

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Realizing Democracy Supplement
Reclaiming Civil Society
By Marshall Ganz & Art Reyes III

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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

The 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

MARSHALL GANZ is the Rita E. Hauser Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Organizing, and Civil Society at the Harvard Kennedy School, an organizer, educator, and author of *Why David Sometimes Wins*.

ART REYES III is the founding executive director of *We the People*—Michigan, and a native of Flint, Michigan.

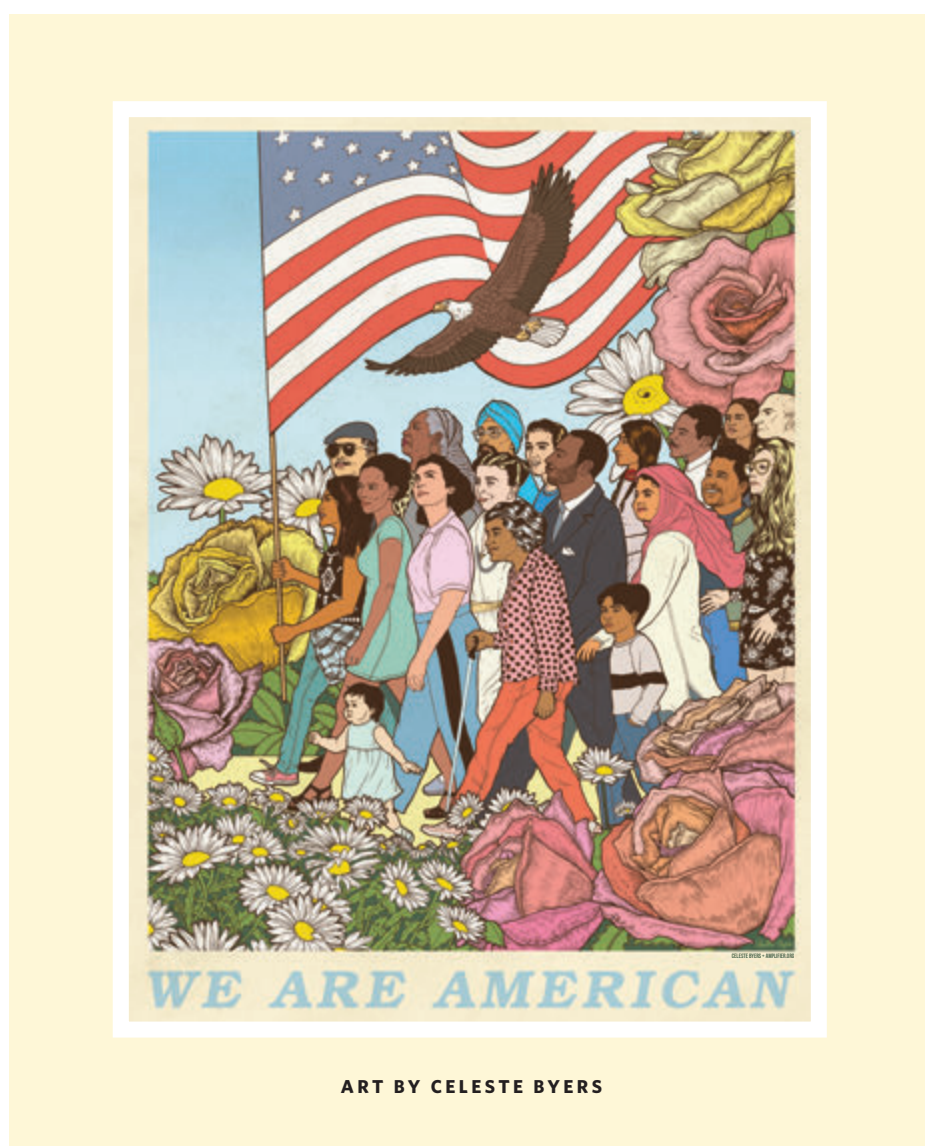
of government. Political scientist Sidney Verba once observed that liberal democracy is a gamble that equality of voice can balance inequality of resources. Inequality of power—especially political power—can cripple democratic practice even more than inequality of wealth. In the American context, racism 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



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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

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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

The 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

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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.

DORAN SCHRANTZ is the executive director of Faith In Minnesota.

MICHELLE OYAKAWA is a lecturer at The Ohio State University.

LIZ MCKENNA is a postdoctoral scholar at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

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