
Democracy as Problem Solving

Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe

Xavier de Souza Briggs

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Many scholars and activists have tackled the question of how to make democracy work. Some have also asked deeper questions about what it is *for*—that is, as a recipe for collective life, since “what works” is very much a matter of perception. It depends on what one believes worth doing. And in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in high-conflict regions and elsewhere, we are once again engaged in tough debates about the social conditions under which democracy can best develop where it is, by any definition, a new and largely untested idea. But at the same time, democracy looks awfully stunted and stymied where it has reigned longest and to greatest fanfare, such as in my country, the United States, where my parents were among the millions of immigrants who believed in the democratic ideal, not just the ideal of equal opportunity, and who worked hard and benefited.

This book is an effort to extend ideas about democracy at work, in all its ambiguity, untidiness, and contradiction, and through those ideas to improve the practice of democracy. I focus on the concept of *civic capacity*, not merely a capacity to set directions collectively but also to devise and implement the means of acting together more effectively, with and beyond government. This blurring of the traditional divide between direction setting (policy making) and outcomes (implementation) is at the heart of the story, and the target problems it encompasses are universals, including: how to manage urban growth as populations expand and concerns about environmental sustainability grow, how to restructure the material basis of our lives (the job economy) where old industries are no longer competitive, and how to invest in young people—through social protections and human development, broadly defined—so as to make every other goal possible.

Across the world, this idea of democracy—as an imperfect recipe for problem solving that engages the public, private, and not-for-profit or

“social” sector in collective action—is desperately in need of careful and creative attention. It is my contention that more of that attention should go to the tangible choices faced and strategies chosen by people and institutions as they problem-solve over time—that is, to the civic process that no longer stops at shaping official policy through advocacy but blends community agenda setting, strategy making, and productive action in a host of innovative ways, stretching institutions and the very idea of democracy in the process. The cases in this book are just that: not short-run episodes of conflict or resolution, of straightforward “participation” or “partnership” reforms, but sagas of multiple chapters and decision points, played out in specific local contexts on four continents: Africa, Asia, South America, and North America. While I am fascinated by changing governance in Europe, particularly as regional institutions evolve there, limited time and other resources led me to focus on less “state-centered” places—that is, where government does not consistently dominate entrepreneurial public action.

My direct interest in these themes began when I worked as a community planner, puzzling over how citizen participation at the street level scaled up, or did not, in the form of public policy and also major private commitments, such as corporate investments in distressed neighborhoods. That interest evolved when I began to design and lead training programs at Harvard University for senior practitioners struggling to make a difference while dealing with the contradictions and tensions in partnerships, participatory planning processes, and other popular ideas—ideas too often resting on weak practices and a resistance to scrutiny. But the experience that compelled me to research and write this book was working in America’s federal government and visiting a terrific variety of big cities and small towns facing common problems and holding a remarkably common assumption about the key to progress, roughly: “Give us the resources, without the red tape (restrictions), and we will get the job done.” Federal budget scarcity aside, this seemed to me a reasonable idea in places with a high capacity for creative collective action—that is, for not just pulling in one direction but managing to discover a *promising* direction and pursue it effectively. But the claim seemed much less reasonable in places with a long history of in-fighting and civic dysfunction, some of it exacerbated by the very resources “mailed in,” from higher levels of government, to help.

Given that genesis over a decade of work inside and outside of the academy, I owe many debts in the production of this book and the more practice-oriented work products that evolved as part of the same project.

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