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BUILDING CIVIC CAPACITY IN AN ERA OF DEMOCRATIC CRISIS



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About New America

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About the Family-Centered Social Policy Program

The Family-Centered Social Policy program at New America is investigating the role of identity in shaping social policy and is developing tools to help make social policy more representative of and responsive to the families it serves.

About the Political Reform Program

The Political Reform program situates issues of money in politics, lobbying and information, participation, and election rules in the context of the market for power, in order to develop and build consensus around new solutions that will be compelling to a wide constituency. Looking at democracy as a dynamic system shaped by regulation as well as culture, by supply and demand, and by the number and identity of participants can broaden the discussion beyond the narrow conflict between regulation and free expression. In addition to advancing specific policy solutions (such as programs to encourage small donors), our program supports journalism, academic research, and events in order to more accurately and persuasively define the nature of the problem, sharpen the proposed solutions, and bring new voices to the conversation.

We also aim to develop a more comprehensive vision of a democracy agenda, linking together issues like instant-runoff voting and proportional representation, nonpartisan primaries, congressional reforms, a constitutional guarantee of the right to vote, open Internet and related communications projects, experiments in deliberative democracy, and other changes that promise to expand participation or ameliorate polarization.

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OVERVIEW: INNOVATING DEMOCRACY IN A MOMENT OF CRISIS

For several years now, the institutions of American democracy have been under increasing strain. Widening economic inequality, the persistence and increased virulence of racial and ethnic tensions, and the inability of existing political institutions to manage disputes and solve problems have all contributed to a growing sense of crisis in American democracy. This crisis of democracy extends well beyond immediate questions about elections, voting, and the exercise of political power in Washington. Our democratic challenges are deeper. How do we develop institutions and organizations to enable civic engagement beyond voting every few years? What kinds of institutions, organizations, and practices are needed to make public policies inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the communities they are supposed to serve? How do we create a greater capacity for and commitment to investing in grassroots democracy? How can we do all this while building a multiracial and multiethnic society inclusive of all?

The current political moment creates an opportunity to think more deeply about both the crisis of American democracy today and about the democracy that we want—and how we might get there. Few scholars or practitioners would content

themselves with our current democratic institutions. At the same time, generating a more durable, inclusive, and responsive democracy requires being realistic about constraints, limitations, and tensions that will necessarily arise.

In this report we sketch out some of the central challenges and tensions we see, as well as some potential avenues for renewal and transformation. Based on a convening at New America in Washington, D.C. and a series of ongoing conversations with organizers, policymakers, and scholars from around the country, we propose a framework in this report to serve as a resource for continuing these important efforts in pioneering new forms of democratic governance.

As we think about what a more inclusive, responsive, and durable democracy might look like, it is critical that we look beyond the conventional focus on elections, campaign finance reform, and voting rights. There is no question that these are critical areas of concern, and necessary preconditions for meaningful democracy reform. But these areas are also well-studied and understood by many of us in the field. In this report, we hope to highlight some of the other dimensions

that seem to be essential to an improved and vibrant democratic society: new forms of organizing and community engagement; new institutional strategies for participation at the national and local levels; and a greater self-consciousness about how to build multi-racial constituencies and alliances to make our democracy more inclusive.

We recognize that the debate over our democracy's future takes place in the specter of the rise of a virulent form of what we might term "exclusionary populism," based on resentment of immigrants, racial minorities, and various perceived "others." This exclusionary populism parallels and coexists with another strain of populism manifesting in a deep distrust of institutions, experts, political corruption and capture. Based on our conversations with practitioners and our own research, we suggest that today's populist moment emphasizes the need to create a genuinely responsive, participatory form of democratic politics in which communities are empowered, rather than alienated—and that we do so in ways that self-consciously strive to build constituencies and identities that are more inclusive and accommodating. Think of this as "us" populism, as opposed to "them" populism. Our democracy would benefit from an investment in "us" populism, ranging from ideas about strengthening voice and public trust by refining institutions, to new mechanisms or institutions of public engagement and deliberation. In an effort to create a blueprint for this type of "us" populism, we convened nearly 50 practitioners and researchers all working on various aspects of re-building our democracy in April 2017.

Our central argument is that the crisis of our democracy is a much broader and deeper problem of inclusion and responsiveness. The sad reality is that our system has systematically reinforced vast disparities of power, influence, and inclusion across racial, ethnic, gender, and geographic lines. We suggest that strategies to revive our democracy must look to the underlying infrastructures that shape democratic political action in the first place. In this report, we highlight two key areas for further analysis and intervention.

The first involves civil society and community organizing. Engaging, empowering, and organizing communities requires significant investment of time, talent, and resources. Our civil society infrastructure, however, is constrained by very real structural limits on the scale, sustainability, and capacity of community organizations themselves. Furthermore, the ways in which we go about organizing communities can play a large role in constructing new identities and solidarities—or, reinforcing existing exclusions and divisions. Thus, we suggest the importance of thinking strategically about (a) expanding the capacities of community organizations, and (b) developing new bridges across racial, gender, and geographic divides.

Strategies to revive our democracy must look to the underlying infrastructures that shape democratic political action in the first place.

The second key dimension involves institutional context and structure. The ability to organize in order to generate power and influence is itself dependent on the institutional context in which decisions are made. Advocacy and organizing do not take place in a vacuum; the efficacy of civil society organizing is shaped by the institutional structures, procedures, and personnel of government. Addressing the crisis of democracy requires reforming our institutions of governance to (a) create more hooks and levers through which marginalized communities can exercise greater power; and (b) invest in the capacity of government bodies themselves to make this kind of systematic inclusion and engagement possible, productive, and sustainable.

A CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS AND INCLUSION

Public opinion indicates a growing disaffection with governmental dysfunction as a pressing concern for most Americans.¹ A recent Pew survey found that trust in government remains at historic lows, with only 20 percent of the public describing government programs as “well-run,” and 55 percent saying that “ordinary Americans” would do a better job of solving national problems than elected officials.² Only 19 percent of Americans say they can trust the government always or most of the time. The majority of Americans (60 percent) think their government needs “major reform,” compared to the late 1990s, when fewer than 40 percent of those surveyed thought so. Although survey data on peoples’ perceptions are not conclusive, there are other data to suggest a weakening of the trust and relationship between American citizens and the state.⁴

This public anxiety is mirrored in a growing body of scholarly literature documenting specific forms of democratic decline and threat. This disaffection represents for many scholars a “threat” to “the stability of the political system.”³ One channel for this threat is the decline of membership-based civil society organizations, whose presence has traditionally been central to maintaining a vibrant, stable, responsive, and legitimate democratic polity.⁴ But this decline of trust and participation is also tied to a much broader problem of increasingly

disparate political power. A growing body of empirical research suggests strongly that American political institutions are being systematically coopted, corrupted, and taken over by wealthier, and more economically powerful, interests. Policy outcomes are vastly more responsive to the preferences of wealthier Americans than to middle- or working-class Americans.⁵ This is partly attributable to the problem of campaign finance and the increasing dependency of elected officials—federal, state, and local; executive, legislative, and judicial—on wealthy donors and business interests.⁶ It is also partly a result of the growing class divide in political leadership: fewer and fewer political leaders come from working-class backgrounds,⁷ while the shared social and cultural ties between economic elites and policymakers (including regulators) explains more subtle forms of “cultural capture.”⁸ Furthermore, the growing sophistication and resource dominance of business interests—particularly in comparison to the decline and deliberate dismantling of worker power and unions—has meant that the business lobby is more influential and effective in its advocacy than ever.⁹

This literature underscores a broader conceptual point: while we tend to associate democracy with specific institutional forms such as elections, at its core, democracy is fundamentally about a type of

relationship between citizen and state—one where constituencies can mobilize and make binding claims on policymaking institutions.¹⁰ Our crisis of democracy, then, stems from the breakdown of this relationship.

This crisis of trust runs in both directions: communities distrust government, but often so do government officials distrust the knowledge, rationality, and good faith of communities. Some communities view government, at best, as incompetent, and at worst, as malignant. Community mistrust of government is a challenge. Many communities, especially racial minorities, immigrants, and others already face pervasive discrimination and state surveillance, making them understandably more distrustful of the state and of participation. For marginalized communities, forging deeper ties with government can come with considerable risk. What mechanisms exist to repair these mistrusting relationships?

On the other side, some public officials fear engaging the public will lead to unrealistic expectations with attendant criticism and increased burdens. With declining budgets, public servants across the country are being asked to do more with less. Without higher-level support for engagement, bureaucrats are left with limited ability to engage citizenry on an array of issues. Absent robust forms of consultation, engagement, and accountability, policies themselves are flawed, based on mistaken assumptions about their goals, users, and priorities. Furthermore, engagement with

communities that are marginalized or excluded from policy discussions entails its own form of risk. Policies might create expectations for government responsiveness that institutions and officials may be ill-equipped to meet.

Repairing this state-society relationship, however, is only part of the challenge, for even with improved interaction between citizens and policymakers, government as it functions today will be unable to address many of the deeper structural challenges facing communities—and dividing them. For example, if democracy entails the ability to have voice and impact over the forces shaping our daily lives, the reality is that today many day-to-day concerns implicate not only government actors but also private ones. Structural exclusions are often based on race, gender, and geography, reflecting historical laws, norms, and institutional hierarchies. Calls for greater economic inclusion, then, require changing public policies, as well as the behavior of firms, financiers, corporations, and even regional and geographic structures. Similarly, if democracy is to apply to “we the people” in the fullest sense of the “we,” it must also take a serious look at the subtle and formal ways in which communities are excluded from decision-making institutions and processes, and from basic social and economic membership.

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CONCEPTUALIZING DEMOCRATIC REVIVAL

If the crisis of our democracy stems from this deeper failure of responsiveness and inclusion, then the task of reviving democracy must take a similarly broad view.

First, we understand the foundations of a vibrant democracy as encompassing more than voting and citizen input. Elections, in fact, are not particularly effective vehicles either for civic participation or for governmental accountability and responsiveness. Elections are too sporadic and episodic, and in a complex society involving a multiplicity of constituencies, issues, and identities, winner-take-all majoritarian elections often do too little to resolve, manage, or address deep disagreements. Rather, democracy requires institutions and organizations that can equalize political power and influence—and which include the full range of residents and communities in the political process. These solidarities, organizations, institutions, and processes have to be actively built and sustained. Furthermore, a robust and mutually responsive relationship between constituents and policymakers depends on a whole ecosystem of actors and supports, ranging from civil society organizations to inclusive policymaking processes to governmental personnel.

In this paper, we suggest conceptualizing democracy, power, and responsiveness as about more than winning particular policy outcomes. Rather, democracy requires building capacity to exercise power and influence, to partake in the challenges and opportunities of exercising political judgment. Such capacity can be expressed in two modes. First, democratic capacity can manifest in a negative dimension of accountability to “we the people”: constituencies need tools through which they can hold government to account, preventing problematic policies or actions, and forcing government to address areas of concern. Second, democratic capacity can manifest in a positive dimension: it needs investment in social, political, economic, and institutional conditions that enable and empower—that make possible the pro-active exercise of such political action and influence. To put it another way, democracy has to involve more than exercising a veto or constraint. And it takes more than creating passive opportunities for participation: we need to consider what kinds of supports make participation possible, as well as effective.

We see two major areas of intervention and innovation required to build this kind of civic capacity and civic power:

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1. Organization

How can we mobilize and empower a wider range of constituencies, and enable them to exercise more effective and transformative forms of power beyond merely providing “input”? What civil society organizations and structures can hinder or enable this form of power-building?

What kinds of solidarities and coalitions must we build?

2. Institution

What kinds of institutions and processes do we need to build to create meaningful opportunities for community participation and power? How best can we link the often technical and obscure work of policymaking with the goal of community participation and power?

What are the challenges of creating a cultural and institutional framework for robust participation within bureaucracies and policy-making centers?

Despite—or perhaps because of—the pervasiveness of our democratic crisis, we are in the midst of a surprisingly rich period of innovation, creativity, and experimentation along both of these lines. Pioneers of new modes of organizing are working across the country—in neighborhoods, cities, exurbs, and rural communities—to bridge a variety of issues, campaigns, and alliances. Similarly, governments, especially at the local level, are experimenting with how to link community organizations to more open, adaptive, participatory, and responsive processes and mechanisms. In the remainder of this paper, we offer some examples of such innovation, and highlight areas of potential future work.

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC CAPACITY THROUGH ORGANIZING

Building democratic capacity involves, in part, a renewed investment in the capacity of civil society to engage communities, mobilize them, and organize them into groups capable of exercising democratic voice and political influence. There are a variety of interventions and strategies that can help expand this grassroots capacity for organizing. Here, we highlight a few examples that indicate the importance of orienting our interventions towards (a) expanding the scale, sustainability, and capacity for impact among grassroots groups, and (b) designing organizing strategies in ways that help construct new and inclusive solidarities and identities. These policy advocacy efforts represent a long-term orientation towards building democratic capacity from the bottom up.

One of the critical challenges for a revived democracy involves the limited scale of many civil society organizations themselves. Grassroots community organizing takes place within larger structures and contexts. For example, media environments, funding networks, and other features of the landscape help determine the ways in which groups can effectively mobilize, organize, and ultimately have impact. Below we highlight

eight illustrative examples of groups working to expand their capacity by tackling these underlying structural features.

Case Studies

BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE WITH THE CENTER FOR RURAL STRATEGIES

The **Center for Rural Strategies** (CRS),¹¹ based in Whitesburg, Ky. in the central Appalachian coalfields, provides rural communities and non-profit organizations with resources on innovative media and communications strategies in order to strengthen their work. Throughout the last 20 years, there has been a systematic disinvestment in those regions on the part of mainstream media, with newspapers and broadcasters pulling out of rural areas. Filling that gap is Christian radio, as well as politicized church sermons. The CRS is working for more inclusive and representative rural voices.

One aspect of the center's work involves publishing information on rural issues and serving as a liaison

between rural organizations and mainstream media in order to help with a more accurate and diverse portrayal of rural perspectives. For example, rural communities are only 7.5 percent less diverse than the country as whole; however, mainstream media portrayal does not reflect this diversity. The CRS also advocates for issues such as improved broadband in rural America,¹² and it organizes and manages the National Rural Assembly, a coalition of over 400 organizations.¹³

A core tenet is that rural communities are inextricably linked to urban and metropolitan parts of America and building stronger bridges between these communities is critical. Policy needs in urban and rural areas are often similar, but politically separated. Rural and urban communities may not realize that they have similar interests; the CRS is interested in using technology to create different kinds of content and show how urban and rural areas share a common purpose. Creating a different kind of communications infrastructure can engender a broader discourse.

The long-term sustainability and potential for impact of community groups depends not just on individual campaigns, but on generating more local leaders, solidarities, and sheer organizing skills over time.

The CRS experience highlights an important lesson about building grassroots organizing capacity. The ability of civil society groups to successfully engage, mobilize, and organize constituencies depends on the underlying communications and media infrastructure. But that communications infrastructure is neither neutral nor automatically provided. Rather, groups are dependent on the relationships between physical communications infrastructure and the infrastructure of content generation. Communities need to be connected to these physical communications infrastructures (for

example, assuring Internet access for rural and disinterested urban communities). At the same time, the content that flows through these channels must speak to the experiences, values, and concerns of communities themselves. In short, communications infrastructure should not be taken for granted; it has to be built, defended, and broadened.

BUILDING ORGANIZING CAPACITY WITH COWORKER.ORG

Coworker.org (Coworker) is a digital platform for workers' voices founded in response to the decline of formal institutions organizing workers and geared towards building a twenty-first century model of worker power.¹⁴ The organization provides tools directly to workers to self-advocate within the workplace, usually where no labor structure or organizing already exists.

The platform creates the infrastructure for people to self-organize and self-advocate in the workplace based on decentralized networks of employees. Most users are in the retail and on-demand sector, and most are low-income or people of color. There has been a focus on workers managed by algorithms (i.e., scheduling) or workers who deal with workplace surveillance technology that tracks keystrokes. For example, Starbucks baristas have run 50 campaigns using the platform,¹⁵ as have big organizations such as Wells Fargo. Coworker has also begun working with large technology companies for workers who want to have a stake in how companies are run and how technology is deployed, as well as have a say in the political consequences of the information technology companies are collecting. Critically, most campaigns are in places where no labor structure and organizing exist.

A key feature of Coworker's model involves creating sub-networks within campaigns. For example, if a user is particularly active in commenting on a campaign on the Coworker platform, Coworker staff will invite the user to join that campaign's media committee. Similarly, if a user exhibits leadership abilities in running a campaign well, Coworker will

work with that user to develop his or her leadership skills further and to identify new potential campaigns for that community. “Data contributors” collect data by polling people in the workplace; Coworker aggregates these data, and reports back to users to provide an overview of the campaigns themselves.

This approach necessarily means that the content of Coworker campaigns is highly fluid and context- and community-specific. But what the Coworker model offers is a powerful tool for identifying, training, and building locally-rooted leaders. In essence, Coworker’s model is more interested in building up the capacities and underlying movement infrastructure of its user-base than it is in pursuing specific campaigns. The theory is that, by building leadership, skills, and—over time—shared identities of users as workers, Coworker is multiplying the power and capacity of workers themselves, which would enable more far-reaching economic justice campaigns and democratic mobilization in the future.

The Coworker example highlights another lesson for building organizational capacity. If physical and communications infrastructure plays a role in the capacity for grassroots groups to build democratic power, so too does the investment in individuals themselves as a kind of resource and enabling infrastructure. The long-term sustainability and potential for impact of community groups depends not just on individual campaigns, but on generating more local leaders, solidarities, and sheer organizing skills over time.

An underlying theme in both the CRS and Coworker examples above is the ways in which organizing strategies can construct particular solidarities and identities over time. This is a crucial aspect for building long-term grassroots capacity. On the one hand, individuals are motivated to participate by specific issues that speak to their experience, rather than broad campaigns. On the other hand, over time, these experiences with mobilization and participation start to create broader conceptions of belonging, identity, and community. Such solidarity

and shared bonds of trust and inclusion must be built thoughtfully, in particular when organizing across racial, gender, class, and geographic lines.

ACTIVATING METRO-AREA CONSTITUENCIES WITH PARTNERSHIP FOR WORKING FAMILIES

The **Partnership for Working Families** (PFWF), headquartered in Oakland, Calif., is a national network of 17 permanent coalitions in metropolitan regions. These regions often cross multiple municipal boundaries and can extend across urban, suburban, and exurban divides. PFWF was started in 2006 in order to rebuild regional organizing with the breadth and depth of a national network.¹⁶ PFWF and its affiliate organizations are focused on issues pertinent to working families and they advocate for policies to support economic growth, civic engagement, and innovative solutions for economic and environmental concerns.¹⁷

PFWF is responding, in part, to the opportunity to engage those who are not currently active in civic life. Over the last 10 years, civic engagement projects have been targeted at voter registration but not at deepening civic voice in policies. The results of the last election—regardless of partisanship—show that belief in how government should work has changed, with low levels of trust and high levels of disillusionment. There is an opportunity to reach the 40 percent of Americans who did not vote in the election. But expanding voter participation requires building non-traditional alliances through identifying common struggles—between labor and faith communities, between Americans across ethnic lines, and between political affiliations—so that deeper work into how government could and should look can take place.

It also requires a long-term approach towards building motivation to participate. For example, Pittsburgh United, the Pittsburgh affiliate, has been testing different outreach strategies. It found that when talking to citizens with a low-propensity to vote about specific issues, these constituencies were more likely to vote. In the last campaign cycle, Pittsburgh United conducted a field test comparing

voter turnout among low-propensity voters. As a control group, Pittsburgh United engaged voters through a conventional civic engagement outreach strategy that emphasized the importance of voting and general values of civic engagement. Another group of voters was approached through an issue-specific appeal seeking support for an affordable housing trust fund. The issue-specific appeal proved more powerful in motivating turnout: it yielded a 30 percent greater participation rate compared to the control group.

PROMOTING MULTIRACIAL COALITIONS WITH FAITH IN TEXAS

Faith in Texas, headquartered in Dallas, was created three years ago with the goal of shifting the dominant narrative of faith in the Lone Star State to reflect a more inclusive, multiracial future. After years of conservative rule, the social justice infrastructure in Texas was weak. Social justice organizing struggled to connect with faith communities, and faced difficulties linking faith communities across racial lines. A central focus for Faith in Texas is building solidarity across key populations: Hispanic millennials, African American millennials, white working-class women, and white moderate people of faith. The policy issues that the organization pursues are meant to help create a long-term sense of shared identity and solidarity. For example, recent organizing around payday lending focused on working with these different constituencies to first narrate openly what, for many, was a private experience of suffering, as a way to build a sense of shared experience. This shared narrative could be understood by all: explicitly moral, religious terms bonded these different constituencies together.

Broader Implications

The vignettes above by no means exhaust the field of ongoing innovations in bottom-up organizing. Further, many of the organizations profiled here engage in similar strategies; the leadership development orientation of Coworker, for example,

also animates the work of PFWF, Faith in Texas, and CRS. These examples do, however, highlight some important themes for our question of how to build democratic capacity through civil society organizing.

Civic engagement must be understood as a constant, sustained practice that outlives election cycles and stretches beyond voting or formal channels for citizen input.

First, civic engagement must be understood as a constant, sustained practice that outlives election cycles and stretches beyond voting or formal channels for citizen input. The motivation, skills, organizational support, and capacity to engage in sustained civic action need to be constructed and maintained over time. Individual policy issues and campaigns are crucial ways to activate communities, but they must be engaged in ways that help build this longer-term capacity for participation. Organizing around a particular short-term goal is not enough. Civil society organizations must toggle between immediate goals and larger visions, showing concretely that participation can deliver results, but at the same time orienting their work towards building those skills, leaders, and capacities that will enable more—and more effective—mobilizations in the future.

A key aspect of this longer-term capacity stems from the identities and solidarity that are given voice through such civic action. Public engagement is not disassociated from the emotions, struggles, and identities of real communities. How we approach civic engagement can exacerbate or further emphasize divisions. By contrast, alternative narratives can build across conventional community boundaries. But such new identities and solidarities must be actively constructed over time.

BUILDING DEMOCRATIC CAPACITY THROUGH GOVERNANCE REFORM

The impact and the sustainability of such civil society organizing also depend on the larger institutional context in which bottom-up civic action takes place. Without points of leverage or entry into actual decision-making institutions and procedures, it is difficult for such civil society actors to have impact. Without meaningful impact, it is difficult for organizations to maintain and sustain civic action over the long term. Therefore, even as we invest in long-term approaches to build bottom-up civic capacity, we must also invest in transforming our governmental institutions, processes, and personnel to create a more favorable and hospitable institutional context where communities can exercise actual policy influence.

This section provides some vignettes exemplifying some of the innovations underway within governmental institutions themselves. As shown below, these innovations revolve around certain themes. First, we can see that innovations to policymaking processes that increase the points of leverage and modes of meaningful community influence can play a large role in creating new democratic practices. Second, we see that such democratic policy making procedures are not

automatic, nor are they simple to operate effectively. Rather, making these procedures work well requires a different approach to the capacities, skills, and personnel of government itself.

Case Studies

EMPOWERING CITIZENS WITH PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a process to empower residents with direct influence over how to allocate public monies. The process started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989 after a 20-year military dictatorship and has been honored by the World Bank as a “best practice” in democratic innovation. In Brazil, PB has been shown to reduce infant mortality and increase redistribution spending, including funds for education and sanitation.¹⁸ The process came to the United States in 2009 through the non-profit Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP). Having started in Chicago with \$1.3 million in discretionary funds, participatory budgeting has expanded to over a dozen cities in the United States, with over 300,000 people allocating \$240

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million so far. In New York City, over half of the city council is putting a portion of its discretionary funds back to the hands of residents. The process empowers traditionally marginalized communities, non-residents, and young people. The PB process has also been used for school budgets,¹⁹ as well as federal urban development funds, in the form of Community Development Block Grants (CDGB).²⁰

The PB process provides residents with a powerful mode of influencing policymaking. Instead of simply providing input or comments, residents can allocate funds towards those projects they deem most valuable. Crucially, PBP itself invests tremendous personnel and resources to running these procedures, and in engaging local communities in order to increase trust, participation, and ownership. As participatory budgeting continues to expand, PBP is working with counterparts in city governments to institutionalize these skills.

BRINGING IN HARD-TO-REACH CONSTITUENCIES WITH THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT UNIT

The **Public Engagement Unit** (PEU) is a division in New York's city government started in 2015 that leverages a modern outreach team to meet citizens and make sure they are receiving vital services. PEU is the first unit of its kind devoted to knocking on doors and making calls to hard-to-reach constituents to enroll them in city services, as well as foster long-term individual relationships with city staff. For example, outreach specialists encounter people at risk of eviction and connect them to

free legal assistance, sign tenants up for rental subsidies, or enroll those eligible for affordable healthcare. PEU serves as an interface through which residents engage with local government to better enable city agencies to identify and resolve individual cases, as well as large community issues. PEU works across agencies to build capacity among outreach teams and is implementing new outreach tools, technology, and best practices to integrate an accessible, door-to-door community engagement approach throughout the city. These tools support strong partnerships with city agencies to help maximize outreach for new services and engage New Yorkers.

FOLDING IN COMMUNITY INPUT WITH ALL IN

ALL IN Alameda County (ALL IN) was founded by County Supervisor Wilma Chan in 2014, the 50th anniversary of President Johnson's War on Poverty, to function as a multi-stakeholder innovation incubator, bringing together community residents, business owners, nonprofit leaders, government agency staff, and elected officials to end poverty in Alameda County, Calif.

ALL IN is working towards this goal with attention to making community members living in poverty arbiters of governmental action by building civic capacity to engage directly with local government and creating mechanisms for ongoing and deliberative collaboration in both the identification of policy priorities and program design. For example, in 2016, ALL IN awarded mini-grants to 74 community leaders and organizations to convene

listening sessions across the county to gauge community needs and identify recommendations to inform future policies or action projects.²¹ Of the 1,700 residents who participated, nearly 60 percent earned less than \$15,000 annually and half had received a high school diploma or less. Insights from these sessions will create an action plan for ALL IN. The infrastructure constructed by the listening sessions will provide necessary community feedback to iterate policy and programing interventions developed in response to priorities surfaced by the listening sessions themselves.

ASKING CITIZENS TO WEIGH IN AT THE OFFICE OF COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

The **Office of Community Wealth Building** (OCWB) was established as a permanent city agency in Richmond, Va., in 2015 to provide anti-poverty strategy and policy advice to the mayor and to implement municipal poverty reduction initiatives and systemic changes around housing, education, and economic development.

The OCWB emerged from an intensive investigation within Richmond by its residents into drivers of structural poverty and inequitable distribution of city benefits and the identification of solutions to redress these challenges.²² Engagement of, and representation by, community members experiencing poverty has been a key strategy for aligning priorities and program design. Recommendations from the process that created the OCWB were vetted by a citizen advisory board, consisting primarily of persons living or working in high-poverty neighborhoods.

OCWB's efforts to maintain a vital leadership role for community members living in poverty and amplify their voices throughout Richmond city government are ongoing. The OCWB has also convened four focus groups with community-based organizations and has an open invitation for community members to participate in listening sessions every Friday afternoon. Input is incorporated into the Community Wealth Building strategy.

Broader Implications

These examples are indicative of three themes that are crucial for building the kinds of institutions and policymaking processes needed to make democratic engagement meaningful, effective, and sustainable. First, they suggest a transformation in how governmental bodies and officials approach their work. Conventionally, government is driven by concerns about efficiency and effectiveness. The goal is often to cut costs, maintain order, and deliver on policy objectives. But a truly democratic institutional ecosystem requires governmental bodies that do more than simply provide services effectively. They must also create meaningful points of leverage and participation through which communities can exercise a share of decision-making power. These institutions must also cultivate these relationships with communities, whether it is in the form of encouraging greater enrollment for government services, or in the form of engaging communities on policy questions. This reorientation around civic engagement requires procedures that go beyond simple town halls or invitations for public comment. As the examples above suggest, meaningful civic engagement requires providing occasions for actual influence over policy outcomes.

This can create some tension for government officials, as it places them in positions that are somewhat open-ended, unstable, and open to potential conflict with community participants. But without this tension, it is unlikely that such participation would be meaningful. Indeed, the second key theme here is that creating legitimacy and buy-in from communities themselves requires efforts from government officials to show what government can do, and to show that the community's participation is being taken seriously. Without providing such emotionally satisfying forms of engagement and without going beyond mere service delivery or passive forms of input, governmental efforts at civic engagement will fail to generate the necessary buy-in.

Third, this reorientation requires a very different approach to investing in governments' own capacities, personnel, and skills. Effective civic engagement will necessarily require more experimentation, but such experimentation itself requires "political air cover" with support from above, giving space for governmental officials to try—and potentially fail—with alternative modes of participatory engagement. Furthermore, developing and implementing such participatory procedures requires that officials have the necessary support and resources in order to pursue these often time- and resource-intensive efforts. Success would also require a more diverse view of the skills and personnel needed for public service. Civic engagement requires its own form of expertise, and interfacing with communities requires a wide range of linguistic, interpersonal, and locally-rooted expertise.

To meet these broader personnel goals, government can both train and invest in existing staff, as well as think of creative ways to bring in a diverse crop of young people.²³ Government also needs a more sustainable pipeline of inclusive talent. This means recruiting both along traditional indicators of diversity, such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and education levels, and from diverse skillsets, expertise, and backgrounds. Outreach to traditionally marginalized communities (e.g., rethinking reliance on unpaid internships) can help provide various on-ramps into government work. At the same time, government needs to create incentives for officials to learn new skills and be exposed to creative thinking, which requires investing in bureaucracies and officials so that they are trained and empowered, with a mandate for genuine civic engagement.

Government also needs a more sustainable pipeline of inclusive talent. This means recruiting both along traditional indicators of diversity, such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and education levels, and from diverse skillsets, expertise, and backgrounds.

TOWARDS BUILDING TOMORROW'S DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The long-term crisis of our democracy is real, deep, and structural. Building a renewed democratic infrastructure will not be easy, nor will the strategies and principles described above by themselves be sufficient.

But there are important opportunities and insights to be derived from current efforts. By investing in the underlying infrastructure and capacities that enable grassroots communities to mobilize, organize, and exercise political power, we can not only create better forms of accountability and responsiveness, but also construct more inclusive solidarities.

By investing in the institutions and personnel of government itself, we can create new processes for decision-making that provide communities with meaningful forms of influence and power. Crucially, these interventions are not cheap, nor are they easy.

We need to think structurally, long-term, and to do so with full awareness that genuine democracy requires a serious commitment of resources and effort. The future of our democracy demands nothing less.

Summary of Key Findings

BUILDING CIVIC CAPACITY IN ORGANIZING

- Linking short-term campaigns with long-term goals is important.
- Cultivating local leaders, building skills, and constructing more inclusive solidarities and narratives over the long-term.
- Investing in communications infrastructures and narratives to enable successful civil society organizing.

BUILDING CIVIC CAPACITY IN GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

- Linking citizens and communities to meaningful opportunities for exercising real power creates genuine civic capacity.
- Shifting the approach of government beyond efficiency and service delivery to instead invest in processes and institutions that empower and engage. This approach expands the capacity of government to engage in more productive and participatory policymaking.

- Investing in governmental institutions and personnel to provide adequate political support, resources, and a more diverse view of skills makes the design and implementation of such participatory processes possible.

Summary of Policy Recommendations

Connect Participation with Power: People want to participate, but there are structural obstacles and growing frustration when feedback is not heard and implemented. However, these challenges can be overcome by giving people some power to make these changes. As one participant said, “if you give people real power over real money, they will step up.” At the same time, when making tangible changes that are responsive to community feedback, we cannot forget about large-scale systemic change and the potential financial obstacles holding people back. Invest in people; pay them to do the work so they can show up.

Test New Ideas in Rural Communities: Rural areas are good places to test new processes. While it is difficult to generalize about these communities, which are diverse, change can often be faster than in urban or suburban communities. Trust is a critical factor for motivating civic engagement and rural communities retain relatively high levels of trust and social cohesions.

Design Realistic Civic Engagement: Government needs ways to solve the information barrier challenges for busy people. What would help movement leaders and public servants better understand each other’s work? Governments need to regain trust, time, and motivation of citizens primarily through municipalities and local government where effects are tangible and there is a direct tie between representatives and citizens.

Build a Sustainable Funding Pipeline: Building a more sustainable funding pipeline requires both attention to the small wins as well as the capacity to address the longer-term questions. The examples highlighted in this paper often necessitate

unrestricted dollars to test new ideas beyond the traditional issue-based advocacy models. This may require more flexible funding models, which encourage collaboration and infrastructure, not only issue-specific campaigns.

Integrate In-Person and Online Tools: High touch, face-to-face organizing and online/data gathering requires integrating online and offline tools. When creating solidarities, it is important to recognize that not everyone can meet face to face. This requires providing the resources to encourage engagement, including stipends for participation, convenient meeting times and locations, transportation grants, childcare, and food.

Make the Case for Government: The government, including local government, needs to reach out to those not engaged. Show what government can do and is providing (and let them know that those services are coming from government). Listen and show that their input matters and is incorporated, that community members are part of government decision making. Demonstrate the roles local government can play: sometimes the role is rowing, steering, and serving. Often, it is knowing when to get out of the way.

Change the Narrative About Government: One obstacle to recruitment for local government is the pervasive negative narrative about working in government. A new narrative needs to be communicated about the opportunity for giving back to one’s community and the exciting leadership and career opportunities there.

Create Cross-Sector Engagement: Government is not the center of all problem solving; decision-making does not necessarily fall back on government. Create spaces for multi-sector organizations to bring citizens together to look at problems and talk about substantive issues. This requires joint leadership and problem-solving. It may also include leveraging money outside of government and contractors and tapping into larger pools of resources for deepening civic engagement.

Notes

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10 See e.g. Charles Tilly, *Democracy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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14 “Home.,” CoWorker.org. <https://home.coworker.org/>.

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