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A Program Review
of the
**PROMOTING ELECTORAL REFORM
AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION
(PERDP) INITIATIVE**
of the
Ford Foundation



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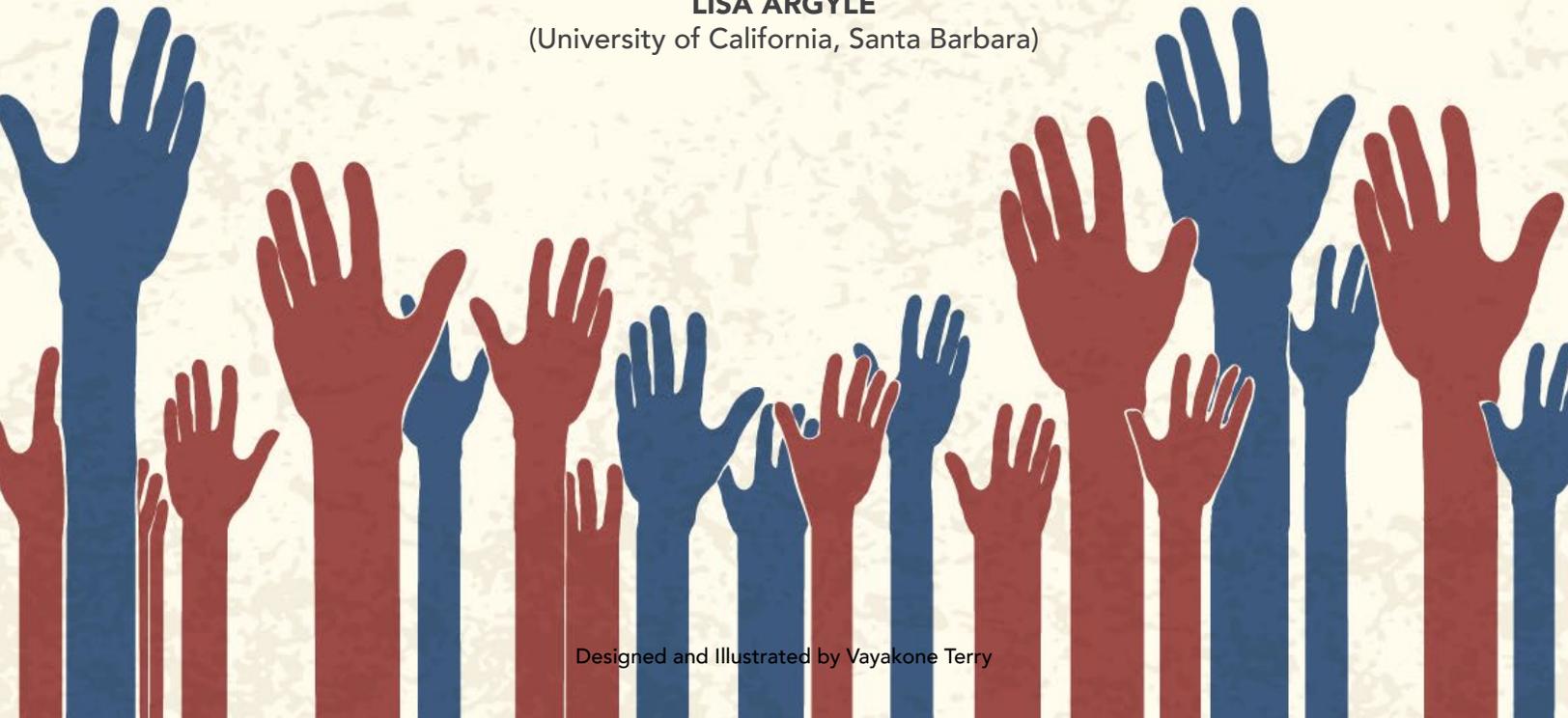


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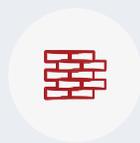
Project Background + Key Questions

As part of its strategic redesign process in 2015, the Ford Foundation sought a systematic review of its Promoting Electoral Reform and Democratic Participation (PERDP) initiative in the United States. The overarching goal of the review was to understand the extent to which a clear theory of change existed in PERDP's work, and whether that theory of change matched broader understandings of what worked in strengthening civic engagement and democracy. Our goal was not to assess particular grants or funding choices. Instead we sought to synthesize learning about strategies for increasing civic participation and improving the functioning of American democracy by looking broadly at both scholarly research and the experiences of PERDP.

In its new structure, the Ford Foundation folds the work of PERDP into a new thematic area called Civic Engagement and Government (CEG). Both PERDP and CEG seek to use government and political processes to improve the lived experience of ordinary people, particularly in ways that ameliorate inequality. Specifically, the PERDP initiative articulated its goals as follows:



To secure sustained increases in civic participation within historically disenfranchised communities, primarily through litigation and policy advocacy;



To build and strengthen vehicles of collective action that contest for power and increase meaningful participation in elections and other aspects of civic life.¹

Because the goal of the report was to help the CEG team be forward-looking, we sought to identify the shared questions in CEG and PERDP to define the boundaries of our work. Some things are necessarily left out, such as discussions of race, since CEG does not focus on “historically disenfranchised communities” as PERDP did. Yet, PERDP and CEG share many underlying assumptions. At their most basic level, both programs assume that strengthening mechanisms for democratic participation will allow people to have voice in governance in ways that improve people’s lives. Further, CEG shares PERDP’s recognition that proactive efforts must be made to protect and expand the ability of communities of color, the poor, and others to participate.

For PERDP and CEG to achieve their stated goals, democratic participation must have three (inter-related) characteristics: it must be powerful, possible, and probable. Put another way, for PERDP and CEG to succeed, participation has to make a difference (powerful), people have to be able to participate (possible), and they have to want to participate (probable).

This framework drove our inquiry. The key questions, in other words, asked what we have learned about making participation powerful, possible, and probable. In particular:

1. *If and when is participation powerful? Does participation matter?* Underlying most approaches to democratic reform is the assumption that increasing the participation of ordinary people will make government more responsive and accountable to their needs. Is this true? What are the conditions under which democratic participation is likely to influence outcomes in ways that improve the lived experience of ordinary people?
2. *How do we make participation possible and probable?* Good solutions begin with correctly diagnosing the problem. In the context of PERDP and CEG, understanding how to improve civic engagement and democratic participation must begin with an understanding of what factors make people's participation both possible and probable.

This report summarizes core findings and recommendations from the review. In addition to the analyses described above, we also undertook an analysis of PERDP's grant proposals and reports. Because findings related to this part of the project are particular to the grant-making processes within the Ford Foundation, they are summarized in Appendix A, which is intended to be an internal document for Foundation staff.

Research Strategy

To undertake the review, we examined a wide array of data, enumerated in greater detail in Appendix B. In sum, our data consisted of interviews, coding of PERDP grant proposals and reports from 2013-14, a review of 62 internal and external documents shared with us by the Ford Foundation, and a review of extant academic literature. Our interviews were semi-structured conversations with 47 grantees, funders, Ford Foundation staff, academics, and other practitioners selected through a purposive sampling process.



PARTICIPATION HAS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE (POWERFUL), PEOPLE HAVE TO BE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE (POSSIBLE), AND THEY HAVE TO WANT TO PARTICIPATE (PROBABLE).

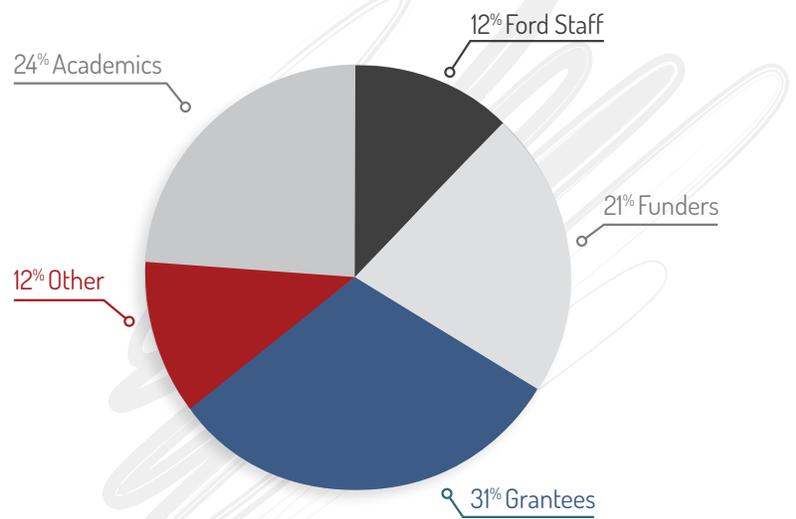


Fig. 1 - Distribution of Interviewees

Core Findings and Recommendations: An Executive Summary

Our analysis began with the idea that achieving the goals of PERDP and CEG depends on rendering participation powerful (it has to matter), possible (people have to be able to do it), and probable (people have to want to do it).

Research paints a bleak picture. Perhaps the key finding is that participation in the United States is, at best, only conditionally powerful, possible, and probable. The reality of American democracy falls far short of its ideal. The participation of ordinary people only sometimes influences political outcomes, if at all. Only some can participate, and only some want to participate. Our interviewees agreed: 87% of practitioners and funders interviewed argued that democratic participation in this current moment is uniquely troubled. Further, because power imbalances are baked into the structure of American democracy, these institutions and processes perpetuate these inequities.

What choices remain for organizations that have committed to changing the status quo to make participation not only powerful, but also possible and probable for ordinary people? The challenge is differentiating between mutable and immutable characteristics about “the world as it is” to identify possible points of intervention that move us closer to an imagined “world as it could be.” What facts about the world are given, and what can we change?

Here, we summarize our core recommendations. In each section, we identify the findings we take as given about the “world as it is” to expose the assumptions associated with each recommendation. The full report elaborates the analyses underlying each recommendation in greater detail.



Making Participation Powerful: Invest in organizations, and focus especially on organizations that (a) can link authentic grassroots power with elite lobbying relationships, and (b) have strategic capacities.

Participation is powerful when the people who participate—or the organizations that represent them—influence governing decisions. What do we know about what influences governance? Our starting premise is that there are no magic bullets. Consider the ability to make policy change. Many different factors are theorized to influence policy change, including having more money, more people, a better message, superior technology, or winning elections. Research shows that while all of these factors matter, none are dispositive. In other words, the pathway between what you have (your resources) and what you get (your goals) is uncertain.



PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES IS, AT BEST, ONLY CONDITIONALLY POWERFUL, POSSIBLE, AND PROBABLE.

87%

Of practitioners and funders interviewed argued that democratic participation in this current moment is uniquely troubled.

Given this uncertainty, the question to ask in assessing the likelihood of achieving change is not just what do you have, but how do you use what you have to strategically navigate the uncertainty. An underlying theme unifying research on the way all of these factors influence change is the importance of organizations. Organizations matter: for any of these factors to make a difference, leaders of organizations (or coalitions of organizations) must make choices about how to use them.

What kinds of organizations and coalitions are best able to influence change?

Research reveals two key characteristics that matter:

1. **First**, organizations or coalitions with the ability to link authentic grassroots power with elite lobbying relationships, like the National Rifle Association, are more likely to be effective. Analyses of successful change efforts finds that having elite lobbying relationships is more predictive of winning than having more lobbying money, campaign money, membership, or other resources. Research also shows that the organizations and coalitions best positioned to develop those relationships are those that can consistently demonstrate the ability to move a constituency.
2. **Second**, organizations with strategic capacity can more effectively navigate the uncertainties of politics. Strategic capacity, simply put, refers to an organization’s ability to develop good strategy. All organizations, especially social change organizations, face constant uncertainty and a rapidly changing socio-political environment. Strategic capacity enables an organization to nimbly respond to these pressures ways that move it closer to achieving its goals. Management scholars argue that an organization’s strategic capacity is a function of who its leaders are and its ability to manage three intertwined processes: its process of learning about changes in its environment, its process for making decisions about where and when to act, and its process for reconfiguring itself in response to change.

WHAT KINDS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND COALITIONS ARE BEST ABLE TO INFLUENCE CHANGE?



Organizations that link grassroots power with elite relationships



Organizations with Strategic Capacity



Making Participation Possible: Couple systemic reform with efforts to make participation probable.

Systemic reform efforts (including litigation, election law, election administration, election protection, Census, and redistricting work) are designed to lower barriers to participation to make it easier for people to vote and otherwise participate. The bulk of evidence, however, shows that lowering barriers to voting through systemic reform alone has limited impact. If we build it, in other words, people will not necessarily come.

IF WE BUILD IT, PEOPLE WILL NOT NECESSARILY COME.

Systemic reforms are needed to keep the pathways to participation open, but as many of our interviewees argued, the best way to keep these pathways open is to create a constituency that fights to maintain the right to vote. Research finds that the effect of any one systemic reform is greatest when coupled with coordinated mobilization efforts.

THE BEST WAY TO KEEP THESE PATHWAYS OPEN: *Create a constituency that fights to maintain the right to vote.*



Making Participation Probable: Build Infrastructure that can Enable Transformative, Relational Experiences.

We begin with the premises that people are social beings and that people are not born with the capacities of democratic citizenship. A wide array of research has demonstrated that dynamic social interactions and identities shape people's decisions to take civic and political action. These interactions and identities do not develop in isolation, however. Instead, people's identities and their choices about if and how to act develop in relationship with others.

Where can the social interactions and relationships that transform people's identities and proclivities to participate be intentionally cultivated? Membership-based civic organizations have the potential to create transformative social interactions that shape the decision to act, and the development of political identities over time. Yet, in the United States, organizations focused on this kind of transformation have declined over time: our democracy has created a set of interests and incentives that have led to the decline of parties, unions, and other institutions that focus on transforming ordinary people to build the capacities they need to participate.



*Organizations have the potential to create transformative social interactions **THAT SHAPE THE DECISION TO ACT**, BUT organizations focused on this kind of transformation have declined over time...*



Working at all levels: To make Participation Powerful, Possible, and Probable, Develop a Profits + Assets Model that Incorporates Feedback Loops.

Private investors commonly assess both the profits and assets for a company in making investment decisions. Examining profits allows investors to understand how much the company has earned in the past. Examining assets allows investors to assess the likelihood the company will continue to earn those profits going forward. It is common wisdom that investing in a company that earns large profits without having any assets going forward is a bad investment—it is unlikely to earn profits in the future.

Although the analogy is imperfect, we begin with the premise that the work of democratic organizations is similarly interconnected. These organizations seek “profits” in the immediate-term, such as electoral wins, policy gains, and other tangible victories. At the same time, we should examine whether they can achieve those gains in a way that builds their assets going forward. In this section and throughout the report, we discuss organizations, but these findings can also be applied to ecosystems of organizations that work together to achieve a common goal.

What are the “assets” democratic organizations should consider? We identify three types:

- 1. First**, what are the downstream impacts of any political battle the organization engages? So often, success is measured in transactional terms that focus only on whether voters turn out, candidates win, or policies pass. Long-term success depends not only on if those outcomes are achieved, but how those outcomes are achieved. Are votes gained, elections won, and policies passed in ways that build the strategic capacity of organizational leaders, that strengthen the relationship between the organization and its constituency, and that translate those relationships into elite lobbying power? Considering downstream impacts thus helps build the longer-term capacities that lead to durable social change.
- 2. Second**, do policies include positive feedback loops, or organizing hooks that make it easier to organize constituencies? The nature and design of a policy can launch feedback loops that create incentives for organizations to organize constituencies around a policy—or not. The creation of Social Security, for instance, created incentives to organize the elderly as an active constituency in American politics. These kinds of policy feedback loops can make participation both more possible and probable, and help cultivate a constituency that will advocate for and protect outcomes over time, thus making a policy more durable and the potential for expansion greater. Historically, policies with these organizing hooks built into them have created durable and scaled change.
- 3. Third**, a particular feedback loop to examine is the relationship between local, state, and national change: The federated structure of US government—meaning the nested structure of government at the local, state, and national levels—means that developing the power to influence change requires attention at all three levels. Historical trends have shown that organizations are more likely to concentrate their resources at the national level, building offices in Washington, D.C. Building national power, however, often depends on having a robust infrastructure at the state and local level. The challenge is to act at each level in a way that has positive feedback loops for other levels.

**WHAT ARE THE “ASSETS”
DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS
SHOULD CONSIDER?**



Downstream impacts of any political battle the organization engages



Positive feedback loops, or “organizing hooks”



Building a federated infrastructure

Below, we elaborate each of these core findings in greater detail.

Detailed Findings



MAKING PARTICIPATION POWERFUL

Why Organizations Matter

Democracy is premised on the idea that equality of voice can overcome inequality of resources.² By giving people the opportunity to exercise influence over governmental decisions regardless of the resources they have, participation has the potential to be a great equalizer. Yet, this process works only if participation actually influences governance. Does it?

To elucidate the role of participation, we first consider a range of other factors commonly thought to influence governance. We begin with a discussion of policy change, and later examine the ways that governing power goes beyond passing policies.³ When a policy passes (or fails), what explains victory or defeat? Here, we examine five factors most commonly cited as explanations for policy change (or lack thereof): public opinion (the public was not on our side), money (the other side outspent us), narratives/frames (we did not control the message), elections (our people lost the race), and numbers of people (the other side had more people). Each of these acts as a resource that potentially helps advocates win the change they seek.⁴

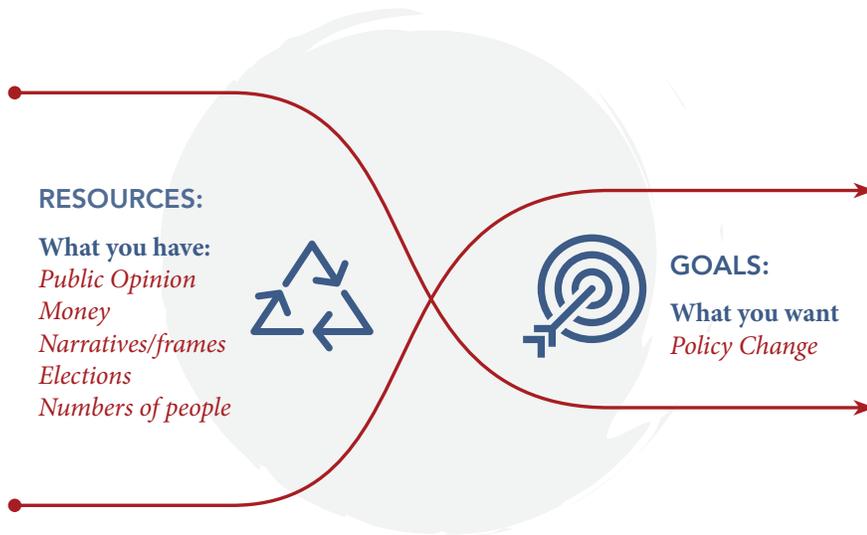


Fig. 2
Resources
Commonly
Thought to
Affect Policy
Change

What does research tell us about the effect of each?

- **Public Opinion:** In any democracy, perhaps the first place to begin examining factors that affect policy change is public opinion. To what extent does policy change reflect the opinions of a majority of people? Put another way, does policy change necessitate majority support in the mass public?

To answer this question, we should first distinguish responsiveness from congruence⁵. Political scientist Brandice Canes-Wrone argues that while there is much evidence that government policy is *responsive* to public opinion (as public opinion moves, so too does government policy), there is not as much evidence for *congruence* (government does not do what most people want)⁶. Consider, for instance, abortion policy: public opinion polls show that a majority of the public favors legal abortion with some restrictions. Policy shifts, however, are more responsive to ideological minorities—ardent pro-life or pro-choice advocates—than the general public.⁷

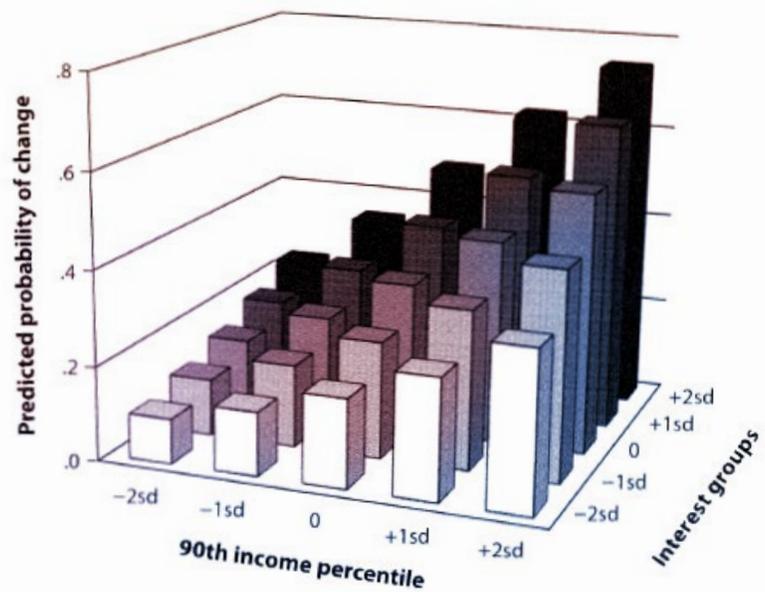
One way to reconcile the gap between responsiveness and congruence is to consider the question of to whom government is responsive. Government is responsive, but just not to everyone. Many recent studies have shown that government is far more responsive to the opinions of the very wealthy and, in fact, hardly responsive at all to unorganized opinions of people at the 10th or 50th income percentiles.⁸

In his study of inequality, Martin Gilens also finds that government is much more responsive to opinions that are organized and salient than unorganized opinion. In the graph copied below, Gilens shows how policy change becomes more likely as the wealthy become more supportive and as organized interests become more aligned.⁹

In sum, government is largely unresponsive to unorganized opinion among low and middle class people, but is more responsive when that opinion is organized.

Fig. 3

The Relationship of Public Opinion of the Wealthy, Alignment with Organized Interests, and the Probability of Policy Change (Source: Gilens 2013 p. 142)



- Money:** Perhaps the most common source of despair about American politics today is the sense that money drives politics. Indeed, there are many ways that money matters. Well-funded corporate lobbying far outstrips the amount of lobbying done by any other kind of pressure group and some studies of lobbying (primarily around trade, corporate regulation, taxation, and budgeting) show that it can affect policy outcomes. Yet, in perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies of policy change to date, Frank Baumgartner and his colleagues examine 98 policy debates over a multi-year period. As shown in Figure 4, they find that the side that has more money only wins 50 to 53 percent of the time (specifically, they examine financial resources from business, lobbying expenditures, campaign contributions, and financial resources from associations). Having more money, in other words, does not ensure victory. Baumgartner and his colleagues argue that this is, in part, because looking across all of the issue areas they examine, they find that both sides of an issue are able to marshal relatively comparable amounts of resources from a mix of corporate, citizen, and government advocacy groups.¹¹ Money matters, but it is hardly dispositive.



TYPE OF RESOURCE	% OF ISSUES WHERE THE SIDE WITH GREATER CONTROL OF THE RESOURCE WON	# OF ISSUES
High-level government allies	78***	23
Covered officials lobbying	63***	35
Mid-level government allies	60***	48
Business financial resources	53	34
Lobbying expenditures	52	58
Association financial resources	50	58
Membership	50	58
Campaign contributions	50	58

Fig. 4
The Relationship of Various Resources to Policy Change (Source: Baumgartner, et al. 2009 p. 208)

- Narratives/Frames:** In any policy battle there exists what people commonly call the “battle of ideas.” Each side wants to control the narrative, which encompasses everything from the broad frames that media, leaders, and others use to talk about the issue to the assumptions, stories, and symbols people consider when they think about the issue.

A wide range of research shows that frames matter in shaping both opinion and action.¹² Framing works because most people have a complicated mix of experiences that create a varied and often conflicting set of considerations that underlie any opinion they may offer.¹³ Most people do not, however, work carefully through all of these complex considerations in forming political opinions. Mass communication frames work by shifting which or how much of each consideration people take into account in considering an issue. To reach people, mass communication frames thus seek to resonate with people's interpretations of their experiences.

Developing mass communication frames is more difficult for movements or organizations seeking to challenge common assumptions people use in making meaning of their experiences. Some researchers argue that changing people's interpretations or the way they make meaning of experiences happens not through mass communication, but instead in social contexts within which deeper conversations or relationships can happen.¹⁴ Organizations have enormous potential to create that relational context.¹⁵

Much research also shows that the "quality" of an idea, narrative, or policy does not determine whether it is likely to succeed in the political arena.¹⁶ Certain kinds of frames—particularly those that can clearly articulate both the challenge and the hope around a particular political issue—are the ones most likely to be effective.¹⁷ Frames are most useful, in other words, when they can help people understand why a problem is a problem, and what a plausible solution is for addressing that problem.

Other research asks why particular narratives or frames become more widespread than others. Most of this research finds that frames are most likely to spread when an organization or group intentionally tries to spread it, and is part of organizational networks through which it can spread.¹⁸

- **Elections:** Another common hypothesis is that policy change depends on getting the right people—or the right party—elected into office. In their comprehensive analysis of policy change across multiple issue areas, Baumgartner and his colleagues find that the impact election outcomes have on policy change is contingent on the partisan nature of the issue.¹⁹ The more partisan the issue, the more electoral change matters. The effect of any one elected official, from the president to individual legislators, however, is highly constrained. Individual political actors are most effective when they are part of larger governing coalitions.



THE "QUALITY" OF AN IDEA, NARRATIVE, OR POLICY DOES NOT DETERMINE WHETHER IT IS LIKELY TO SUCCEED IN THE POLITICAL ARENA.

- **Numbers of People:** Democratic government is not designed to be responsive to individuals acting alone, but instead to individuals acting collectively. Yet, much research shows that individual actions, even when added together, are not powerful. Data in Figure 4 show that in policy fights, the side with greater numbers of people (more membership) was no more likely to win than the other side.²⁰ In elections, lots of individuals may turn out to vote, but elections alone do not produce responsive government.²¹ Sheer numbers of people, in other words, are no more dispositive than other resources.

Conceptually, it is important to differentiate simple numbers of people from collective action. Scholars of collective action argue that collective action is not the mere result of adding individual acts of participation together. Instead, collective action makes the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. It has the potential to become powerful when people’s resources, taken together, have a greater impact than they would have alone. The challenge, which we discuss further in the report, is to figure how to build collective action that can be transformative.



Collective action is not the mere result of adding individual acts of participation together.

INSTEAD, COLLECTIVE ACTION MAKES THE WHOLE GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS.

So, why organizations?

First, we should emphasize that the research reported above does not imply that these resources do not matter. Any organization seeking to make change is, by definition, fighting entrenched power structures that have already institutionalized their power into status quo policy.²² In this uphill battle, having more of any of these resources—money, people, electoral victories, etc.—is both needed and helpful. The impact each of them have on policy outcomes, however, is very contingent. None can clear a path to victory.

Change, then, does not depend on how much of a particular resource advocates have, but instead how that resource is organized and deployed. Having more people on your side may facilitate change in some contexts, but not others. Whether participation, or any other resource, becomes powerful depends on how it is used. Organizations, or coalitions of organizations, are the conduits that leverage resources to exercise influence over the policymaking process.

Organizations and the ecosystems in which they operate matter because it is organizational leaders who make choices about how to deploy resources like public opinion, money, narratives, allied elected officials, and people. They can also pool resources together to aggregate how much an organization or coalition has, and also how they are deployed. As Tocqueville argued in his observations of American democracy in the 1830s, organizations make democracy work because they transform everyday resources people have—a bus token, for instance, in the context of the Montgomery Bus Boycott—into a potential source of power.



ORGANIZATIONS ARE CONDUITS THAT LEVERAGE RESOURCES TO EXERCISE INFLUENCE OVER THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS.

They make democracy work by transforming everyday resources people have - like a bus token in the Montgomery Bus Boycott - into a potential source of power.

Leveraging the Grassroots to Develop Elite Relationships

If organizations matter, what kinds of organizations are most likely to have influence? Research shows that powerful organizations leverage an authentic grassroots base to develop elite relationships. Baumgartner and his colleagues find that the resource that is most predictive of whether policy advocates win is relationships. In a policy fight, the side that had more relationships with high-level government allies was likely to win 78 percent of the time (see Figure 4). These elite lobbying relationships are more predictive of winning than having more lobbying money, campaign money, or membership.²³

78%

In a policy fight, the side that had more relationships with high-level government allies was likely to win 78 percent of the time

This finding naturally begs the question of what kinds of advocacy organizations are most likely to possess those relationships.

Examples of organizations that consistently show the ability to move a constituency and build elite relationships: The National Rifle Association and Americans for Prosperity.



Research shows that it is groups that can leverage independent, authentic grassroots power to create the kind of elite relationships Baumgartner, et al. describe.²⁴ In this case, “authentic grassroots power” refers to the ability to move a constituency, such as influencing the way they vote, accurately representing their views on issues, and influencing the other political choices they make. When organizations are able to demonstrate their ability to move a constituency over time, they develop what scholars call a “recurrent reputation” for consistently being

able to move a constituency. Having this reputation facilitates relationship-building between groups and elected officials because those elected officials like the “competitive advantage” they get from working with this group.²⁵

On the right, we see vivid confirmation of this theory in observing the power of groups like the National Rifle Association or, more recently, the Koch brothers’ grassroots organization, Americans for Prosperity, and the broader Koch network within which AFP operates.²⁶ Even though these organizations hold views that are not representative of majority opinion, they are consistently able to move policy in their direction.²⁷

The Importance of Strategic Capacity

To build power in an uncertain world, organizations need strategic capacity. Strategic capacity refers to the likelihood an organization will develop effective strategy. Strategic capacity enables organizations to overcome the power imbalances, resource deficits, and persistent uncertainties that characterize any change process. It is not, in other words, about how much you have, but how you use what you have.

Marshall Ganz argues that a key explanation for the United Farm Worker's success in unionizing California's 100,000 farmworkers in the 1960s and 1970s had to do with its strategic capacity. Why did they succeed, for instance, where the better-resourced AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee failed? Ganz argues that the UFW's unique success is a function of their strategic capacity. As Ganz argues, strategic capacity is rooted in the combination of salient knowledge, learning processes, and motivation at the intersection of individual (identities, networks, repertoires) and organizational (deliberation, resource flows, accountability) factors. Organizations with the strategic capacity link these individual and organizational factors to the relevant constituencies being organized.²⁸

WHY DID THE UNITED FARM WORKERS SUCCEED IN UNIONIZING CA'S 100,000 FARMWORKERS IN THE 1960S AND 1970S WHEN THE BETTER-RESOURCED AFL-CIO AWOC FAILED? THEIR STRATEGIC CAPACITY.

Although they focus on for-profit firms, management scholars have devoted more time to studying strategic capacity, finding that a firm's strategic capacity differentiates high-performing firms from their counterparts.²⁹ What kinds of firms are likely to have these capacities? These scholars find that strategic capacity is dependent on two things: first, the identity of the leaders, and second, the organizational setting.

- Who the leaders are is important because their strategic capacity is shaped by what their motivations are, what kind of knowledge and people they have access to through their (strong and weak) relationships, and the kinds of tactics and strategies they consider.
- The organizational setting matters because it shapes the structures and processes that make leaders more or less likely to be able to identify, learn about, and respond to changes in the environment. The organizational setting, for instance, determines the extent to which there are accountability mechanisms that enable an organization to be responsive to its constituency, and its ability to draw resources from that constituency.

An organization's strategic capacity is partly dependent on the leaders it selects. It is not just about finding the right people, however. Organizations can also develop practices, systems, and processes to enhance their strategic capacity. Management scholars argue that there are three main processes an organization needs:³⁰

THREE PROCESSES THAT UNDERLIE STRATEGIC CAPACITY: *Sensing, seizing, and transforming*



(a) **First**, organizations have to be able to “sense” how the world around them is changing. How are the needs of their constituency changing, for instance?



(b) **Second**, organizations need structures and processes that enable and incentivize them to “seize” new opportunities and proactively address challenges. In the context of for-profit firms, management scholar David Teece discusses this in terms of adjusting their “business model.” For social change organizations, the question focuses more around their theory of change—what is the organization’s theory for how their actions will help them achieve their goals? How will they know when that theory of change is working, or not?



(c) **Finally**, organizations have to be able to “transform” themselves. When the organization realizes that it must adjust its theory of change, how will it actually make those changes?

There are certain organizational characteristics that make organizations more likely to be able to undertake these processes. Management scholars think of them as “microfoundations” or “enabling conditions.”³¹ A few key characteristics relevant to social change organizations are detailed below:

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL CONDITIONS ENABLE OR MAKE STRATEGIC CAPACITY MORE LIKELY?



(A) STRUCTURE:

The ability to maintain a tension between decentralization and centralization: Organizations need to have enough decentralization and local autonomy to have multiple conduits through which they receive information about changing needs in their constituency and the socio-political environment. But that information also has to be communicated to and synthesized by centralized organizational leaders.



(B) GOVERNANCE:

Learning and decision-making processes that are free from bias: When the organization generates new learning about its constituency or its environment, how does it prioritize and make decisions about that information? Organizational leaders need to have analytical systems in place that allow them to generate the data they need to learn about these changing dynamics, but then need ways of making decisions about how to act.



(C) COMMITMENT

From staff and leaders: Organizations are better able to react nimbly to change when their staff is committed and loyal. These traits make people more willing to adapt to change.



(D) CO SPECIALIZATION

(or interdependence): When organizations need to restructure or remake themselves in response to changing needs, that change is made easier when there is co-specialization or interdependence, between organizational units. People within distinct units need to have relationships with and expertise in how the other units work, making it easier to take groups apart and reconfigure them.



(E) ACCOUNTABILITY:

Organizations have to be grounded in their constituencies and have mechanisms of communication and accountability in place to know what the changing needs of the constituencies are.



MAKING PARTICIPATION POSSIBLE

Necessary But Not Sufficient

Strategies designed to make participation possible encompass a wide array of initiatives that can broadly fit into three main categories:³²

- Policies designed to expand participation at the polls, including things like motor voter laws, same-day registration, restoration of felons' rights, vote-by-mail, and other such policies.
- Efforts to improve election administration, including things like modernization of voting technology, proper enforcement of laws related to voting, and training and relationship-building with election officials.
- Election protection efforts, including things like litigation to protect against voter suppression or other laws designed to limit participation.

All of these efforts focus on making participation possible by clearing or opening pathways to participation. 82% of funders and practitioners interviewed, and 100% of systemic reform experts agreed that these kinds of systemic reform efforts are necessary but not sufficient.

For decades, reformers have been focusing on these kind of systemic reform efforts on the assumption that lowering barriers to voting will make it easier for more people to vote. The bulk of evidence, however, shows that lowering barriers to voting through systemic reform has limited impact on increasing overall turnout rates.³³ Looking at particular reforms, research is most optimistic about the effect of same-day registration laws. Research on same-day registration generally shows an estimated 4-8 percentage point increase in turnout, with the impacts disproportionately large for low-propensity groups.³⁴ Research on NVRA is mixed, but generally shows increases in registration with an unclear or negligible impact on turnout, especially among low-propensity groups.³⁵

The reforms alone are not “self-actuating”—in other words, simply passing the policy does not increase turnout. More work on the impact of these reforms on low propensity voters is needed. In general, however, research shows that the effect of these reforms is modest unless coupled with coordinated implementation efforts (which often include a voter education and mobilization effort).³⁶ Thus, as many of our interviewees argued, to make these reforms self-actuating, and keep these pathways to participation open over time, the best strategy is to create a constituency that fights to maintain the right to vote.

82% *Of funders and practitioners*

100% *Of systemic reform experts*

AGREED THAT SYSTEMIC REFORMS ARE NECESSARY BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

*Same-day registration generally shows an estimated **4-8% POINT** increase in turnout.*



MAKING PARTICIPATION PROBABLE

The Decline of People's Agency

Part of the reason why systemic reforms are limited in their impact is that people not only have to be able to participate, they also have to want to participate. Participation not only has to be possible, it has to be probable. Yet, as 70% of the funders and practitioners interviewed argued, at the root of declining rates of participation is the sense that people do not feel like their participation matters. People do not feel like they have any real reason or opportunity to exercise voice in the political process. People's sense of agency is in decline, especially given negative or incomplete experiences of government in their lives.

This lack of caring comes as no surprise when we examine research showing that most people have negative or, at best, incomplete experiences of the role of government in their lives. Suzanne Mettler, for instance, finds that many middle-class people who benefit from different government programs—ranging from education savings accounts to welfare to tax credits—believe that they “have not used a government social program.”³⁷ In addition, other scholars find a trend towards increasing privatization of public goods and political processes in the twenty-first century.³⁸ As a result, government is what Mettler calls a “submerged state,” since the role of government in people's lives is effectively submerged from view.

People of color or lower-income people have experiences of government that are worse than incomplete; they are often quite negative. Scholars Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman, for instance, find that the effect of jail time on people's probability of voting is larger than the effect of things like income or race.³⁹ People whose experience of government is primarily the associated with the penal state, in other words, are much less likely to want to participate.

People's disaffection from government and the political process becomes evident in measures of people's political efficacy over time. Data show that people's sense of whether they have any say over government or whether public officials care about them has been declining since the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁰

THE SUBMERGED STATE:

64% of education savings account beneficiaries, 44% of Social Security beneficiaries, and 40% of beneficiaries of the GI Bill believe that they “have not used a government social program.” (Source: Mettler 2008)

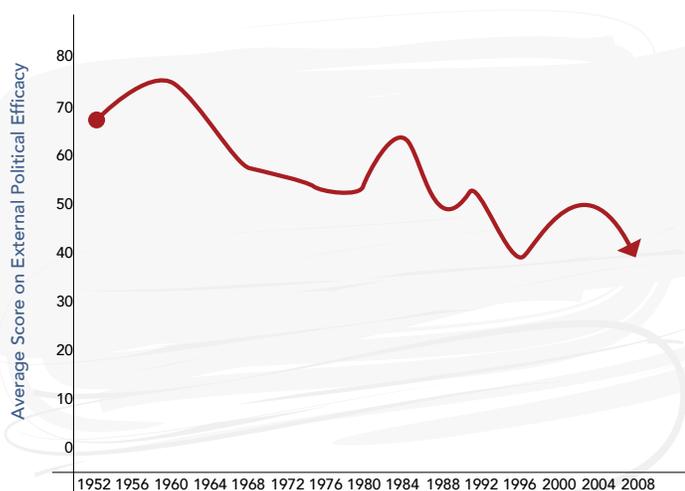


Fig. 5

Efficacy in America has been declining. (Data: American National Election Study. Index compiled from responses to two questions: “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and “I don’t think public officials care much what people like me think.”)

Organizations Transforming People's Agency

If a core problem in people's lack of participation is their declining sense of agency, where do people develop agency? Throughout American history, civic associations have played an important role in acting as Tocquevillian schools of democracy that shape people's identities as agents of social change. All kinds of associations, from churches to the Sierra Club, from MoveOn to the National Rifle Association, from Planned Parenthood to the Tea Party, have been foundational to making democracy work because they equipped people with the skills and motivations they needed to be active agents in our democracy.⁴¹

The transformative capacity of these organizations becomes evident in a study of the pro-life movement. Sociologist Ziad Munson finds that 47% of activists at the frontlines of the pro-life movement were either pro-choice or indifferent to issues of abortion when they joined the movement. Through their experiences with the pro-life groups in their community, however, not only did their views on the issue become transformed, so too did their sense of themselves as activists.⁴²

Organizations use a wide range of different strategies to engage people, however, and not all forms of mobilization are the same. Social psychologists define agency as the combination of competence and autonomy. Too often, organizations try to develop people's agency by developing their competence, or sense of efficacy, without giving them any real autonomy. Not giving people any real agency matters. Psychologists Brian Christens and Paul Speer, for instance, find a 28 percentage point difference in people's likelihood of ongoing participation with an organization based on what their early interactions with that organization were like.⁴³ Christens and Speer argue that the experiences most likely to predict ongoing activity are those that shaped people's sense of individual and collective agency. Certain kinds of activities make people much more likely to build the agency they need to stay involved than others.⁴⁴

Developing people's agency depends on investing in the kinds of organizations that can shape the social interactions that transform people's sense of individual and collective agency, and their experiences of government. Societal transformation (or powerful collective action), thus, begins with individual transformation.

The Decline of Transformative Organizations

Institutions (such as political parties, unions, and the like) that organize ordinary people have declined.⁴⁵ Now, there is a marked organizational imbalance in America, in which the number of organizations that represent business or wealthy

47%

Of activists at the frontlines of the pro-life movement were either pro-choice or indifferent to issues of abortion when they joined the movement

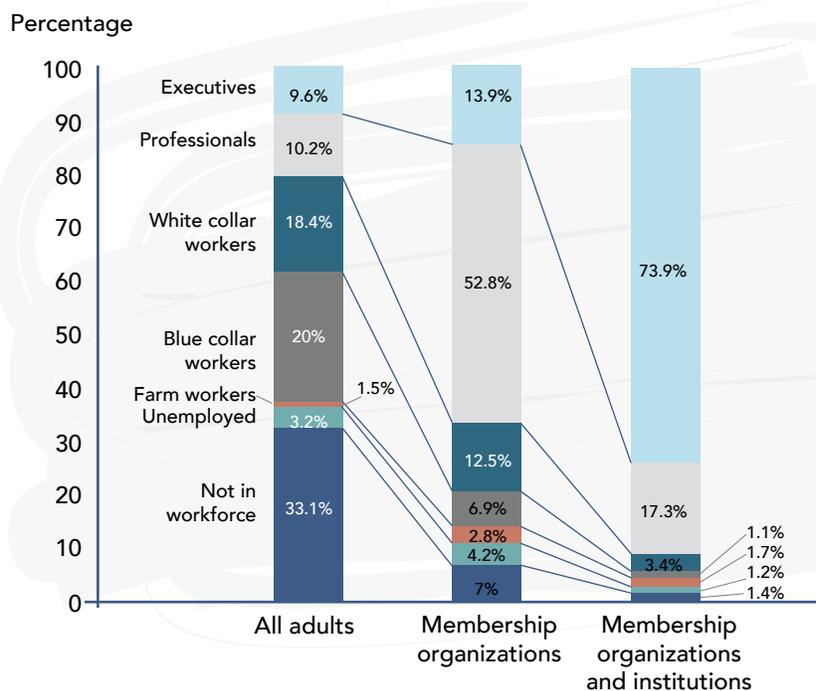


Social psychologists define agency as the combination of competence and autonomy.

TOO OFTEN, ORGANIZATIONS TRY TO DEVELOP PEOPLE'S AGENCY BY DEVELOPING THEIR COMPETENCE (OR SENSE OF EFFICACY) WITHOUT GIVING THEM ANY REAL AUTONOMY.

people far outnumber those that represent the middle class, the working class, or the poor.⁴⁶ Further, that imbalance has only been growing over time, as the number and influence of organizations representing business has grown, and unions have declined.⁴⁷ In their examination of the representation of voice in interest groups in America, Schlozman, Verba, and Brady find, for instance, that: while professionals make up only 10% of the general adult U.S. population, 53% of the membership organizations in Washington DC represent them. Conversely, while blue-collar workers make-up about one-quarter (24%) of the general adult population in the U.S., only 7% of the membership organizations in Washington DC represent them.⁴⁸

Fig. 6
Distribution of Adult Workforce Statuses, Parallel Membership Organizations and All Economic Organizations. (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012, p. 329)



In addition, as with many other democracies around the world, the linkages between voters and political parties have declined. Whereas in some countries, parties play the role of connecting people to politics, in America, they do not.⁴⁹

Given the crucial role that organizations play in (a) helping ordinary people have voice in governance processes, and (b) shaping people’s willingness and ability to engage as active citizens, is it any surprise that participation is moribund if such organizations do not exist? The lack of organizations actively organizing and representing constituents hinders the likelihood that participation will be either probable or powerful. This pattern is especially true if we consider the importance of organizations that have a strong enough local infrastructure to connect meaningfully with constituencies on the ground.

One of the unique challenges facing social change advocates in the twenty-first century is the decline of democratic institutions that have the local infrastructure they need.⁵⁰ As shown in Figure 7 below, large membership-based organizations have historically had a local and state-based infrastructure that enabled their membership growth. Since the 1960s, there has been a trend towards advocacy organizations focusing their efforts on building up their national organizations at the expense of their local organizations. As a result, the number of local organizations with the strategic capacities, leadership structure, and constituency base they need is relatively scarce.⁵¹

LARGE MEMBERSHIP BASED ORGANIZATIONS HAVE HISTORICALLY HAD A LOCAL AND STATE-BASED INFRASTRUCTURE THAT ENABLED THEIR MEMBERSHIP GROWTH

Making participation more probable, then, depends in part on strengthening the kinds of institutions that connect people to the political process, and building the infrastructure that makes that work possible.

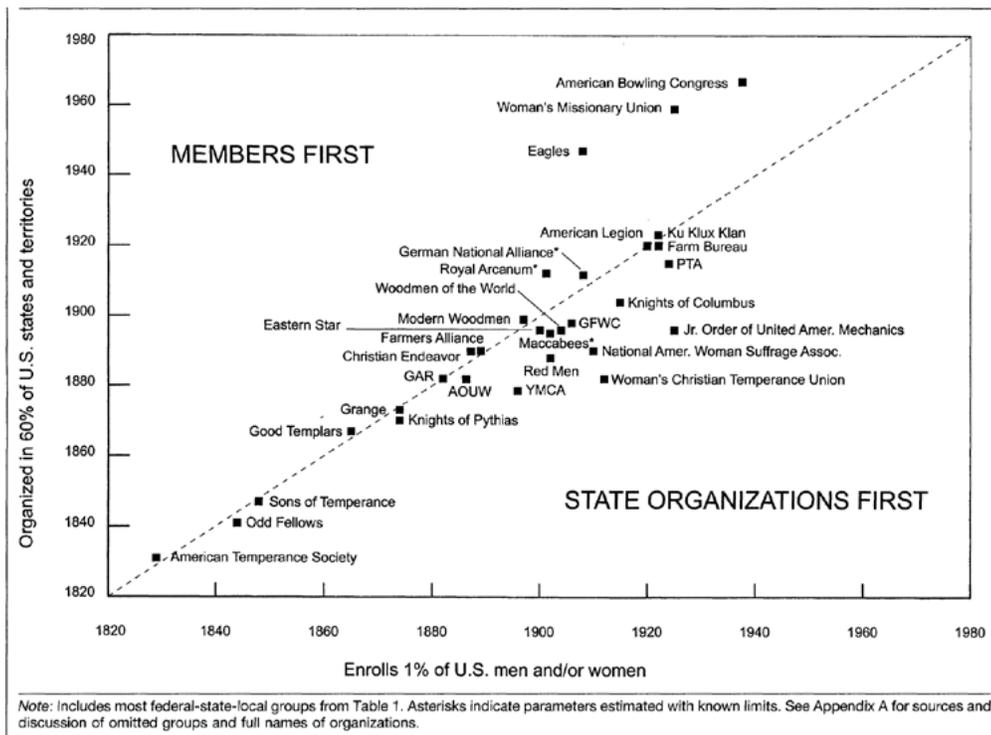


Fig. 7
Membership Growth and Institutionalization of State Units in Large U.S. Membership Federations (Source: Skocpol, Ganz, Munson 2000)



WORKING AT MULTIPLE LEVELS: MAKING PARTICIPATION POWERFUL, POSSIBLE, AND PROBABLE

↓ Downstream Effects

Because democracy is a strategic game played between shifting sets of individuals, organizations, and institutions, any action has downstream impacts because of the way it shapes the incentives of other actors in the democratic system—from policies that shape choices about who organizations mobilize, to mobilization efforts that shape the extent to which ordinary people feel like they can be agents of change. Reform must recognize the interconnectedness of systemic reform, organizations, and individual behaviors.

Developing a profits + assets model of investing recognizes and strategically leverages these downstream impacts. Instead of creating a false dichotomy between focusing on immediate wins and longer-term capacity building, the key is to identify strategies in which organizations can work towards achieving immediate wins (profits), while still building their capacity for the long-term (assets). In this case, those longer-term assets often focus on the capacities of the organizations themselves. Any system of metrics, then, should capture both the profits an organization is achieving, as well as the assets it is building.

If we consider the idea that interventions can happen at three levels—the institutional/systemic level, the organizational level, or the individual level—the challenge is to identify reforms that work at multiple levels.

For instance, how can we design institutional/policy reforms in such a way that they have feedback effects on organizations? How a policy is designed can have a strong impact on if and how it shapes incentives for organizations to organize constituencies or not. The key is to focus on identifying systemic reforms and narratives that change the pattern of incentives for organizations. What reforms create the incentives and resources needed for organizations to invest in the constituencies you care about?

Similarly, when intervening at the organizational level, how can we do so in ways that build strategic capacity for individuals who are part of the organization, or that strengthen the ability of governments to pass or implement policy? Because organizations are in the middle, how they do their work can affect the individuals who are part of the organizations, as well as the institutional context within which they work.



PROFIT + ASSETS

The key is to identify strategies in which organizations can work towards achieving immediate wins (profits), while still building their capacity for the long-term (assets).

HOW A POLICY IS DESIGNED CAN HAVE A STRONG IMPACT ON IF AND HOW IT SHAPES INCENTIVES FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO ORGANIZE CONSTITUENCIES OR NOT

HOW CAN WE BUILD STRATEGIC CAPACITY FOR INDIVIDUALS?

And, finally, when intervening at the individual level, how can we engage people in ways that build their individual and collective agency, which then strengthens the organizations of which they are a part? Not all mobilization efforts are the same, and we should be differentiating between those that build ongoing capacity for organizations and those that do not.

Policy Feedbacks

Change, of course, does not stop when the ink is dry on a new statute. Instead, change is arguably just beginning. Any policy takes a long journey from the Capitol to the point where it impacts the lived experiences of ordinary people. History is rife with examples of policies whose impacts were stripped away as future bureaucratic, judicial, and even legislative decisions reversed gains once made.⁵² What, then, influences the extent to which a policy is durable over time, and has the impacts originally intended?

A large body of research on policy feedbacks argues that policy itself has the potential to reshape politics. Policies that are the most durable and scaled over time are the ones that successfully “shift the terrain on which interests are calculated.”⁵³ These policies, in other words, shift the balance of power over time because they create a different incentive structure for political actors.



POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS

The programs that are the most successful often create incentives for organizations to organize constituencies with an interest in protecting that policy over time. Examples include policies like Social Security and agriculture policy. Although we think of seniors and farmers as being a politically active constituency in modern-day politics, it was not always so. In fact, it was not until Social Security and modern agricultural policy was formed in the early 20th century that these groups became active. With the creation of policies that directly benefited these constituencies, organizations with an incentive to organize these constituencies emerged. Groups like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), the National Farmers Union (NFU) and others emerged, and quickly grew. Once organized, the existence of an active and engaged constituency gave policymakers incentives to protect the policy over time.⁵⁴



BACKLASH

Policy creates feedback loops not only for incentives it creates for advocates, but also incentives it creates for opponents. Sometimes, policy change can give organizations opposing the change a threat that they can use to mobilize constituents. Gerald Rosenberg gives the example of *Roe v. Wade*, which, he argues, codified a series of laws that were being passed quietly at the state level throughout the 1960s into national law. By codifying it into federal law, however, the Supreme Court gave pro-lifers a clear threat they could organize around. More than supporting the pro-choice movement, Rosenberg argues, the Supreme Court fueled the pro-life movement. Looking at the data, then, he finds that the largest increase in legal abortions came before 1973. After 1973 the number of legal abortions actually plateaued, as implementing agencies—hospitals, medical schools, clinics—stopped offering abortions in reaction to the backlash. Rosenberg argues that the key to lasting policy change is, then, not the policy itself but the extent to which the change is grounded in a constituency that supports it.⁵⁵

Through the way they shift the incentives for political organizations and actors, these kinds of policy feedbacks have thus prompted some of the largest shifts in participation among different demographic groups over time.

In thinking about policy feedbacks, two questions to consider are:



(1) Does a policy's design contain a logic that increases the durability of the reform over time?



(2) Does the policy's design contain a logic that will promote the ability of future policy advocates to expand the policy, either by creating new advocates or increasing the relative resources available to existing advocates?⁵⁶

Policy feedbacks can make it easier for advocates to organize constituencies who can push for additional change by making it easier for them to obtain the resources they need to organize.

The key consideration in thinking about the durability of a policy over time, and the likelihood that any policy gains will be protected, is to think not only about how politics shapes policy, but to ask how to design policy that reshapes politics. Reshaping politics depends on creating an institutional context that enables organizations to continue to advocate for the constituencies to whom they are accountable.

The Interconnectedness of Local, State, and National Change

There is no straightforward answer to the question of where, from a geographic standpoint, organizations or coalitions should focus their resources. Throughout American history, it is true that change has been a constant process of push and pull between the federal government and state and local governments. In some cases, as with issues like same sex marriage, the spread of policy change at the state and local level can pave the way for policy change at the national level. In other instances, as with civil rights policies like school desegregation or voting rights, national policy is needed to push states to enact certain policies.

Given the gridlock in national government, currently it appears that change is more likely at the state and local level. What is important is to engage these early fights in such a way that they build power for national fights. In the same way the policies can have feedback loops, so too can the way policy fights are engaged at the state and local level. Those fights can have downstream impacts that generate capacity for larger victories at the national level—or not.

ENGAGE THESE EARLY FIGHTS IN SUCH A WAY THAT THEY BUILD POWER FOR NATIONAL FIGHTS.

Fig. 8

The Relationship of Individual, Organizational, and Institutional Transformation: The Nested Structure of Socio-Political Change (Source: Joy Cushman, PICO National Network)



Classic examples of this phenomenon come from iconic social movements in American history, which often used the state and local fights as a way of building capacity for the national ones. As depicted in Figure 8, these movements often follow a logic in which institutional transformation emerges as the result of individual transformation. By desegregating diners, integrating schools, and other public spaces, individual civil rights activists began to realize their own power at the local level. Through organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the NAACP, and other organizations, they could aggregate those individual transformations to larger victories at the state and local level. This included things like desegregating buses in Montgomery or winning a sanitation workers' contract in Memphis. These state and local victories not only signified direct policy wins for the movement, they also were opportunities for leaders in the movement to have an experience of collective action. Through fights at the state and local level, movement leaders began to develop the motivations, skills, and capacities they needed to work collectively to leverage power. Finally, they could aggregate that collective capacity to push for wins at the national level.⁵⁷



Movements throughout US and international history have followed a similar logic. A more modern example comes from the efforts by undocumented youth to pass more humane immigration policy for Dreamers in the United States. Many Dreamer families first became involved in the movement when they organized in their local communities to stop deportations. These experiences helped them realize the transformative potential of collective action, which became the foundation for work they did to pass policy at the local, state, and eventually national level.⁵⁸

As such, the success of efforts to change national policy often depended on the extent to which they had a local infrastructure through which ordinary people could realize their own agency, experience the value of collective action, and channel those efforts towards national policy change.⁵⁹

Choices about the geographic terrain for policy battles then, should be made with an eye not only towards where the fights are most likely to be won, but also where the fights can be waged in such a way that they build this kind of infrastructure and capacity for a larger movement.



FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The core recommendations from this review are summarized in the executive summary on pages 5-8. In this final section, we look particularly at some of the strategic questions facing Ford's new program on Civic Engagement and Government (CEG). CEG organizes itself around three lines of work focused on: leveling the playing field for participation, making government more open and responsive, and making public resources work for people. Because the third line of work focuses primarily on things like budgeting procedures that are distinct from the purview of PERDP, we do not address it here.

If we consider our findings in light of CEG's first two lines of work, some specific implications that emerge are:

1. Leveling the playing field/changing the rules of the game

- Leveling the playing field alone (making participation possible in a more equitable way) is unlikely to have the intended impacts
- Systemic reforms have to be made with a consideration of their feedback effects, and the way they change patterns of interests/incentives for organizations.

2. Making government more responsive to change people's experience of government

- People's experience of government is inexorably linked to the intermediary organizations that connect ordinary people and policy
- These organizations must engage people in ways that build their individual and collective capacity
- And these organizations have to develop their own strategic capacity to be able to identify and leverage opportunities for broader reform.

Below, we expand on some of these ideas to look specifically at particular strategic choices in light of the findings in this report. Most of the strategic questions identified here are questions that emerged in conversation with the Ford Foundation team.

Assessing Progress and Learning

Several of the findings pointed to the need for a new set of metrics that can be used to assess progress and learning. First, perhaps the most durable finding from all of the research on social change is that change is hard. In most cases it fails, and when it works, it can often take a long time. Because the ultimate outcome is relatively distant, it is often hard to know if any one particular intervention is working. Having better metrics to identify and assess benchmarks along the way provide a clearer yardstick that can focus and measure the Foundation's work. In particular, these metrics should focus on the question of whether the work the grantees are doing is resulting in the kind of power the organization wants to build.

Second, in doing our research, we found quite a few areas where it seemed like more research was needed. Even many of the findings reported in this report are still under investigation by other scholars. Given the paucity of universally held axioms about how change works, there is still a lot of room for more learning. In other words, there are a lot of things we do not know. New metrics can help facilitate learning in new areas. As Michael Lewis writes about former NBA player Shane Battier, sometimes we cannot know how good a player is if we do not have the right metrics to assess his skills. We cannot, for instance, know how effective certain interventions, leaders, or organizations are if we are not measuring the right things to capture their effects.

Identifying metrics for learning is no easy task. Social change organizations often measure their progress at three levels: ⁶⁰



1. Are we making the change in the world we want to see?

These measures vary widely based on the particular nature of the campaign or organization. In an electoral campaign, the number of votes won might be the key measure. In an issue-based campaign, this outcome could include passage of a bill, legislative votes secured, administrative policy decisions, etc. Change can also include things like the constructing a new grocery store, getting homeless people off the street, or changing people's minds on an issue.



2. Are we developing collective capacity?

Findings on the inter-relatedness of social change efforts imply that organizations should seek to enact change in ways that build their collective capacity. These measures are also specific to particular organizations, but can include things like whether the organization is developing the processes it needs for strategic capacity. For instance, is it undertaking its campaign in a way that strengthens processes for absorbing new information about the political climate in its community? Is it undertaking its campaign in a way that builds greater inter-dependence between organizational units, making future change more possible? ⁶¹



3. Are we developing individual capacity?

Societal transformation depends on individual transformation, so measuring the extent to which organizations do their work in ways that build individual capacity is important. Measures of individual capacity development can include the extent to which individuals develop leadership skills, their commitment to the organization, their sense of themselves as agents of change, their ongoing participation in other kinds of activities, and other indicators.

Naturally, there is no formula to developing metrics. Several key challenges emerge in developing and using metrics:

- How can we see the change we want to make? The challenge is identifying observable indicators of the phenomena we want to bring about. So, for instance, if we want to develop public awareness around an issue, how will we know when we have? What can we actually observe?
- What can we observe now to test our theory of change, if the change we want to make is far away? Because the changes we seek are often quite distant, we have to identify proximate measures of changes we can observe now. Identifying these proximate measures often depends on an organization's theory of change: if we raise awareness, legislators will change their minds. How can assumptions like these be tested?
- How do we use metrics to develop a positive culture of learning? Using metrics effectively for learning is no easy task. Too often, metrics are used as punitive tools that become burdensome for participants. Using them effectively as tools for accountability depends heavily on creating an open organizational culture that prizes learning and normalizes failure. When failure is normalized—even expected—a culture of creativity emerges that allows for testing of different ideas.

HOW DO WE USE METRICS
TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE
CULTURE OF LEARNING?

Any campaign will have campaign-specific metrics and theories of change that it has to develop. We cannot address all of those here. What we tried to do in the report is identify principles and enabling conditions that cut across different kinds of campaigns. What are the conditions that make “success” more likely? In Appendix A, we identify specific questions that apply the powerful, possible, probable framework in this report to the work of the CEG team.

Strategic Choice: Focusing on Immediate Fights v. Longer-term Capacity-building

How should CEG balance its investment in immediate fights (supporting efforts to pass same sex marriage laws, for instance) versus focusing on longer-term capacity building?



Recommendation: Develop a Profits + Assets model—figure out how to fight for immediate wins (profits) in a way that simultaneously builds longer-term capacity (assets).

The questions to ask with any intervention are:



What profits (wins) did you achieve?



What are your assets (capacity) going forward? Consider the downstream impacts of the interventions you create.

Strategic Choice: Transactional v. Transformational Voter Mobilization Efforts

Given research on the limited impact of c3 voter mobilization, questions have come up about the value of investing in voter mobilization. Many of these analyses, however, examine only the “profits” of voter mobilization without consideration of the “assets” that these mobilization efforts may create (or not). More research is needed to identify what the downstream impacts of different voter mobilization efforts are, but preliminary research shows that how an organization mobilizes matters.



Recommendation: Differentiate between mobilization efforts that build individual and collective capacity (agency) and those that don’t.

- How you mobilize matters.
- Recognize and study the downstream impacts of efforts to engage people (such as integrated voter engagement strategies).

Strategic Choice: Putting the Onus on Government v. Creating Incentives to Organize

A number of the systemic reform experts we interviewed focused on reforms, such as automatic voter registration, that put the onus of things like voter registration on government. The idea is that people should not have to do the work of registering themselves, but instead government should.

We agree with this point, but would nuance it to argue that the focus should not be where the onus of responsibility lies, but instead what the pattern of incentives is for organizations and the full range of political actors—not just governmental actors.



Recommendation: Focus on identifying systemic reforms & narratives that change the pattern of incentives for organizations.

- What reforms create the incentives and resources needed for organizations to invest in the constituencies you care about?

Strategic Choice: Systemic Reform v. Mobilization

PERDP invested resources both in systemic reform efforts to open pathways to participation, and mobilization efforts designed to make participation more probable. How should CEG balance these efforts?



Recommendation: Identify the points of intervention that act at multiple levels.

- For Institutions: Identify reforms with strong feedback effects
- For Organizations: Build strategic capacity
- For Individuals: Engage in ways that build individual & collective agency

Strategic Choice: Fixing the Institution v. Fixing the Organization

Sometimes there is a debate about whether it is more efficacious to invest in fixing a policy or institution versus fixing the organizations that advocate or act on those institutions and policies. The strong finding about the importance of organizations, and the constant unpredictability that arises in any political context, points towards the importance of investing in organizations. This does not mean that fixing the institutions is not important—but institutions, because they are socially created by political actors, are constantly in flux. Thus, to protect democratic ideals over time, the key is to have strong organizations that can continuously hold institutions accountable to their democratic ideals. These organizations, however, also need systems that keep them democratically accountable—that accountability comes from a constituency.



Recommendation: Invest in organizations that can build independent, federated power focused on the constituencies you care about.

- Focus on creating the conditions under which they develop the strategic capacity to fix institutions.
- To fight status quo bias, these organizations need to build up their own, independent power base.

Strategic Choice: Scaling Reform

In some ways, scale is the white whale of political change. For generations, organizations have been struggling to enact reforms they desire at scale. In this day and age, the key is to begin thinking about scale in non-linear ways. Given the importance of organizations and organizational contexts in shaping both the leaders and strategic opportunities of any change effort, we should consider how these organizations affect scale. Research demonstrating the non-linear impact of organizing interventions points towards the need to think about scale in non-linear ways. How do organizations create the contexts both within the organization, and in their environments, that make their interventions most powerful?



Recommendation: Think about scale in non-linear ways, considering organizational and institutional contexts.

- Examine how to create the organizational and institutional contexts that make interventions more powerful.
- Under what conditions are the interventions most effective?

Strategic Choice: Breadth v. Depth

Should CEG try to “cover the shoreline” or take deep dives in particular areas?

Considerations:

- Change is hard, and requires focus.
- A clearer theory of change forces CEG to take some educated bets and, done correctly, creates a culture of learning.



Recommendation: Develop new “power” metrics, or outcome measures (esp. focused on Ford constituencies), that create a clear yardstick to focus and measure CEG’s work.

Appendix B: Research Methods

To conduct research for this report, we examined four major data sources:

- Interviews with Ford Foundation staff, other funders, Ford Foundation grantees, academics, and other practitioners in the field. We used a purposive sampling method to identify interviewees, working with Ford Foundation staff to identify people in a range of different kinds of positions who might have insights to offer. We also asked interviewees themselves whether they had other suggestions for people to interview. In the end, we conducted 47 total interviews with 5 Ford Foundation staff, 9 other funders, 13 grantees, 5 other practitioners, 12 academics, and a few who wished to remain anonymous. All of the interviews were conducted as semi-structured conversations. A list of interviewees is included below (names of people who requested their names not be included are left off the list).
- Coding of PERDP grant proposals and grant reports: we examined 114 grants from 2013-2015 through the PERDP portfolio. Of this list of 114 grants, 23 were reauthorizations, meaning that the same grant was awarded twice through PERDP. So as not to double-count these grants, we coded each of these grants only once. 36 of the grants were still active during the time of our research and thus did not have grant reports. As a result, we coded 55 grants awarded through PERDP. In coding this grant data, we examined internal Ford documents summarizing the grant proposals, and the final reports submitted by the grantee.
- Review of 62 internal and external documents provided by the Ford Foundation, including other research reports, internal strategy documents, and other reviews of the field.
- Review of extant academic literature: In addition to interviewing researchers from a range of different disciplines about relevant research in this area, we also read a number of different books and articles to better understand research in this area. Key pieces are listed in the bibliography.

Our interviewees included:

Adam Ambrogi, *Democracy Fund*

Kenneth T. Andrews, *Univ of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

Larry Bartels, *Vanderbilt University*

Frank Baumgartner, *Univ of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

David Becker, *PEW*

Judith Browne Dianis, *Advancement Project*

Dan Carpenter, *Harvard University*

Joy Cushman, *PICO*

Lee Drutman, *New American Foundation*

Anita Earls, *Southern Coalition for Social Justice*

Henry Fernandez, *Tools For All*

Ethan Frey, *Ford Foundation*

Katrina Gamble, *Center for Popular Democracy*

Lisa Garcia Bedolla, *University of California, Berkeley*

Keesha Gaskins, *Rockefeller Brothers Foundation*

Ben Goldfarb, *Wellstone Action*

Ginny Goldman, *Texas Organizing Project*

Matt Grossmann, *Michigan State University*

Jacob Hacker, *Yale University*

Marcia Johnson-Blanco, *Lawyers Committee*

Jee Kim, *Ford Foundation*

Larry Kramer, *Hewlett Foundation*

Gara LaMarche, *Democracy Alliance*

Jeff Malachowsky, *Wellspring Advisors*

Vivek Malhotra, *Ford Foundation*

Christopher Mann, *Skidmore College*

Geri Mannion, *Carnegie Foundation*

Heather McGhee, *Demos*

Karen Narasaki, *Shelby Response Fund/SIF*

Kirk Noden, *Ohio Organizing Collaborative*

Sabeel Rahman, *CUNY-Brooklyn*

Rakesh Rajani, *Ford Foundation*

Scott Reed, *PICO*

Mark Schmitt, *New American Foundation*

Adrienne Shropshire, *BCEF*

Matt Singer, *Bus Federation*

Theda Skocpol, *Harvard University*

Daniel Stid, *Hewlett Foundation*

Tracy Sturdivant, *Make It Work*

Bill Vandenberg, *Open Society Foundation*

Tova Wang, *Communications Workers Association*

Eric Ward, *Ford Foundation*

Brenda Wright, *Demos*

Several anonymous interviewees

Appendix C: Endnotes and Bibliography

1. Program Review of the Promoting Electoral Reform and Democratic Participation Initiative, Request for Proposal. August 6, 2015. p. 1.
2. Verba 2003.
3. See Fung 2016 for a definition of power focusing particularly on the three (or four) levels at which power operates (see also Lukes 2005 for a definition of the three faces of power). Policy change focuses on Level 1 power, but much of the ensuing discussion examines the question of how we wage Level 1 fights in a way that builds power at the other levels Fung discusses.
4. The framework in Figure describing the relationship of resources and goals as a process of turning “what you have” into “what you want” is borrowed from work by Ganz 2014.
5. Canes-Wrone 2015
6. There are a number of reasons why divergence might occur, ranging from institutional structures that create partisan bias in government action to the unstable bases of mass opinion and subsequent possibility of elite manipulation of opinion (see Table 1 in Canes-Wrone 2015 for a summary of different theoretical approaches). For more, see Zaller 1992 for a classic formulation of the instability of public opinion, and Fiorina 1999 for an examination of why the median voter theorem does not hold true.
7. See Fiorina, et al. 2004 for a discussion of public opinion on this issue.
8. Bartels 2008; Gilens 2013.
9. Gilens 2013, Figure 5.2 on page 142.
10. See de Figueiredo and Richter 2014, p. 168 for a summary of research on the effectiveness of lobbying, and the difficulty in drawing causal connections. See Drutman 2015, Schlozman, et al. 2012 for data on the distribution of lobbying groups in America.
11. See Baumgartner, et al. 2009 for a detailed discussion of research on the relationship of money and policy change
12. See Chong and Druckman 2007 for a summary of research in political science. For an explication of framing theory in social movement studies, see Snow 2007; Cress and Snow 2000; Klandermans 2007. See Fiske and Taylor 1984 for classic psychological theory on the importance of frames.
13. As Dennis Chong and Jamie Druckman describe in their review article, a wide range of factors may shape a person’s attitude towards a new housing development. A person might believe the project will favor the economy, but harm the environment. If this person places a positive value on both the economy and the environment, her attitude towards the project will depend on how much she thinks the housing development will help the economy or harm the environment, and how important each is to her. See Marcus 2002 on how experiences shape the values people have.
14. See, for instance, Broockman and Kalla 2016 on emerging research about deep canvass experiments, and the power of authentic interpersonal interactions in changing public opinion (this research re-runs the now discredited study by Michael LaCour and Donald Green about the power of deep canvass). Unlike research on framing, which largely shows public opinion on an issue to be immutable, the deep canvass studies show that getting people to move beyond superficial frames towards conversations about their real, lived experience is more likely to change their opinions. See also Bedolla and Michelson 2012.
15. See Han 2016 for a discussion of how organizations can do this, and results of several field experiments showing the importance of organizational activity on shaping activism.
16. Kingdon 1984
17. See Andrews and Edwards 2004 for a summary. In one study of advocacy by 15 homeless movement organizations in eight cities across the U.S., sociologists Daniel Cress and David Snow find that the presence of particular kinds of frames—those that can effectively articulate both the challenge and the hope—was the most common shared characteristic across the organizations that were able to attain resources, rights, or relief for the homeless (Cress and Snow 2000).
18. Benford and Snow 2000, p. 627
19. Baumgartner, et al. 2009.
20. Baumgartner, et al. 2009.

21. See Achen and Bartels 2016 for a discussion of the limits of individual action and additive approaches to understanding collective action.
22. See Baumgartner, et al. 2009 for a discussion of the way status quo policy reflects entrenched power, and the ramifications that has for the kinds of patterns we see in what affects policy change.
23. Baumgartner, et al. 2009. The side with more relationships with high-level government allies won 78% of the time. The side with more relationships with covered officials won 63 percent of the time, and the side with more relationships with mid-level government allies won 60 percent of the time. See Figure 4.
24. See Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016 for an analysis of how conservative organizations led by the Koch brothers developed these capacities. See Hansen 1991 for a classic formulation of this theory.
25. Hansen 1991.
26. Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016.
27. See Hertel-Fernandez and Skocpol 2016 for a discussion of the way the right leveraged these relationships to move state policy in their direction over the past decade.
28. Ganz defines strategic capacity as: "the targeting, timing, and tactics through which they mobilized and deployed resources. Differences in their strategy, however, and the likelihood it would be effective in achieving desired goals, were due to differences in leaders' access to salient information about the environment, heuristic use they made of this information, and their motivation—what I call their 'strategic capacity.'" Ganz 2000, page 1005. Emphasis added. See also Baggetta, et al. 2013; Han, et al. 2011; and Andrews, et al. 2010 for further discussion about the relationship between leadership structures, strategic capacity, and organizational effectiveness.
29. Note that much of this research is referred to as the study of "dynamic capabilities." A classic formulation of this theory comes from Teece, et al. 1997.
30. These three capacities are adapted from Teece 2007, which explicates this theory of dynamic capabilities in the context of for-profit firms. See especially the chart on page 1342, which describes the three dynamic capabilities (called sensing, seizing, and transforming) and, the sources of each of those capabilities.
31. See Wageman, et al. 2005 for the enabling conditions that make teams operate successfully. The characteristics discussed in this section are taken from review articles about this research by Wageman, et al. 2005 and Teece 2007.
32. These categories are based on a taxonomy defined in Grassroots Solutions and Novick 2011.
33. See Fiorina 2003 for a clear articulation of why lowering the costs of voting has not increased turnout in ways we might have expected. See Wang 2015; Leighley and Nagler 2013 for summaries of more recent research on this topic.
34. See Wang 2015 for a longer, more in-depth analysis of recent research on this topic. Neiheisel and Burden 2012, however, argue the election day registration only increases vote share among certain populations.
35. Leighley and Nagler 2013. See Hess, et al. 2015 for a paper summarizing the challenges of getting government agencies to implement NVRA, and the limited results of experiments to generate compliance.
36. Wang 2015; Hess, et al. 2015
37. Mettler 2008
38. For theoretical discussions how marketization of public goods affects democracy, see Brown 2015, Sandel 2013. For a description of the rise of public affairs consultants and its attendant effects on democracy, see Walker 2014, Sheingate 2016.
39. Weaver and Lerman 2010
40. See, for instance, data from the American National Election Studies, which has been tracking people's sense of political efficacy every two years since 1952. They ask compile a political efficacy index from people's responses to two questions: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," and "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think." In examining the percentage of people who agreed with these statements, this index peaked at around 75% in 1960, and now hovers around less than 40%.
41. See Fung 2003 for a discussion of the historical role of associations in democracy, and Skocpol 2003 for a discussion of how that has changed over time.
42. Munson 2009

43. Christens, et al. 2011
44. See also Munson 2009 for a discussion of the role that pro-life organizations play in shaping people's commitment to the movement, and their identities as agents of social change, and Han 2014 and Warren 2001 for how organizations can transform people into activists.
45. For more on the historical decline of these institutions, see Skocpol 2003; Schier 2000; Berry 1999. Some have argued that high levels of polarization are another current factor that may prompt a decline in participation. In the late 19th century, however, polarization was also very high—yet that time period was one of the most participatory eras in American history. Polarization, in other words, does not necessarily lead to low participation. See McCarty, et al. 2006 and Han and Brady 2007 on historical patterns in polarization. See Keyssar 2000 on historical patterns of participation.
46. Schlozman, et al. 2012; Drutman 2015
47. Drutman 2015
48. See Figure 11.1 in Schlozman, Verba, Brady 2012. See also Strolovitch 2007 for an analysis of the imbalances of representation within these groups for marginalized constituencies, particularly those that are intersectionally marginalized. She argues for the need for systems of "affirmative advocacy" to overcome inherent biases within these groups towards representing those who are most likely to be marginalized.
49. See Katz and Mair 1995 and Dalton and Wattenberg 2002 for an examination of the relationship between parties and citizens from a comparative perspective. See Key 1956 and Chapter 2 in McKenna and Han 2014 for a discussion of the way U.S. parties used to link voters to their communities, and the way those relationships have eroded over time.
50. See Skocpol 2003 for a discussion of this trend, and other citations in the section on "Making Participation Powerful."
51. See a journalistic article by Yglesias 2015 for a discussion about the electoral ramifications of this trend.
52. See, for instance, work by Hacker 2004 on policy drift, or Rosenberg 1991 on the impact of both *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade*.
53. Quote taken from Eaton and Weir 2014, which discusses the way a coalition dedicated to advancing the public interest in California's healthcare system was able to succeed between 1980 and 2010.
54. See Campbell 2003 for a study of how Social Security shaped activism among senior citizens, and Wilson 1973 for a classic formulation of the Wilson-Low matrix, and the political dynamics that underlie issues like agricultural policy (which he describes as "client politics").
55. Rosenberg 1991; Klarman 1994. For an example focused on changing policy for the poor, see Dreier 2003 for a discussion of policy feedbacks around the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) and the Home Mortgage Data Act (HMDA). Originally passed to stop banks' practices of redlining poor communities to avoid making loans in those areas, CRA and HMDA have, over time, been responsible for trillions of dollars in investments into poor communities over time. Although their effects have not been without controversy, Dreier argues that one thing they accomplished is to create incentives for poor communities to organize around stopping redlining. CRA required that banks sit down with leaders from the poor communities to ensure they were not discriminating in their lending, and the HMDA gave these communities access to the data they needed to hold banks accountable. As a result, the combination of these two laws gave community based organizations the hooks and tools they needed to organize poor communities around stopping redlining, and ensuring that dollars continued to flow into these communities.
56. Questions adapted from a discussion of policy feedbacks and policy design in climate policy in a white paper by the Governance Environment and Markets Initiative 2015.
57. Though not directly related to the way social movements structured federated power, see Skocpol, et al. 2000 for a discussion of the way the federated structure of government influenced the development of federated civic organizations throughout American history.
58. For a case study of United We Dream, see the case study by Jimenez and Dreier 2015.
59. See Han 2014 and Tufekci 2015 on the importance of organizations who have local infrastructure to do this kind of transformative work. See Andrews, et al. 2010, Han, et al. 2011, Baggetta, et al. 2013 for a discussion of the importance of leadership structures at the local level.
60. See Andrews, et al. 2010 for an explication of the theory behind this tri-partite framework, and the application of it to studying the Sierra Club. See Pastor, et al. 2011 for examples of specific metrics that can be used both to measure change and capacity. See Andrews and Edwards 2004 for a discussion of the different kinds of outcomes social movement scholars examine.
61. See Teece 2007 for a discussion of the specific processes that underlie strategic capacity.

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