing force that is necessary and whose job it is to regulate markets in order to ensure that they serve the public good. The good news is that our current levels of economic inequality are the product of policy choices made over the past four decades. That means that those changes can be undone and government power can be used to check market power and ensure a more equitable distribution of economic resources. In order for this change to happen, the meaning of the economy must be broadened to include the workplace as a site of democracy and democratic practice.

Previous reform efforts have attempted to focus on one part of the problem—be it voting, government reform, or workplace issues. These essays make clear that all these factors are important and interrelated. American democracy has never been fully realized—for most of the nation's history, the majority of the US population was excluded from the franchise and alienated from their basic rights. The current democratic crisis has its roots in, among other things, resistance to the attempts by social movements, such as the civil rights movement, to demand access and fairness within our democratic institutions. Within that context, incremental reforms that tweak at the margins will not work. Without a serious, concerted, and holistic effort to address issues of power and inequality across civil society, government, and the economy, our democracy will never be fully realized. ●

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The **Realizing Democracy** project is a year-long learning series reimagining the relationship among civil society, government, and the economy—asking what it would take to realize the full promise of democracy in the United States. Longstanding but deepening crises have combined to create significant limitations for the practice of self-government, which should center everyday people and communities. What's more, the interrelated crises affecting civil society, government and the economy compound each other—and tend to deepen inequality in a vicious cycle—undermining people's ability to create the world they want and deserve. But we can choose a different, more inclusive path, one grounded in people-centered democracy and the nation's most deeply shared values. A new path would elevate innovative forms of inclusive leadership, respond to technology and other drivers of change, and offer frameworks for taking action on the challenges that affect us all—and generations to come. Realizing Democracy is a collaboration between Community Change, the Center for the Study of Democracy and Organizing, Demos, Ford Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations.