
Democracy as Problem Solving

Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe

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Introduction

The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized, it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion. And even as far as political arrangements are concerned, governmental institutions are but a mechanism for securing to an idea channels of effective operation. . . . Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself.

—John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, 143, 148)

The Pittsburgh city councilman wants a table at the rear of the café. He has squeezed this interview into a trademark busy day, but an obvious pride of place keeps him recounting changes in the city as we work our way to the back, navigating the laptop computers and other signs that Steel City is, at least in part, a city of “knowledge workers” now. “That’s where we get developers together with community residents if we need to work out a conflict,” he says, pointing to a glass-walled side room near our table. And the thought hits me immediately: the room is a metaphor for many of the civic changes underway in this former industrial powerhouse region, once the home of philanthropist-magnates such as Carnegie and Mellon and more than a dozen Fortune 500 companies, where more old-economy jobs were lost faster—in the restructuring of the 1980s—than anywhere else in America.

The room with glass walls is not big and it is not “public,” not in the sense of belonging to government, representing everyone, or functioning according to formal rules of procedure. Nor is it a corporate boardroom where a few CEOs work out master plans with the mayor or governor and then steer them for decades or longer, like the fabled, elite-led “renaissance” plans that remade the physical fabric of downtown Pittsburgh and cleaned polluted air and rivers in the wake of World War II. Granted, conflicts over neighborhood development have never been the

main target of centrally planned, regional master strokes made by a cohesive business-government elite. They always left the most local politics to the locals. But the glass-walled room is a mechanism nonetheless, a space for getting public work done when official channels fall short. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about the most democratic mechanisms being the most visible public stages, where everything is on the record, the backroom conversation is a key to exploring interests outside the spotlight of adversarial politics and gamesmanship. It is one element in a larger, emerging structure of decision making that is more democratic—more accountable to the public will—in part because *it gets things done*.

At their best, democracies confront important public problems. What is at stake in Pittsburgh, and communities in much of the rest of the world, is how to shift the economy, accommodate urban growth or decline as part of a more sustainable future, and invest in human development through institutions and leadership decisions that span government, business, and civil society. Wider demands for participation in decision-making, and much more robust expectations of transparency and accountability, help define the new civics of leading change—but with few clear roadmaps from place to place and situation to situation. Does more democracy mean less “development” (progress), for example? The glass-walled room is a place for informal consultation, for exchange and problem solving *out* of the official public eye, and so it has a place in the larger civic fabric of a changing industrial region. As an inversion of yesterday’s hidden-from-view “back room” for elite decision makers, the new room is a place where, as negotiation analysts would point out, a costly public impasse can be reexamined without the need to protect reputations or go on the record. It hits me, as Councilman Peduto takes me to the heart of a changing Pittsburgh through his own story, that we can envision the glass-walled room—the figurative one, not the one in this coffee shop, that is—but not always get there, that when we get there, we often bring our own rules to the table, not a shared sense of how to act together to make our civic life more productive.

A world away, I am in Mumbai (Bombay), a major engine of the surging Indian economy and a city-region where almost half the population lives in slums. Here, a global bank recognizes that a unique network of nongovernmental organizations accountable to the urban poor offers the very best option for limiting the costly delays and conflicts that threaten housing projects. Meanwhile, smarter government subsidies trigger the market, regulation helps curb abuses that sap economic

efficiency and also erode trust, and broader spatial planning ensures that efforts to give Mumbai a “world-class” airport and other needed infrastructure will not steamroll the poor who have yet to share in India’s new prosperity. It all began about twenty years ago, when government and civil society organizations slowly threw out an older set of rules about who could be counted on for what. “We grew tired of protesting and then depending on government to deliver,” the president of India’s National Slum Dwellers Federation tells me as our taxi speeds past the city’s countless construction projects, “so we decided to start creating our own solutions.” Yet the slum dwellers did not surrender their political strength—India’s slums have long been called “vote banks” in highly competitive political campaigns—in order to form a think tank, planning outfit, or hasty partnership with government. A rich sequence of learning and bargaining, cooperation and conflict, among civil society groups, local and state government agencies, and private developers and lenders has over two decades, brought new progress on slum redevelopment. This is no small thing since “slum-led” growth is how much of the world urbanizes, because Asia and other developing regions are urbanizing quickly, and because Mumbai has such huge and economically important slums. Much of the future of India’s cities hinges on the kinds of arrangements that are redeveloping Mumbai’s slums.

In Salt Lake City, an innovative organizing initiative for regional visioning and consensus building—one very carefully launched *outside* of state and local legislatures, with participation by businesspeople, environmentalists, and others—develops a broad-based constituency for sustainable “quality growth” and then helps the public sector develop new capacity to institutionalize and implement the vision.

Constituency and capacity—the will and the way—are much needed elsewhere, too. In Pittsburgh and the Greater ABC region (in the heart of industrial Brazil), public, private, and nongovernmental institutions work to install new foundations for competitiveness in a global economy, including regional leadership that overcomes a stubborn localism about important investment decisions. In Brazil, the Workers’ Party helped lead a peaceful revolution to install more participatory local governance in the ABC and other regions, as the country emerged, in the late 1980s, from decades of military dictatorship. Brazil’s experience illustrates how the transition to democracy and vigorous party competition can shape urgent economic restructuring, while greater Pittsburgh lacks both factors but has a long history of public-private cooperation enabled by philanthropic organizations and others that act as “civic intermediaries.”

And in San Francisco and Cape Town, advocates leverage direct democracy (in the former case) and new constitutional rights (in the latter) to build a new commitment to the well-being of disadvantaged young people and their families. The change agents know that investing in people, the younger the better, is the most basic imperative in a changing world, and yet they struggle to define government's role in that effort alongside new and varied roles for nongovernmental or civil society organizations: as organizers of pressure politics for expanded forms of accountability, as conveners of policy discussions, as service providers and coproducers of change, and more. In both cases, strong support for government intervention contends with the limits on what government alone can accomplish to solve important problems.

In each of these cases to come, the players made significant achievements against the odds—in the face of division and complexity and the risk of “process paralysis” that has confounded other communities—to resolve important problems and to do so in democratic ways. How did they do it? The answer turns out to lie in how we think about democracy and what it means to make it work as a recipe for solving public problems.

A Puzzle: Democracy and Public Problems

This book is about collective action to address community problems and about what democracy actually entails as a recipe for such action. It is for scholars and other students of civic life and social progress, as well as those engaged in practical problem solving. Several big questions motivate the book: Do wide-ranging efforts to “make democracy work” around the globe promise to make democracy a more effective recipe for changing such social conditions or just an institutional machinery, a set of rules and routines, for fairer or more popular decision making? Does leading change in democratic ways require fundamentally different strategies and institutions in different places and situations, or do the same core dilemmas appear and reappear? Does the idea of democracy, as enacted by those who put it into practice, encompass a workable recipe for acting collectively, *with and beyond government*, on urgent community problems?

Traditional conceptions of democracy focus on how we elect those who “steer” government, how political interests and claims are voiced and processed and political conflicts resolved, how citizens are protected by right from abuses by the state, how the branches of divided govern-

ment behave, and, occasionally, on how pent-up demands—the absence of evolution—can lead to revolution.

Out of these general questions, as I explore in the next chapter, powerful analytic traditions have crystallized for understanding democracy, including decision making at the local level: in cities, metropolitan regions, and neighborhoods or other small communities. The first tradition sees democracy as a *contest among interest groups*—a strategic process, mediated by some formal rules but decided by power, whether the model is one of structural conflict dominated by the elites (Fainstein and Fainstein 1979; Gaventa 1980; Logan and Molotch 1987) or pluralism through bargaining (Altshuler 1965; Dahl 1961; Stone 1989; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987). The second broad approach sees democracy as an instrument for *deliberation*—a collective search for better answers above and beyond self-interested bargaining, a “school” for developing citizenship, and a mechanism for expanding the public’s faith in politics and thereby invigorating civic life (Bowman and Rehg 2000; Cohen and Rogers 1995; Fung and Wright 2003; Mansbridge 1980). The latter rarely explains what role deliberation versus bargaining plays in complex cases of political action over time—as opposed to in idealized “spaces” of dialogue or small, face-to-face workgroups. But the intersection between these approaches is important: political competition and conflict, for example, and not just the motivation to find better answers, help invigorate civic life. And the learning that deliberation can generate does not simply, or necessarily, lead to a convergence among disparate interests. That learning can also create new things to compete for, shifting the stakes of the “game” (the contest dimension of civic life) and sometimes the rules as well.

There is a third, hugely underdeveloped approach, which extends those two, helps reconcile their different emphases, and responds to their blind spots in vital ways. Nearly a century ago, philosopher John Dewey (1927) argued that democracy’s potential is to be the fulfillment of “community life” itself, which necessarily includes progress on important community problems: not just authorizing a government to act but acting with it, and beyond it, if that is what it takes to have an impact on social conditions. “Governance” captures that general idea of managing collective life beyond the formal instruments of government. But unlike the approach I take in this book, most efforts to examine governance stop at illuminating the process for setting the political agenda and mobilizing resources, both public and private, to support that agenda. The political project and not the substantive task of changing “the state of the world,”

with learning and tinkering along the way, is the focus for the analyst, and this obscures vital civic lessons about producing change in the state of the world by treating implementation, in effect, as “noncivic”: a largely technical process with inputs and outputs. Also, portraits of governance tend to focus (given a quest for stable, recognizable patterns) on the routine—and so overemphasize the maintenance of a status quo. As students of public leadership consistently remind us, significant problem solving is generally about doing the *nonroutine* (Stone 2001). And according to those who study civic apathy and *disengagement*, the larger result—social impact, beyond the opportunity to participate *per se*—is precisely what citizens hope for. In fact, it may be the only reason they stay involved in public affairs (Barber 1984; Fung 2004; Putnam 1993, 2000).

These points convey the importance of *democracy as problem solving*. For Dewey (1927, 203), the challenges of using democracy as such are recognizable and debatable only because of prior transformations, one of which took power from “dynastic and oligarchic dynasties” in many corners of the globe and another that created modern nations with a professionalized government apparatus, with experts to respond to elected policy makers. But if the nation and its apparatus—the “mechanism” Dewey identifies in the epigraph to this chapter—are not enough to get our problems solved, then what? The theory and practice of what makes democracy work necessarily include the study of problem solving in action and of the collective capacity to problem-solve—not only to deliberate about the world and set directions for government, but to change the state of the world through collective action, not only to devise and decide but to *do*.

This is a conception of democracy as efficacious community, and community life as defined by effective joint problem solving, that echoes Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1835) oft-quoted observation that “in democratic societies, the art of combining is the mother of all other human arts.” It incorporates the insight that trust and reciprocal obligation in civil society are crucial to making the machinery of government work in democratic nations (Lipset 1994), to making public institutions “devices for achieving *purposes*, not just for achieving *agreement*” (Putnam 1993, 8).

But this conception of democracy also puts our debates about what community means well beyond the communitarian longing for closer bonds, sometimes labeled *social capital* (the usefulness in social connections, such as networks and norms). And it gets to the heart of the

debates about social capital: how to create more of the kinds that generate collective benefits. A focus on problem solving also helps us avoid the risk of treating interpersonal connections as the cure-all for community problems. In effect, social capital has too often been promoted, by well-intentioned users of academic research on the concept, as though it *were* civic capacity—the larger-scale, more complex resource I examine in this book—rather than a useful ingredient.

Social and technological change notwithstanding, what contemporary community life can “supply,” beyond feelings of belonging and affiliation, is a capacity to act together—on environmental problems, crime and insecurity, illness, educational failure, and more—in ways that are efficacious, rewarding, even irreplaceable. The urgency and promise of this “collective efficacy” (Sampson 1999), which implies developing both the will and the way to act effectively, are all the more clear in light of Dewey’s portrait of a changing America—in what he and others called “the machine age,” almost a century past. It is a portrait strikingly parallel to our own world, and many nations in it, today, a portrait colored by the potential and the strains associated with increased social diversity (a less homogeneous public, diversified need and frames of reference), more complex issues demanding public attention and decision, tensions between the global and the local (including more mobile populations, greater transience, a loss of traditional social bonds and stable cultures-in-place), and tensions between the need to institutionalize or regularize on a large scale, on the one hand, and the need to constantly adapt and experiment on the other (which typically happen fastest and best on a small scale).

Scholars have defined collective efficacy, a form of social capital, as resting on patterns of small-scale social organization, notably among neighbors in larger cities and societies, hinged on proximate trust (trusting in particular others who share one’s neighborhood), social cohesion, and the expectation that others will act with you if the need arises (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Sampson 1999). Acknowledging the risk in transplanting ideas without such strict limits, I have borrowed the term to suggest that collective efficacy also captures the core concept of democracy as a recipe for collective (or “community”) problem solving. Scaling up obviously requires representation, in that we often do not represent our own interests in civic life, as well as accountable organizations that devise and carry out work, beyond the self-help that citizens can manage at the small scale. It is collective efficacy that Dewey warned *large-scale*, modern democracies—democracy in mass societies,

not face-to-face, small-town ones—would lack, particularly with a divided or disengaged public facing more and more complex problems.

It is widely acknowledged that the requirements of civic life in democratic societies are changing and sometimes acknowledged that the erosion of old institutions does not automatically generate new ones that will work (Barber 1984; Fung 2004; World Bank 2000). The substantive problems our societies face are complex and shifting—in public health and safety, employment, housing, education, the environment, and more—but the rules of problem solving are changing as well, and these rules are at least as complex as the underlying problems. Expectations and roles are shifting dramatically with regard to who decides, who implements, and how. The public interest work of societies has been radically reshaped in less than a generation, with a widespread loss of trust in public institutions and expert-led bureaucratic approaches, a massive decentralization of decision making “downward” to local governments and “outward” to private and nonprofit contractors, the rapid transformation of civil society organizations and networks of innovation that span the globe, the diffusion of “empowerment” as an antihierarchical organizing principle for society, and more. As I explore in chapter 2, global debates about participatory governance capture one side of this sea change—the expectation of wider stakeholder participation in decision making that matters—and the “new public management” emphasizes a different expectation, centered on whether and how public institutions, which depend on our formal and informal “authorization” to be effective (Moore 1995), deliver acceptable results.

Business and nongovernmental organizations, informal citizen-led initiatives, “community-driven development” and “community building,” and cross-sector partnerships are taking on much of the innovative work on urgent problems (Briggs 2003a; Warren 2001). And in some instances, citizen or community action has become a substitute, or shock absorber, for needed government and market action, for example to reduce inequalities in income or safeguard workers and the environment. National governments have devolved authority and responsibility, though not always resources, to local governments and also called on elected local leadership to make government more collaborative (Campbell 2003; Grindle 2007; Healey 1997).

Yet impasses are frequent, and civic action often seems ruttled in adversarial stand-off or the vague mantra of “working in partnership” without genuine give-and-take and shared agendas. Inequalities in access and influence (power to act and to shape important decisions) persist, and

yet governance must happen in spite of those inequalities—and not await massive social reform to eliminate them. Trust is hard won and easily lost, especially where a history of inequality and resentment across ethnic or other social borders casts a shadow. And government sends mixed signals about its responsibilities.

Much of the available insight and advice for navigating this rapidly changing environment is piecemeal, advocacy-driven, and developed in the context of a single country, if not a single locality, and a single domain of public problems (health *or* economic development *or* community safety). This book aims to address those gaps. It crosses problem domains and borders too. It is a journey from the rapidly sprawling suburbs of Salt Lake City to the crowded slums of Mumbai (Bombay), India—a city where the population in slums is larger than the entire population of Chicago—from the civic board rooms, City Hall, and social service providers of San Francisco to planning meetings in poor townships of Cape Town in postapartheid South Africa, and from the biotech centers of a former steel town, Pittsburgh, to the suburbs of São Paulo, in the industrial heart of Brazil. In all of these places, the concept of *civic capacity*, or the capacity to devise, decide, and act collectively to improve our lives, lies at the heart of this inquiry about making democracy work.

The Argument

Having outlined the book's aims, and before detailing civic capacity and its specific puzzles, let me preview my main argument, which is a fundamentally hopeful one, along with some of its sobering implications. I argue that it is possible to construct effective forms of civic capacity, under particular conditions and often against long odds, even where history has not endowed a place with a tradition of civic cooperation or widespread trust in public institutions. That is, there is nothing in these cases to disconfirm political scientist Robert Putnam's (1993, 183) finding, in his seminal study of civic traditions and government performance in modern Italy, that "the civic community has deep historical roots." Rather, there is much to corroborate and illuminate the idea that history need not be a curse.

To be sure, as Putnam (1993, 185) concludes, "building social capital will not be easy" in some contexts. But it is also the case, as he and others have highlighted, that it will not be enough to "make democracy work," particularly where a community faces important social or

ideological divides and the need to adapt to change. Civic capacity is a shorthand for the ingredients that *can* make the machinery of governance effective: institutions that combine learning and bargaining effectively and constantly rather than divorcing dialogue from forging wise agreements; multiple forms of accountability—pressure politics, markets, negotiated compacts, codified rights, and more—to make “solutions” more broadly legitimate and sustainable; and space for the grassroots or the “grasstops” (authority figures and other influentials) to initiate important change, regardless of how broad participation becomes over time.

The core structures for creating and deploying civic capacity are stable coalitions that authorize things and implementation-focused alliances that get things done. Without wider civic strategies that connect to coalition agendas, alliance or partnership arrangements are “boutique” efforts—appealing miniatures—without the promise of significant impact on public problems. On the other hand, combining the coalition form with the partnership form responds to the two powerful logics of the age, which sometimes compete with each other and often get obscured in all the rhetoric: the logic of *empowerment* (which emphasizes changing political relationships and access to influence) and the logic of *efficiency* (which emphasizes measurable progress on social conditions).

This hopeful argument, with specifics about how civic capacity can be built and used, has some challenging implications, however. After all, autocrats, too, can get things done and even inspire collective action to achieve it, and popular movements can lead to “tyrannies from below.” Breakthrough problem solving in democratic societies calls for more multidimensional forms of accountability, and more practiced, skillful combinations of learning and bargaining by civic actors, than most contemporary rhetoric about “acting in partnership” or “bottom-up” change has even hinted. Civil society organizations, for example, turn out to have important roles to play as brokers or civic intermediaries who help define problems and build capacity to tackle them, not just creative service providers, associations that articulate citizen interests, or professional advocates.

This is more than the standard researcher’s conclusion that things turned out, on closer observation, to be more complex than someone had thought. As I outline in the next section and detail in the next chapter, our dominant conceptions of democratic participation, conflict and consensus, and “top-down” versus alternative approaches to tack-

ling problems are misleading in several key respects—about what it takes to make democracy work—and uninformed in several others. One key implication is that we are sometimes misdirected, in the practice of politics and innovative change—out in the world, that is, beyond the seminar room—about something more fundamental: what makes our collective life democratic (or not). It is not just participation through the vote or the structuring of wider forms of participation but *structuring participation to achieve social progress* that makes for strong democracy. The book ends on this second, normative argument, considering whether we are compelled to trade away inclusiveness, at least in some instances, to achieve that progress.

The Heart of the Inquiry: What Is Civic Capacity, and Why Does It Matter?

This book focuses on questions about a vital resource for collective problem solving: *civic capacity*, including what it is, what it is for, and how political actors develop and deploy it in diverse contexts to lead change. Although collective action is an age-old concern, civic capacity is a relatively new idea as a target for systematic research. Based primarily on a study of education reform in eleven major American cities, political scientist Clarence Stone (2001, 596) has argued that “civic capacity concerns the extent to which different sectors of the community—business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others—act in concert around a matter of community-wide import” (also see Stone et al. 2001).

But to some extent, that outcome-oriented definition (“the extent to which different sectors . . . act in concert”) confounds the questions of “will” versus “way.” Civic capacity might be thought of as the extent to which the sectors that make up a community are (1) *capable* of collective action on public problems (the resource dimension), given the norms and institutional arenas for local action; and (2) *choose* to apply such capability (the dimension of effort, will and choice, or “agency”). While it may be useful in principle to assess a city’s latent capacity to act, even this tends to be based on past actions. It is my contention, then, that capacity per se can only be meaningfully assessed in the context of effort.

Stone adds that the tasks for which civic capacity are required include setting agendas of collective action, building coalitions, and mobilizing

resources in a specific kind of context: *where expectations of stakeholder participation are relatively high and the power to get things done is decentralized and fragmented*. Those, then, are the broad “tests” of capacity for nonroutine civic action, and the notion of broad tests enables us to examine civic capacity in a wide variety of political and cultural contexts.

Stone posits, furthermore, that the development and effective use of civic capacity may be specific to a particular problem domain (education, crime, economic restructuring, and so on) in a given community: “Any civic consensus is far from stable, and therefore the process of building support for a program of action around one problem is not easily transferred to (or borrowed from) another exercise in problem-solving” (p. 615). He also hypothesizes that stable institutions, not looser coalitions—short-run “marriages of convenience,” in the lingo of politics—are likely to be the “pillars” of civic capacity. Communities need civic pillars that withstand the contentiousness that tackling major public issues invariably triggers.

Judd (2006) replies that Stone’s definition of civic capacity is too close to that of a public-private governing coalition or *regime* (Fainstein et al. 1983; Stone 1989; Stoker 1995; Stone 2005). Judd argues, based largely on the case of St. Louis in the latter half of the twentieth century, that “civic capacity may be assembled within specialized arenas that act quite autonomously from one another” (p. 45). Or it may be missing entirely, robbing a community, at least for a time, of the will and way to undertake “ambitious public initiatives” (p. 46). Going further, Gendron (2006) contends that Stone’s use of civic capacity ignores the structural inequalities of power or influence that reformers often face, to which Stone (2006) has replied that confronting unequal power is very much at the heart of mobilizing communitywide support for change but that reformers, likewise, cannot forgo the work of institutionalizing their influence in “viable forms of cooperation” that sustain change over time. “Power to” accomplish that, argues Stone, and not just the question of which group has “power over” another, is critical, and “power to” depends on developing and deploying adequate civic capacity. I return to the issue of power in the next chapter, emphasizing that instead of revealing what democracy “is,” much research merely reflects what particular observers choose to understand about it: influence or control, collective accomplishment, social learning, the meaning of citizenship, and so on.

The Focus and Contribution of This Book

There are several crucial possibilities in need of further inquiry:¹ that the potential to assemble and use civic capacity is fundamentally determined by the history of an area's institutions, resources, and culture; that civic capacity's major tests include a substantial array of collective-action tasks, from forging shared agendas to building support for them and mobilizing resources to enact them, that are relevant in diverse local contexts; conversely, that effective civic action rests on such a variety of institutional bases, differing so substantially across communities and country contexts, that no common patterns that can reasonably be labeled (or developed as) "civic capacity"; that several forms of democratic accountability may be at issue all at once given the variety of tasks and the variety of actors and issues in play; and that contrary to some hopes about social capital, civic capacity may be domain specific and limited to "specialized arenas," not an all-purpose communitarian resource to be applied to whatever problem "comes along." I have been able to examine all but the final one of these possibilities in depth.

Without closer analysis of these possibilities, carried out on a wider range of cases, we risk, in civic capacity, the community cure-all expectation that quickly attached itself to social capital in the 1990s, as well as a circular, you-know-it-when-you-see-it logic: where there is civic cooperation on a contentious problem, there must be durable civic capacity at work.

But several important process questions about civic capacity must be answered if we are to better judge the claims outlined above. First, what strategies do political actors use to create more capacity for communitywide collective action, not just to win influence (get their way) in a variety of contexts? Strategy is about resourcefulness vis-à-vis task, which implies understanding one's civic context well enough to make better choices. As I will show in the next chapter, where civic capacity is concerned, strategy includes a conception of democracy that is broader, more flexible, and more powerful than simply expanding "voice" for citizens—or holding more meetings to engage them. Second, to what extent are those strategies, which presumably reflect and respond to the dynamics of civic capacity, driven by deliberative learning as opposed to competitive bargaining? And third, beyond the power to forge and enact broadly supported agendas of change, how does the implementation of agendas of change relate to other dimensions of civic capacity? Put differently, should we consider implementation or "production," as distinct

from policy agenda setting and support winning, another test of community civics?

Civic efforts at the local level obviously cannot control the range of factors that shape conditions in the world, not directly at any rate, so “successfully civic” places can produce disappointing results in terms of jobs, educational achievement, pollution, and more. But creative, adaptive collective action, the civics of change, includes steps to reduce risks, to gain more control over the causal factors (“drivers”) that matter, and to try new and more promising strategies over time. Well-developed civic capacity therefore reflects resourcefulness or “the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled”—Howard Stevenson’s rich definition of entrepreneurship (Sahlman et al. 1999). Put differently, entrepreneurial actors may have to create civic capacity as they go, and this means facing different kinds of strategic problems over different stages of action.

Impact studies of specific programs, and studies of democracy that center on contentious decision points, generally ignore or obscure this rich civic process (Healey 1997, 2003). We need better explanations of how change is managed over time, against the odds, to make useful innovation possible and to better fit “collaborative policy making” or other tools to the right contexts. As Grindle (2004, 2) puts it in a study of government reform in schooling,

Research to assess the efficacy of various policy alternatives . . . is a centrally important undertaking. But it usually takes the process of reform for granted—how improved education becomes part of the political agenda, how reform initiatives are developed, what interactions and negotiations shape or alter their contents, how important actors and interests respond to change proposals, how initiatives are implemented and sustained once they are introduced.

With this book, I seek to add in several ways to the limited body of research specifically about civic capacity as well as the much larger body of work on making democracy work and making institutions with a public mission, whether inside or outside of government, more effective. First, as detailed in the discussion of methodological approach below, the book centers on parallel analyses of pairs of cases, enabling analysis across borders and across different problem domains, unlike many studies of local governance that center, as I noted above, on a single domain or single context or both.

Second, by focusing on process, the book offers new insights on how civic resources are reshaped over time—that is, on “moves” and other dynamics, not just structures—as civic entrepreneurs build and abolish

institutions, identify problems and change the ways in which they get defined, navigate key decision points, and deal with what decisions imply (the new “game” or strategic situation created by the latest outcome). The constraints abound, but the study looks closely at how people create and deploy new possibilities, not how things “turn out” for high-trust versus low-trust regions, say, over long periods of time, but at how trust is won, to particular effects, and then built on—or not.²

Third, since civic capacity without tangible results is merely broad-based interest canvassing and mobilization, the book offers more attention than most studies of urban governance to how policy aims get acted on collectively. The book is not implementation research per se, but I offer attention to implementation models and barriers to success, from root causes of problems (that may not be addressed in civic agendas) to institutional turf battles, from mistrust among ethnic or class groups to unfocused participation that sends mixed messages to the public, avoids resolving conflicts about priorities, and fragments the authority and accountability needed to make measurable progress on problems (Kadushin et al. 2005). I contend that these are not merely sources of “noise” on the back end of the focal policy-making process; they are central to the way reputations and strategies develop to set agendas, mobilize new resources, and more.

My focus in this book is on the local (“community”) level, not because all the resources for solving problems are found there, not at all, but because societies cannot do without effective local systems for acting on public problems. As governments, aid agencies, and ambitious nation-building efforts increasingly acknowledge, developing more collective problem-solving capacity, closest to the citizen, is a worldwide imperative (Campbell 2003; Grindle 2007; World Bank 2000). City-regions are the building blocks of the global economy, the centers of innovation, and, for most of the world’s population, an important source of distinctive identity (local culture).

I turn next to my methodological approach before outlining the plan of the book.

Civic Capacity Where?: The Cases and Approach

Problems in Cities within Countries

Cases are uniquely valuable for understanding how processes evolve over time; they tell us what large surveys, for example, cannot about how people make something of their history through their perceptions, choices,

and interaction with each other (Mahoney 1999; Ragin 1987; Yin 1994). I examine efforts to tackle communitywide challenges in six cities in four nations. From the outset, my aim was theory building in an emergent conceptual domain, not hypothesis testing in a well-charted one. This required choices of challenges (problem domain), nations, and cities.

Each of the three *problem domains* is important worldwide, to cities and the societies they propel: restructuring the job economy, managing urban growth without ignoring sustainability and social equity, and investing in young people and their families (i.e., through social protections or programs that enable or develop human capacity). Beyond being vital and relatively universal, these problems share two other traits: They demand *cross-sector* action, and they demand concerted *local* action, regardless of how important larger forces, such as national policy or global markets, turn out to be. In simple terms, as I noted at the outset, civic capacity cannot determine all the “cards” that a local community will have to play, but that capacity shapes, quite directly, how well the cards get played—even if a community cannot change its weather, endowments of natural resources, proximity to export customers, or, to cite an adjustable but not-easily-adjusted type of structural factor, the larger nation’s trade and immigration policies. Selecting the problem domains was the first crucial sampling, which led next to a sampling of country contexts and cases of local experience.

In well-designed studies, sample choices are suited to specific analytic objectives, and in small-N studies, with just a few cases examined in depth, purposive sampling is more common than the random sampling of large-N survey studies, which trade depth, and sometimes validity too, for representativeness (Denters and Mossberger 2006; Eisenhardt 2002; Ragin 1987; Yin 1994). Here are the analytic objectives that drove my sampling choices: the analyses are comparative, first with parallel application of theory (cases understood as revelatory bases for inference, in and of themselves, about civic capacity; see Skocpol and Somers 1980; Yin 1994) and then comparison across cases in a pair (cases positioned in a more global matrix of possible outcomes; see Ragin 1987). As detailed below, the latter are comparisons as to civic tasks to be accomplished, not as to outcomes (neither policy choices as outcomes nor “end” outcomes in social conditions, such as regional income levels, urbanization patterns, and so on).

Within each of the three problem domains, I have paired a U.S. city-region with one in the global South: San Francisco with Cape Town, South Africa (investing in young people and their families); greater Salt

Lake City with Mumbai, India (managing urban growth); and the Pittsburgh industrial region with that of industrial São Paulo, Brazil, specifically the Greater ABC region (restructuring the economy). My choice of countries was purposive, meant to enable close analysis of civic capacity in development and use in contexts of special relevance to wider global trends. Notwithstanding their contemporary differences or distinct historical paths of development, Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United States are all large, regionally diverse democracies with vibrant civil society institutions, liberalized markets, and important hopes about the market contributing to public problem solving. Civic capacity is particularly at issue in such contexts, less so in contexts where government (and the political parties that steer it) dominates collective action on public problems, as in most of Western Europe. These nations are also, in many domains of public decision making, quite decentralized: local policy making, public management, and resources matter, even if they often prove, or seem to prove, insufficient to the tasks at hand, and even if a particular kind of “muscular” local government is longer established in one nation (the United States) than the others. What is more, Brazil, India, and South Africa have all decentralized within the past twenty years, enabling us to assess relatively early efforts by political actors to pursue major public initiatives with new institutional mechanisms (rules, incentives, and tools) in place at the local level.

In the global South, Brazil, India, and South Africa are increasingly recognized as pacesetters of social innovation for Latin America, Asia, and Africa respectively. For their progressive constitutions of social and economic rights (Brazil’s was adopted as recently as 1988, when two decades of military dictatorship gave way to civilian democracy, and South Africa’s in 1996, with the transition from apartheid government), for their experiments in participatory local democracy, and for other contributions, these three countries are more and more the object of comparative study. Though different in important respects, such as the degree of decentralization or service delivery versus participatory democracy focus, all three nations reveal, in compelling ways, the tensions among democracy, “development” (economic and social progress), and global economic change. The United States represents a major reference point, not in the normative sense of being what other nations should aspire to become, but in the sense of being, for better or worse, a seedbed and standard bearer for an approach to public problems that emphasizes public-private cooperation and as much government decentralization as possible.

I detail the choice of cities, which reflect the theoretical sampling common in small-N case-study research (Eisenhardt 2002), in the three section introductions. To illustrate with a preview, Salt Lake City and Mumbai are exemplars of the distinct problems of uneven urban growth facing wealthy and poor nations: unsustainable sprawl on the one hand and inefficient and inequitable “slum-led” urbanization on the other. Beyond that task challenge, the two cases also exemplify the challenges of significant civic action in American and developing-country democracies, respectively. Finally, both are recognized by experts in that problem domain as having experimented in significant ways with new civic approaches—and even for being models to emulate. I wanted to know: models of what exactly?

In methodological terms, the theoretical bases for sampling these and the other local cases included maturity, affording a long path of decision and accomplishment through which to trace civic action on complex problems; a reputation, outside the locality, for accomplishment along that path, in spite of clear barriers and notwithstanding many persistent problems and gaps; and access to key insiders, critics, and an ample media and public record, making for what Pettigrew (1990), in his seminal work on how to research change, has labeled “transparently observable processes.” This last feature is especially crucial for rich description and the careful inductive reasoning that can make small-N studies “big” in their value for theory and practice.

The cases in this book are defined by four things: a *site*, a *focal problem*, a *period* of time, and one or more key *episodes*. That is, cases are defined by boundaries not only of place and theme but of time. Like all social processes, civic ones are about how actors make sense of things, interact, make choices, and shape relationships, institutions, and ideas over time. Two features are crucial: each case in this book has clear and deep historical roots as well as distinct, contemporary starting points. Take the example of managing a growing population while promoting a more sustainable model of physical growth in greater Salt Lake City and other parts of the American West. This challenge has roots in the settlement of the frontier by Europeans and those of primarily European descent—in Utah, by the Mormon pioneers—as well as the displacement of Native Americans from much of the land, about a century and a half ago. As I explore in chapter 4, certain notions of community, the “good society” and good city as part of it, and core values of environmental stewardship can all be traced to the upheavals and the hopes associated

with that settlement. So can the demographic patterns and political institutions that settlement drove.

But just as certainly, contemporary efforts to act on public problems feature much more recent milestones, including triggers as starting points for community action. In the Utah case, that point is a nongovernmental organizing and consensus-building effort, launched in the mid-1990s to respond to highly visible public concern about rapid and costly urban growth. In Kingdon's (1984) classic distinction, the *conditions* associated with rapid urban growth became a public *problem* that key players decided it was time to tackle with a significant investment of time, reputation, and more. Centered on an initiative called Envision Utah, the organizing effort brought to media prominence and public awareness the ideal of "quality growth" and mobilized resources to promote that ideal in a political context that outside observers consider extremely unfriendly to public planning. That surprising emergence of a big public idea, as well as some unconventional civic strategies to promote it, helped draw me to the Salt Lake region. But the larger point for now is that each case in the book features such a starting point, as well as historical roots that I try hard to keep in view.

To highlight a second distinction, studies of civic life, particularly at the local level, often focus on long-run institutional change *or* on action at decision points, less commonly on how the two together define progress on some agenda of action. A focus on capacity for conflict resolution and consensus building, for example, naturally centers on the decision points, where the effective or ineffective handling of conflict comes sharply into view. But a focus on the underpinnings of those processes calls for attention to structures—for instance, institutions that embody key ideas (such as a public-serving mission or cause), or that enable deliberation, decision making, or the provision of services. And accounts of decision points too often present cursory attention to how those structures evolved over time, who did what to shape them, or how key institutions operate beyond the decision point that is the center of attention.

I examine both structures and decision points. I do this mainly by analyzing cases within cases (i.e., significant *episodes*) and by closely analyzing in-between periods in which relationships, institutions, and/or the frames around public problems—how they get defined, who is thought to be responsible or capable of acting, and more—evolve in important ways. The episodes include specific decision points and the

players and “moves” associated with them. These points matter directly because they shape resources and the action that follows and also indirectly for what those decision points reveal about the capacity of the players involved to bring divergent interests and views to bear and resolve conflicts (or not). Yet democracy is more than deal making or structured consensus building about well-defined agendas. If the intensive episodes deliver the goods, providing the proverbial “mortar,” one must also attend to what lies between them—to the bricks and how they are made. To use the formal language of strategic interaction offered by game theory, we care not only about how the players play particular games but why those games, and not others, arise in the first place, why some players, and not others, get to play, how rules of engagement shift (“evolution”), and how players acquire the resources—both tangible and intangible—with which to play.

Theoretical Approach

My approach is importantly different from that of other small-N comparative case studies, which have evolved significantly in the research world over the past two decades (Denters and Mossberger 2006; Mahoney 1999; Ragin 1987, 2000). In those studies, the aim is *causal* analysis: examining how variation in one factor (predictor) explains variation in some other factor (outcome) of interest. That analytic approach, a foundation of hypothesis testing in both the natural and behavioral sciences, is appropriate where achieving a specific outcome is the target of study, whether that outcome is a social condition (a revolution, a threshold rate of divorce or suicide in society, a level of industrialization, etc.) or a policy decision (a particular policy for land use, education, wages, environmental protection, or some other domain). Causal analysis is feasible and appropriate where the analyst can confidently control on (hold constant across the grouped cases) a reasonable number of confounding factors, beyond the factor to be tested, that might be associated with the outcome of interest. This is not feasible where cases offer contrasts in context (by design), at least where specific institutional arrangements are concerned, rather than matched context, and in part for these reasons, causal analysis is not the aim of my study. An extreme example makes the point. In the domain of managing urban growth, Salt Lake City and Mumbai are hardly comparable as to social conditions or policy choices. The section introduction on managing urban growth, which provides an overview of the domain and introduces both cases, therefore does not center, say, on whether the two city-regions “arrived” at a consistent land use policy.

My aim, instead of offering causal analysis, is to understand the process of building and using civic capacity in specific, revelatory contexts that provide lessons for other contexts. In this book, then, civic capacity is not an explanatory variable for predicting the success of problem solving.³ The reason is that I am not confident we know what civic capacity *is* in distinct contexts and what building and using it would entail.

The book offers a process study grounded in the dilemmas that decision makers faced, the roads taken and not taken, and the efforts to move agendas under conditions of imperfect information, controversy, and other messy features of “operating democracies” rather than idealized ones (Mansbridge 1980). The aim for Salt Lake and Mumbai, then, and for the other case pairs as well, is comparing “tests” of civic capacity vis-à-vis a community problem and whether and how actors meet those tests. The contrast (between the two cases) in background conditions and specific policy outcomes and social outcomes is a substantial source of theory-building power at that level of analysis, though it would be the proverbial kiss of death in an outcome-driven causal comparison (Ragin 1987).

Drawing heavily on the accounts offered by insiders, my approach to developing propositions about the data is grounded theory, which emphasizes “the discovery of the theory implicit in the data” rather than testing grand theory deductively (Eisenhardt 2002; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1998). Beyond the literature on urban governance, and beginning in the next chapter, I draw on varied research—from negotiation and action learning to social movement theory, the politics of the policy making process, and, to a more limited degree, organizational behavior—rather than on a single tradition. In this way, I build accounts that fit the data, all with the aim of addressing key questions, outlined above, about the emergent concept of civic capacity.

Data Collection and Analysis

To study operating democracies, I relied on documentary evidence, scholarly and journalistic accounts of events, institutions, and organizations in these settings, some administrative and census data, limited participant observation of meetings or other significant gatherings, and—most importantly—face-to-face interviews with key informants, which I conducted in all six cities between 2002 and 2006. The noninterview components are classics of the case-study method, which relies on triangulation (obtaining multiple sources of data about the same subtopics) to make

more valid inferences (Yin 1994). The key informant interviews also figure prominently in case studies that seek to understand how a process unfolded as the participants in that process understood and navigated it (or as informed observers assess it).

The interviews, with public officials (elected, appointed, and civil servant), journalists, businesspeople, academics, and civil society advocates, provide insider perspectives on events for which documentary and other sources typically offer “filtered” accounts or no specific, action-oriented information at all: How and why did the players make difficult choices? What controversies or other strategic issues did they consider then or later? I asked my interviewees for referrals, thus “snowballing” my contacts along networks, but I also directly recruited key subjects (“cold-called” by letter, e-mail, and/or phone), based on media accounts or other guides to reputation and role, as a way of seeking out divergent perspectives.⁴ This sampling approach, together with specific interviewing techniques, helped me test for disconfirming evidence—for example, where insiders’ hypotheses about events and ideas might contradict my own emerging efforts to build accounts that fit the data. Of the prospective interviewees I contacted in six cities, no one explicitly refused to be interviewed, though a total of seven could not be scheduled under the time constraints.⁵ The final sample included 111 interviews or just over 18, on average, per case.

I asked interviewees about three things mainly: public *agenda setting* (who tries to do it, who succeeds or fails and why, what agendas include and exclude, how they shift over time), *planning* (how and through what institutional settings specific strategies are developed to respond to a given agenda, who does or does not participate and why, what is learned, what sources of knowledge are deemed legitimate and relevant by the players and why), and *implementation* (who acts and how, what results, how perceptions of success or failure drive subsequent action on problems). But I also asked about specific *organizations* (evolution, capabilities, reputation) and *problem analysis* (informants’ own “theories of the problem” and its possible solutions).

Plan of the Book

The next chapter discusses distinct traditions for approaching the democratic process at the local level—as contest, deliberation, or problem solving—as well as major social and political changes that have radically shifted institutions and expectations in democratic societies in recent

decades. I outline the implications of studying democracy, and also strengthening it, as a recipe for collective problem solving, examining both familiar and counterintuitive ideas about several core themes: participation, accountability, and the role of conflict versus consensus. Beyond juxtaposing the contest and deliberation frames of reference to help clarify problem solving as an important third conception, I review several literatures that rarely converse with each other but serve as key sources of insight for my case analyses, consistent with the grounded-theory approach I outlined above.

The subsequent three sections analyze the civics of change in the three problem domains, looking within and then across cases. In each section, an overview chapter examines distinctive civic features of the problem domain and outlines my rationale for selecting each case. Two case chapters follow, with case summary and implications at the end of each chapter. The second chapter in each pair adds implications developed across the two cases.

The final chapter presents the study's major lessons about civic capacity, returning to the question about "capacity for what," our understanding of what makes problem solving "democratic," and the central themes of power, participation, effectiveness, and accountability.

