Realizing Democracy Supplement
Against Nostalgia
By Lisa Garcia Bedolla
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Three takeaways to establish the structural and institutional guardrails necessary to achieving the democracy we need and deserve.

BY LISA GARCÍA BEDOLLA

The articles in this supplement outline the changes that need to happen within civil society, government, and the economy in order for our society to realize its full democratic promise, arguably, for the first time. The articles’ authors propose and explain the key principles needed in order to establish those guardrails. The goal is to provide a holistic diagnosis of the problem—one that does not romanticize history but instead learns critical lessons from it. The stories from the field are meant to exemplify the courageous transformation that is already happening across the country.

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

Reversing Institutional Capture | A government cannot be seen as democratic if it is not accountable to its people. America’s founders believed that state and local government were less dangerous than the federal government because they were closer to, and therefore more accountable to, the people. Hertel-Fernandez and Smith’s analysis suggests the Founders may have been wrong, showing how state governments have, for a variety of reasons, been captured by “the political interests of the well-organized, wealthy few at the expense of the broader public.” Yet Hatch and Gerstein make clear that state and local government can also be seen as potential sites of democratic opportunity, as is evident in their success electing progressive prosecutors and working with attorneys general in localities across the country.

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

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

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