

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Realizing Democracy Supplement
Realizing Democracy
By K. Sabeel Rahman

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2020

Copyright © 2019 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

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

We 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

K. SABEEL RAHMAN is the president of Demos and an associate professor of law at Brooklyn Law School.

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

Power 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

HAHRIE HAN is the inaugural director of the SNF Agora Institute and a professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University.